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Opening Extract from...

Buckingham Palace Blues

Written by James Craig

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BUCKINGHAM PALACE BLUES

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ONE

'Urgh.' Joe Dalton took a bite out of his fried-egg roll, chewed it a couple of times and spat it out of the window of the Austin FX4. Despite having eaten little for more than three days now, he could feel the bile rising instantly in his throat and knew that no food would stay down. Disgusted, he chucked the rest of the roll into the gutter and wiped his hands on his grubby Nickelback T-shirt. Gingerly taking the cardboard cup from the drinks-holder on the dashboard, he removed the lid and blew gently on his oily black coffee. He took a tiny sip and winced. *Horrible*.

Wearily he opened the cab door and climbed out. Pouring the steaming liquid down a drain leading into one of London's crumbling sewers, he then dropped the cardboard cup and its plastic lid into a nearby bin. Shivering in the cold, he went round to the back of the cab and opened the boot. Coiled on top of the spare wheel inside was the length of cord that he had been carrying around with him for weeks: three-strand 6mm white nylon – excellent shock-absorption properties, with a guaranteed break load of 750kg. With a sigh, he pulled it out, knowing that it was more than capable of doing the job required.

Sticking it under his arm, Dalton slammed the boot shut and walked towards the streetlight beside which he had parked the taxi. Looping one end of the rope around its metal pole, he tied it securely with a simple overhand knot. Stepping back to the cab, he tossed the rope through the driver's window, opened the door and got back in. After putting on his seat belt, he took a couple of

deep breaths. Then he wound the free end of the rope round his neck three times, tying it off with the same kind of knot.

It was tight, but not too tight. The nylon cut into his neck, but he could still breathe. Gritting his teeth, he switched on the ignition and pushed the stick into first gear.

'Fuck it!'

Tears welling up in his eyes, he released the handbrake and stomped on the accelerator.

Fernando Garros returned his cup of tea to its saucer and idly watched the taxi driver getting in and out of his cab. He recognised the grinning face of Chad Kroeger on the guy's shirt and gave a small nod of approval. Nickelback were cool! Fernando had spent more than a day's wages to go and see them at Wembley the year before. The extra £20 for a T-shirt had been beyond him, but at least he had seen an awesome show. He hummed a few bars of 'Burn It to the Ground' before turning around, embarrassed, to check that no one had heard him. He needn't have worried; sitting by the window, he had Goodfellas café to himself. Apart from the cabbie, there had been no other customers through the door in the last hour. Xavi, the café's Spanish owner, had been fast asleep behind the counter for the last twenty minutes.

Yawning, Fernando checked his watch. It was almost 3.15 a.m. Closing his eyes, he folded his arms and stretched out his legs. He was in no rush. He had come off an eleven-hour shift as a hospital porter at St Thomas's and was enjoying his dinner (or was it his breakfast?) before he made the fifteen-minute walk back to the bedsit he had rented for the last eight years. Elephant and Castle wasn't the greatest neighbourhood to be wandering around in at night but, if he waited another half hour or so, he could be reasonably sure that all the gangbangers, nutters and general assholes who might otherwise try to impede his journey home would have gone to bed.

Xavi's snoring grew louder. Opening his eyes, Fernando finished the last of his tea and thought about helping himself to another

cup. Deciding against it, he returned his gaze to the cabbie who had now returned to the relative warmth of his taxi. Fernando was amused by the way London cab drivers fussed over their taxis. He found it strange. True, the vehicles were expensive – £30,000 or more, he'd read somewhere – but even so, at the end of the day it was just another car.

'Mierda!'

Fernando almost fell off his chair as the cab suddenly shot backwards, jumped the pavement, knocked over a rubbish bin and crashed into the front window of a dry cleaner's.

Immediately, several alarms started ringing.

'What happened?' Xavi appeared at his shoulder, yawning, and went over to the door.

'Car accident.' Fernando then noticed the rope hanging from the lamp post, trailing along the pavement. He was fairly sure that hadn't been there before. Then he remembered the cabbie. It was hard to make out what was happening inside the vehicle, but it looked like the driver was slumped forward over the wheel. Maybe he'd suffered a heart attack. Meanwhile, something – a football? – had bounced into the road and come to a stop beside the upturned bin.

