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Opening Extract from...

Guns of Brixton

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ONE

The wind blows cold off the Thames at Gallions Reach in January. Straight from Russia in the east, across Europe, the North Sea and the lowlands of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. That particular January morning the river was running high and fast, reflecting the leaden sky over Docklands, and the breeze whipped little white horses on its surface.

The meeting was set for eleven. Sharp on the hour, a black left-hand-drive Range Rover Vogue with French plates slid on to Barge House Road next to Royal Victoria Gardens. The car sat, its motor idling to keep the heat going inside, until it was joined a few minutes later by a navy blue Bentley Continental that drew up to it, closely followed by a black Mercedes saloon. The Range Rover was grimy from the road; the Bentley and the Mercedes were both highly polished, with tinted windows that kept the identity of their occupants secret. The cars sat together, faint white exhaust pumping from their tailpipes, until the front passenger door of the Bentley swung wide, and a tall, balding man of about sixty emerged. What remained of his white hair was cropped close to the skull. He wore a navy blue overcoat with the dull sheen of cashmere, a navy scarf loosely tied that showed a white shirt and dark tie, navy suit trousers and highly polished black shoes. He closed the Bentley's door with a discreet clunk, raised his hand to the Mercedes, indicating to whoever was inside that they should remain there, and walked towards the Range Rover. As he did so, its driver switched off his engine, opened his door and got out. He too wore an overcoat, but of a cheaper material, black this time with a velvet collar turned up against the cold, a long muffler, jeans and Chelsea boots with a slight heel. His hair was thick, dark as the sky, although slightly peppered with premature grey, and long over the ears. When he turned to look at the limousine, his eyes were

almost as dark blue as its paintwork. No one ever forgot those eyes. As he approached he half raised his hand in greeting to the Bentley's passenger, who reciprocated with a slight wave of his own.

When they were close, the balding man took off the black leather glove from his right hand and they touched palms, then hugged each other without embarrassment.

'Uncle John,' said the man in the black coat when they separated. He was in his early thirties, but his face was lined, the skin tanned, a dusting of a day's worth of dark beard covering his cheeks.

'Mark. It's been a long time. Too long. How've you been?'

'Not too bad. You?'

'Not great, I'm getting old, son.'

'Aren't we all.'

'You, you're just a baby,' said John Jenner. 'You still look like a bleedin' kid.'

'Don't you believe it,' said Mark and took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. He extracted a cigarette from the packet and lit it with difficulty in the wind with a brass Zippo. Before he put the cigarettes away John Jenner took the packet from his hand and examined it. 'German?' he said.

'Last of the duty frees,' Mark explained.

Jenner looked at the Range Rover. 'French plates. You get around.'

'I do. But I'm back now.'

'Where you living?'

'Here and there. Nothing grand.'

'Nice car.'

'Belonged to someone I met,' said Mark.

'And he gave it to you.'

'Didn't have much choice.'

'Like that was it?'

'You know how it goes.'

The older man nodded. 'Let's walk,' he said.

The pair went down to the river's edge where the wind lifted the skirts

of their coats and flapped them around their legs. Jenner put his glove back on and Mark sunk his bare hands deep into his overcoat pockets, cigarette in his mouth, and turned his back to the water.

'Who's in the Mercedes?' asked Mark.

'Some blokes.'

'What kind of blokes?'

'Just a bit of security.'

'And you have to hire security now. What happened to the rest of your firm?'

'Dead, dying, retired, lost their bottle. Times change.'

'They do that.'

'I'm glad you called,' said Jenner.

'I heard you wanted to see me.'

'Who from?'

Mark shrugged. 'Word gets around, you know how it is. I try and keep up with things. Lay a little money out and people keep me advised on what's happening.'

'I've got some problems.'

'I heard that too.'

'You hear a lot.'

'Like I say, I try and keep up with things.'

'You didn't keep up with us.'

'Dev always knew where I was if I was needed.'

Jenner shook his head more in sorrow than in anger. 'Bloody Dev. He would. You two always were as thick as thieves. He never said.'

'I asked him not to.'

'He's a law unto himself.'

'That's why I chose him to keep in touch with him. I knew he'd never let on.'

'Bastard.'

'You know you don't mean that. He's a good bloke. Taught me a lot.'

'Like how to get hold of nice motors like that one,' said Jenner, indicating the Range Rover with a nod.

'No danger.'

'Bloody Dev,' said Jenner. 'I never knew.'

'I thought it was for the best, John,' said Mark. 'After all that happened.'

Over to the south towards Kent, black clouds gathered like an angry mob waiting to do mischief and Jenner sunk his neck into his collar. 'Might get some snow later,' he said.

'Maybe.'

'It's bloody cold whatever. Dunno why I stay in this rotten country,' said Jenner.

'So go. What's stopping you? Spain's nice at this time of year, so they say.'

'And you'd know.'

'You said it. I get around.'

'So what brought you back, if not us?'