'Man,' Xavi scratched his head, 'you would have thought a taxi driver could drive better than that.' He stepped cautiously out of the door on to the pavement, and then into the empty road, heading towards the cab.

Feeling more than close enough to the action already, Fernando watched him cross the street towards the ball. Then, as an afterthought, he pulled out his mobile and dialled 999.

TWO

It was a beautiful evening with the temperature in the low 60s, a bit chilly when the wind blew but as good as you were ever going to get in London on a Saturday evening in the middle of September. A darkening blue sky with only the occasional patch of cloud offered a sad reminder of the summer days past. Now was the steady, painful descent into autumn, and then winter beckoned.

Wiping his brow on his sleeve, Inspector John Carlyle took a swig of water from his plastic bottle as he jogged up The Mall, heading towards Buckingham Palace. Running was not really his preferred form of exercise, but it was cheaper than going to the gym. And just being outside helped clear his head.

He was glad to be out of the flat; his daughter and wife had been bickering all day, and he felt a sense of relief as he pounded the pavement. Alice was fast heading towards so-called 'tweenager' status, twelve going on twenty-five, and several years of further conflict seemed inevitable. Carlyle felt bad that there wasn't more he could do to smooth things out between them, but he had learned a long time ago that there were severe limitations to what he could hope to achieve when it came to dealing with women, whatever their age and however well you thought you knew them.

Leaving the flat in Winter Garden House, he had taken an easy pace down Drury Lane, cutting through Covent Garden Piazza and Trafalgar Square, getting nicely into his stride as he dropped down from Carlton Gardens on to The Mall and made his way up

towards Buckingham Palace. Carlyle was no royalist but he appreciated the grandeur of the surroundings. Having all this history on your doorstep was one of the perks of living in Central London. It gave you a sense of being at the centre of one of the great cities of the world. And, hand on heart, it *was* a great city. But, above all, it was *his* city. He had been born in London and, apart from a few unhappy but mercifully brief excursions into the provinces, he had lived and worked here his whole life. He was a London boy; it was the only place he had ever wanted to be.

Passing the statues of the Queen Mother and her husband King George VI, he veered on to the gravel cycle-path to avoid a couple of tourists taking photographs. As he did so, another couple stepped into his path and he was forced to do another little sideways dance, knocking him off his stride.

'*Tossers!*' he hissed under his breath, trying to get a bit of adrenaline going as he lengthened his stride. Looking up, he noticed that the Union Jack hanging from the flagpoles along either side of the road were interspersed with another flag that he didn't recognise, doubtless celebrating an official visit by some foreign head of state. Kicking on, Carlyle upped his pace as he approached the Palace itself. Nearing the junction with Marlborough Road, he checked the traffic-lights. They were on red, so he speeded up, not wanting to stop. But, as he did so, he saw the little green man that told pedestrians they could cross safely, disappear. Bollocks, he thought. But not wishing to lose his rhythm, he kept going.

Stepping off the pavement, his foot had barely touched the tarmac when a police motorcycle roared past, its lights flashing.

'Shit!' Carlyle quickly jumped back on to the pavement and started jogging on the spot, as if that had been the plan all along, ignoring the snickering of a couple of teenagers by his side. A few seconds later, there were some gasps from the gaggle of surrounding tourists, and cameras started whirring as a massive black Daimler slid past. All alone on the back seat, a little old lady in a pale yellow coat and matching hat sat staring into space. The

limousine hardly slowed as it took a right and shot down The Mall towards the Palace, followed by another couple of police bikes.

Well, well, Carlyle thought, as he jogged across the now empty road. After more than forty years in London, I've finally seen the bloody Queen.

Reaching the Victoria Memorial, he veered right. His plan was to complete two circuits of Green Park, and then head for home. It was already approaching 7.30 p.m. and the light was fading. The crowds were thinning and Carlyle could see only one other runner as he headed past Canada Gate and along Constitution Hill. To his right he heard a shout and turned his head to see a group of kids playing touch rugby. Their ball had landed a couple of yards in front of him. Picking it up, he passed it, quarterback-style, to the nearest kid, annoyed that his rhythm had been interrupted but happy for the pause. Taking a sip of water from his bottle, he looked around. Another kid, a girl, was sitting on a stone bench nearby while further on a man was walking his dog. Otherwise the place was fairly empty.

Another day in the city was slowly coming to a close.

His pace having slowed considerably, it was almost twenty-five minutes later when Carlyle passed the same spot for a second time. The man with the dog and the kids playing touch rugby had gone, but the girl was still sitting on the bench, staring into space. He eyed her as he approached – maybe nine or ten, short dark hair, a sleeveless flower-patterned dress and, he now realised, no shoes. She ignored him as he jogged past, the glazed expression on her face a study in inscrutability.

What's wrong with this picture?

It suddenly struck him that there was no one else within twenty yards of the girl.

No sign of any parents.

No playmates.

No one at all.

He jogged on another ten yards and came to a stop by a tree,

letting his pulse subside while he drank the last of his water before tossing the bottle in a convenient bin.

Slowly he jogged back towards the girl, who still appeared lost in thought, and came to a stop a couple of yards in front of the bench.

'Excuse me?'

The child looked up at him but didn't say anything.

Carlyle stepped closer. Her eyes were like hard grey pebbles. 'Excuse me?' he said again. 'Are you okay?'

The girl lowered her gaze, but still she said nothing. As she folded her arms, Carlyle could see a series of black and blue marks just above each elbow. Some were faded; others looked fresh. Keeping a respectful distance, he knelt down in front of the child. 'I am John,' he said, a mixture of discomfort and anger rising inside him. 'What is your name?'

The child bit her lip and dropped her chin close to her chest, shaking her head.

'I am a policeman.' He was conscious of having no ID on him, but that couldn't be helped. 'Are you lost? Do you need any help?'

The girl's eyes welled up and a single tear ran down her left cheek. Carlyle's heart sank. He stepped back and looked around. It was getting properly dark now. The cars speeding by had their headlights on and the Palace behind him was bathed in floodlight. Doing a slow pirouette, he scanned though 360 degrees. Still there was no one else in sight who looked like they might belong to this kid. Fuck, he thought, what a pain in the arse. With a heavy sigh, he pulled his mobile from the back pocket of his shorts and called the station.

George Patrick, the fairly new desk sergeant at Charing Cross police station, answered on the first ring. 'Desk!'

George was probably older than Carlyle, but he was enthusiasm personified compared to his predecessor, Dave Prentice. Earlier in the year, Prentice had finally realised his lifelong ambition by retiring to the eastern suburb of Theydon Bois. Not a minute too soon, thought Carlyle. The inspector had not missed the moaning old sod once since he had left.

'George,' he said, 'it's John Carlyle. I'm in Green Park, just past the Canada Gates on Constitution Hill. There's a young child here who appears to be lost.' He lowered his voice a notch. 'She looks a bit . . . zonked out, so there may be more to it than that. Can you send a car?'

'Let's see . . .' There was the rustling of papers in the background. 'I'm not sure we've got anyone spare at the moment, but I'll find you something.'

'Thanks. Who's on duty at the moment?'

More rustling. Then Patrick read out a list of names.

Carlyle thought about it for just a second before making a decision. 'Send Nicole Sawyer.' Sawyer was an extremely pleasant, extremely overweight Afro-Caribbean WPC. At twenty-nine, her social skills were far better than Carlyle's and better than those of just about anyone else he had ever worked with. She might not be able to catch any criminals running down the street, but she certainly had the knack of simply talking them into giving themselves up. If anyone could be considered the acceptable face of the Metropolitan Police Force, it was Nicole. 'See if you can get her down here as well.'

'Okay.'

'Call me on my mobile when they're on their way. And check if there have been any reports today of a missing girl. She's aged about eight or nine, I'd reckon. Grey eyes and short dark hair. Wearing a flowery dress.'

'I'll check.'

'Thanks. See you later.' Carlyle ended the call and dropped the phone back in his pocket. As he did so, he became aware of someone hovering just behind him.

'Alzbetha!' cried a very pukka English voice that contained more than a hint of irritation. 'Come here! What have I told you about talking to strangers?'