'You know. He'll be out soon won't he?'

Jenner nodded.

'And I'll be waiting, like I always said I would,' said Mark Farrow as he flipped his cigarette end into the freezing water.

They were silent for a minute, and only the sound of the river washing up against the pylons of the dock beneath their feet, and a distant police siren touched their thoughts. 'So, Uncle John,' said Mark. 'What's it all about?'

Jenner reached inside his coat and fished out a long cigar, found a windproof gas lighter in his pocket and took his time getting it lit to his satisfaction.

'I thought you gave up smoking years ago,' said Mark.

Jenner grinned through a mouthful of smoke that was whipped from his open mouth as he spoke. 'I started again,' he said. 'What's the point of prolonging the agony? You see, that's one of the problems I mentioned.'

'Whaddya mean?' asked Mark, and he frowned.

'I'm fucked, mate.'

'Uncle John?'

'The big C.'

'You're joking.'

'Wish I was. I'm rotten with it. Dev never told you that, did he?'

'No.'

''Cos he doesn't know. Only me, Martine and Chas do. Apart from you now, and half the bloody consultants in London by my reckoning.'

'How long have you known?' asked Mark.

'A while. Long enough.'

Mark touched his hand to his forehead, as if by doing so he could replay the conversation a different way. 'But these days…'

'No,' said Jenner, cutting him off. 'The quack says it's inoperable.'

'Second opinion?'

'This is the fourth opinion as it goes. And I'm fed up with geezers I don't know fiddling about with my private bits. And that fucking chemo screws you up, so I knocked it on the head.'

'Christ, I'm sorry, John,' said Mark, and he touched the older man on his arm.

The clouds were getting closer and the first flurry of snow as Jenner had prophesied hit the water and vanished as if it had never existed. 'Really sorry.'

'Don't worry about it, Mark.'

'How can I not worry?'

'There's no point.'

'But still…'

'Instead of worrying about something you can't do anything about, do something for me.'

'What?'

'Later. I'll tell you later.'

'So what's the prognosis, Uncle John?'

'How long have I got, you mean?'

'Well, I wouldn't exactly have put it like that.'

'You don't have to be squeamish, or dance around the subject Mark. A year maybe. Maybe a bit longer. I'll never get my bus pass now.'

'Christ.'

'It's all right, Mark. I've come to terms with it. Even joke about it. It's

the breaks. I've had longer than a lot of people I know. Better people too. Life's not fair, but then no one ever said it was.'

Mark hugged Jenner again, and there were tears in his eyes.

'You keep doing that and people will think we're a pair of poofs,' said Jenner, but Mark knew he didn't mean it, and besides, there were no hostile witnesses on that bitterly cold day on the side of the freezing waterway.

'I dreamt about Hazel last night,' said Jenner, changing the subject suddenly. Hazel had been his wife who had died ten years before of heart disease. 'I dream about her a lot these days. Cor, she was just the same.'

He brushed at his eyes with his glove. His eyes were wet too. 'Bloody wind,' he said. 'Making my eyes water.' Mark nodded, but they both knew the truth.

'I could actually touch her,' said Jenner, his gaze looking miles beyond the far river bank where the Millennium Dome loomed, large and empty. 'She was all warm, just like she used to be.'

'She was a great woman,' said Mark. 'She was like a mother to me. We had some laughs, didn't we?'

'Laughs. You remember that bloody laugh of hers? It was like a bloody corncrake.'

Mark smiled. 'And could she drink.'

'You and me both under the table,' said Jenner. 'But that's not why we're here.'

'Why?' asked Mark.

'Things are going mental over there,' said Jenner, taking in southeast London again with a sweep of the cigar in his hand. 'Something's going to give, and I'm too old and fucked up to sort it.'

'Like what? What's going to happen? Tell me.'

'It's all going to go off soon, I know it. Come back with me. It's been too long since you visited. Sort things out. There'll be blood on the streets if you don't. My blood. And I want what little time I've got left.'

'Jesus. But will I be welcome?'

'You're always welcome, you know that. Except you never come.'

'You know why.'

'But that's all in the past now.'

'Is it?' Jenner nodded. 'I'll take your word for it,' said Mark.

'You do that.'

'Fine.'

'Just tell me why you never got in touch before.'

'Oh come on, Uncle. You know. Christ, you better than anyone.'

'But me, Mark. I can understand anyone else. But why blank me?'

'I blanked everyone. It wasn't easy. Jesus, I left my whole life behind.'

'Not even a call until yesterday. Not one call in how many years?'

'Eight.'

'Yeah, eight.'

'I've been busy.'

'Too busy for me?' It was more of a challenge than a question. A recollection of favours done and favours owed that could never be repaid even if both men lived far beyond their allotted spans, which was unlikely for one of them at least. But most of all it was a simple reminder of a relationship that had lasted since the younger man had been a boy.

Mark Farrow smiled at the memories. 'All right, Uncle John,' he said. 'Tell me all about it.'