Carlyle turned round to face a handsome man in his late twenties or early thirties. He had light, sandy hair receding at the temples, with sharp blue eyes and slim build. Carlyle put him at

around five foot ten. His black suit looked expensive – Armani, maybe – as did his azure-blue shirt, which was open at the neck, and his black penny loafers.

'Who are you?' the young man asked, not trying to hide his annoyance now.

Carlyle stepped protectively in front of the girl. 'Who are *you*?'

The man looked flummoxed for a second. 'I am the girl's . . . uncle.'

That's a lie straight off the bat, thought Carlyle, whose dislike of this posh-sounding gent in front of him was already fully formed. 'Is that right?'

'Yes, it is.' The man nodded theatrically. He held out a hand towards the girl. 'Come.'

Alzbetha slipped off the bench but did not make any move towards her 'uncle'. Carlyle put a hand on her shoulder and felt the girl flinch. He thought of his own daughter – who was not much older than this kid – and a sense of rage rose within him. He kept his hand on her shoulder and tightened his grip. You are going nowhere, he thought, not with that tosspot.

He plastered a smile on his face that was more like a grimace and looked the man directly in the eye. 'I'm afraid you'll have to wait for a moment.'

'Is that right?' the man now yelled. 'And what business is it of yours?' He took half a step forward, as if contemplating a quick right hook to Carlyle's jaw.

'I am a police officer,' Carlyle said quietly, ignoring the phone which had started vibrating in his pocket. In the distance, he could hear a siren approaching quickly up The Mall. He gave silent thanks to George Patrick and stood his ground, still keeping a firm grip on the girl's shoulder.

'This is ridiculous!' But the man had heard the siren too, and Carlyle could see that he was unsure now about what to do.

'I think we need to discuss this down at the police station.' This time, Carlyle's smile was more genuine. The siren was getting ever louder. The car would be here in a matter of seconds. He took his

hand from the girl's shoulder and stepped towards the other man. Immediately, she shot off, heading deeper into the park, in the direction of Piccadilly. Both men eyed each other, wondering who would be the first to give chase. When it was clear that his adversary was not going to move, Carlyle turned and headed after her.

The girl had a sharp turn of speed. By the time Carlyle got going, she had a start of maybe twenty metres. After tripping over a drain-cover, it took him the best part of a minute to catch up with her. Once he did, however, she stopped in her tracks, with a resigned look on her face, and let him lead her back to the now waiting police car.

Nicole Sawyer gave them a friendly greeting and ushered the girl carefully into the back of the car.

'Where's the bloke?' Carlyle asked, looking around for the young man in the expensive suit.

Sawyer eyed him quizzically. 'What bloke?'

Declining the offer of a lift back to the station, Carlyle took a direct route home to Winter Garden House, running the whole way in a little over ten minutes. After a quick shower, he threw on some fresh clothes before grabbing a banana and a couple of Jaffa Cakes. As he headed back out the door, he stopped to give his wife the briefest of explanations about what had happened in the park.

'Poor girl.' Helen grimaced, glancing up from the television. 'God knows what they've done to her.'

Not interested in stopping to discuss who 'they' might be, Carlyle just shrugged and gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. 'I'll be back as soon as possible,' he promised limply.

'Sure.' From years of experience, she knew that 'as soon as possible' could mean anything between half an hour and three or four days. Blowing him a half-hearted kiss in return, she returned her attention to the television.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, he was standing in one of the 'friendly' interview rooms located on the third floor of Charing Cross police station, which looked out over Agar Street. The girl was now sitting at a table, happily munching a bag of cheese and onion crisps and doodling in a colouring book that Nicole Sawyer – God bless her – had rustled up from somewhere. Also on the table were the remains of a chocolate bar and an empty Coke can. If Alice gobbled that lot, Helen would have a fit, Carlyle thought. This, however, wasn't the time or the place to be too choosy about the child's diet.

Standing by the window, Sawyer had her back to him. She was talking on the phone and he could tell by her hushed tone that it wasn't about work. Catching his reflection in the window, Sawyer quickly ended the call and turned around, signalling that they should step into the corridor. Finally acknowledging his presence, the girl looked up, gave Carlyle a wary stare and went back to her drawing.

Outside, Carlyle waited for Sawyer to close the door behind her. 'Has she said anything yet?'

Sawyer shook her head. 'Nothing I could understand. She did say something, but it wasn't English.'

'So she's foreign?' Carlyle asked in surprise, thinking about her very English 'uncle'.

'I suppose so,' Sawyer shrugged.

'Have we got a translator?'

'Nothing doing till tomorrow morning,' Sawyer said. 'Do you have any idea where she's from?'

'Not a clue.' Carlyle said. 'What about a doctor?'

'On the way . . . apparently.'

'Social Services?'

Sawyer rolled her eyes to the ceiling. 'We've left a message. No one's picking up, as usual.'

'Christ!' Carlyle hated dealing with Social Services. Almost without exception, the social workers he came across were unmotivated and uninspiring, he thought, always looking to do

the bare minimum while hiding behind the rule book, their union agreements and political correctness. As far as he could see, it was a profession where everyone hated their job and couldn't wait to retire on some grossly inflated public sector pension. Looking forward to his own pension, Carlyle was fairly ambivalent about that ambition. What he couldn't abide was the general reluctance to earn their corn while they were still working.

Sawyer looked at her watch theatrically. 'Sorry, Inspector,' she said, 'but my shift ended half an hour ago. I need to get home.'

'No problem,' Carlyle replied, through clenched teeth. Now *he* was left holding the baby. Literally. He resisted the temptation to point out that he himself wasn't supposed to be working at all today. 'See you tomorrow.'

'Yes. Thanks.' Sawyer turned and propelled her fat arse along the corridor as fast as possible, before Carlyle changed his mind and condemned her to some more involuntary overtime.

Stepping back into the room, Carlyle took a seat opposite the girl. She stared at him for a moment, then glanced at the door, as if she was weighing up whether she could try and make another break for freedom.

Carlyle leaned back in his chair. What the fuck do I do now? he wondered.

The girl picked up a red crayon and began smearing it across the paper.

With some effort, he tried to assume what he hoped was his friendliest demeanour. 'Hello, again,' he said gently. 'Remember me? I'm the man from the park.' He pulled out his warrant card and slid it across the table. 'I'm a policeman. My name is John.'

The girl looked at the ID but did not touch it.

'What's your name?' What had the guy called her back at the park? Alzbetha? 'Elizabeth?'

The girl looked at the crayon, squeezing it so tightly between her fingers that it snapped in two.

'Is that your name?'

Carlyle watched her eyes welling up. Her bottom lip trembled. He leaned forward, waiting for the words to spill out.

Suddenly, she wiped her nose and looked at him defiantly. 'We fuck now?' There was no hesitation in her tone. It was almost a challenge.

'What?' Carlyle pushed himself away from the table, wanting to pretend that he hadn't heard what he had just heard.

The girl stood up. 'You want?' she asked, trying to put on an approximation of the same cut-glass accent spoken by the man in the park. 'We fuck?'

Without another word, Carlyle left the room. Closing the door behind him, he headed a couple of yards down the corridor. Standing in front of a road safety poster, he headbutted it twice.

Ow!

The pain felt good. After it had subsided, he pulled out his mobile phone and called the desk downstairs. 'Is the doctor here yet?' he asked, feeling more than a little desperate.

'Two minutes,' Patrick replied.

'Who is it?'

'Weber.'

Carlyle knew Thomas Weber. He was a very nice guy. German. Very thorough. Very professional. Not the man for this job, though. 'Get me a woman,' he said.

'What?'

'Trust me,' Carlyle hissed, fighting to keep his tone even. 'It should be a woman.'

'But Weber is on call . . .'

'I don't care if the King of fucking Siam is on call,' he ranted. 'Get – me – a – woman doctor. *Please*.'

'Inspector . . .'

Calm down, Carlyle told himself. Just calm down. Shouting won't get you what you want. He took a deep breath. 'Look, George, I'm sorry but this could be nasty. Really nasty. Not the usual day-to-day bullshit that we have to put up with. It's

important and it's urgent. I'll stay with the kid till we get it sorted. See what you can do.'

'Okay.' Patrick slammed the phone down in a *fuck you too* kind of a way.

Carlyle stood in the corridor, feeling dizzy. For want of anything better to do, he went back into the interview room. The girl had abandoned her colouring book and was now crayoning on the table. This time, she didn't even acknowledge his presence. Leaning against the wall, he watched her destroy one crayon after another until there was nothing left but a pile of stubs. When there were none left, she sat back in her chair, folded her arms and admired her handiwork. It looked pretty good to Carlyle. Maybe they should take the table over Waterloo Bridge to Tate Modern.

'Elizabeth,' he said, more to himself than to the girl, 'where the hell are you from?'

She rolled one half of the broken red crayon across the table, muttering something under her breath that he didn't catch. She sounded Eastern European. Russian maybe? Polish? He didn't know. The kid looked European, but she wasn't speaking French, Italian, German or Spanish. Presumably she wasn't from Scandinavia. He had never heard of children – or anyone else for that matter – being trafficked from there.

He was still mulling it over a few minutes later, when Thomas Weber arrived. The doctor was accompanied by a small, mousy-looking WPC Carlyle didn't recognise. She smiled wanly but said nothing. Seeing the annoyance on the inspector's face, Weber held up a hand before Carlyle could say anything. 'I know what you asked for,' he said firmly, 'but I'm all you've got.'

Carlyle studied the tired-looking man in front of him and nodded sheepishly. Now was not the time for any more shouting.

'Okay.' Weber looked at the little girl and smiled. 'Let's go downstairs.'

The WPC took the girl by the hand and led her out of the room. Carlyle let Weber go next and brought up the rear.

On the first floor was the station's 'medical suite': a couple of

rooms that had been kitted out in a fair imitation of a GP's surgery. Once they got there, Weber turned to Carlyle. 'It's probably better if you let us handle this from here. Why don't you go and get a cup of coffee and come back in half an hour?'

'Will do,' Carlyle agreed, secretly quite relieved.

While the child was being examined, he nipped out of the station and headed for a nearby bookstore on New Row that he knew would still be open. The children's department was in the basement. With help from a friendly assistant, he found a copy of *My First Atlas* and a couple more colouring books – one with pictures of ballerinas, the other of princesses. The books made him smile; they were the kind of thing he would have bought for Alice only a couple of years ago. Then he remembered the girl back in the station, and the smile died on his face.

'Is there anything wrong?' The assistant seemed genuinely concerned by the thunderous look on Carlyle's face.

'No, no,' replied Carlyle almost absentmindedly. 'Thanks for your help. That's just what I was looking for.'

Back at the station, the doctor was already waiting for him outside the medical suite. As he approached along the corridor, Carlyle could see from the look on Weber's face that things were at least as bad as he had feared. Squeamish at the best of times, the last thing Carlyle wanted was a discussion of the ugly details.

'One for Social Services?' he asked quickly, before Weber could say a word.

Weber nodded solemnly. 'I'll give them a call straight away.'

'Good luck with that,' Carlyle growled. 'What am I supposed to do in the meantime?' It was a stupid question, the result of tiredness and frustration.

'I'll be as quick as I can,' Weber said evenly, picking up the briefcase at his feet and heading for the stairs.

Gritting his teeth, Carlyle watched him go. Not for the first time, he cursed himself for getting into this type of situation. His stomach rumbled and he realised that he was starving. The station

canteen would be shut by now and he would need to go out again if he wanted to get something to eat. He thought it through. If he took the girl with him, it would be a breach of protocol. On the other hand, maybe it would help her open up a bit. Carlyle doubted, however, that her English extended much beyond the terrifying handful of words she had already come out with. But maybe, just maybe, he could start to build up some trust with her over a burger and some chips.

Bracing himself, he stepped into the medical suite. The WPC jumped up from her seat, nodded in his general direction and quickly left the room. In the corner, he could see the girl asleep on the examination table. She lay with her back to him and was wearing a paper gown. In the silence of the room, he could hear her snoring quietly. Carefully placing the books on an empty desk on the other side of the room, he found a blanket in a cupboard and gently placed it over her. For a while he stood there, watching the slight rise and fall of her chest. A pretty girl, though. Almost all kids are pretty at that age, he mused. Eyes closed, and without the frown, she looked at peace for the first time since he'd met her.

Switching the light off, he sat down on the chair vacated by the WPC. His stomach rumbled again. He told it to shut up. It didn't matter how hungry he was; all that he could do now was wait.

Waking with a start, Carlyle slowly came to terms with the darkness. After a while he could vaguely make out the time, by the clock on the wall. He groaned when he saw that it was 2.15 a.m. Rubbing the back of his neck, he got reluctantly to his feet and ran through a mental checklist of all the places where his body ached. It was a long one. The girl was still fast asleep, curled up in the foetal position, her breathing steady.

Stepping quietly out of the room, Carlyle checked his phone. To his dismay, he had four missed calls and a text message from his wife – *Where are you?* – timed at just after 11 p.m. Carlyle yawned. How had he slept through all that? Par for the course. He had a very mixed record with mobile phones. Sometimes he could go for

days without managing to pick up any of his calls. It drove him – and everyone else – mad.

Now was not the time to call Helen back. He felt an ache in his bladder and realised he needed to piss. After a trip to the gents, he headed downstairs to the front desk. By now, George Patrick had gone off shift. He had been replaced by Gerry Armstrong, an Irishman Carlyle knew reasonably well. Beyond the security doors, the reception area was relatively empty for Saturday night–Sunday morning. There were a couple of drunks and one guy with blood oozing from a cut above his eyebrow, but it seemed that tonight the loser count was relatively low.

'Gerry,' he nodded in greeting. 'Quiet tonight.'

The desk sergeant looked up from an early edition of the *Sunday Mirror*. 'John,' he replied, sounding far too cheery for this time of night. 'What are you doing here?'

Carlyle explained the situation.

'Christ!' Armstrong exclaimed. 'No one told me. Mind you, I was a bit late in getting in tonight.'

Maybe you should read the duty log then, Carlyle thought. But he let it slide. It was too late and he was too tired to allow himself to get annoyed again. 'That's okay. But I need you to get one of the PCSOs – a woman – to sit with the kid for an hour or so. She's asleep now, but just in case she wakes up. I'm going home to get a bite to eat and pick up some stuff. Then I'll be right back.'

Police Community Support Officers, known as 'plastic policemen', were staff hired to help with the grunt work. Regular officers, like Carlyle, generally had a very low opinion of the plastics. Bored, with no power to arrest suspected criminals, they were responsible for most cases of gross misconduct among Metropolitan Police staff. Carlyle avoided them wherever possible. For now, however, they would have to do. Surely even a PCSO was capable of looking after a sleeping kid for an hour.

'No problem,' Armstrong said. 'They're all in the smoking room, watching videos, anyway.'

Safer than having them on the streets, Carlyle thought. 'Thanks.

And could you call Thomas Weber for me? See if he's made any progress with Social Services.'

'Will do.' But Armstrong had already returned his attention to his newspaper – a story about some bisexual, drug-dealing minor member of the royal family – and Carlyle realised that he had been gently dismissed. Zipping up his jacket, he headed off into the night.

The girl finally awoke just after seven in the morning. If not exactly happy to see Carlyle, she didn't immediately try to make a dash for the door. Taking the clothes he had brought for her – some of Alice's cast-offs that Helen hadn't found a home for – she dressed quickly. When she was finished, he looked her up and down, feeling a small stab of satisfaction at a job well done. Even in the middle of the night, he had managed to come up with a reasonable ensemble – jeans, sweatshirt, trainers – without waking up either wife or daughter, which was a major result.

He opened his mouth and pointed a finger at his tongue. 'Food?'

The girl nodded.

'Good.' Carlyle smiled, happy to be making at least a little progress. He held out a hand, but the girl refused to take it. Ignoring the snub, he stepped over to the door. 'Come on, let's go and get some breakfast.'

Official police protocol or not, they had to eat. Carlyle knew that the only place open at this time of a Sunday morning would be the Box café on Henrietta Street, a minute from the station, just down from the piazza. As they arrived, the owner was just opening up. He nodded his welcome as they slipped inside and took a table by the window. The girl immediately grabbed the outsized laminated menu and scrutinised the pictures, before pointing to the Full English Breakfast. 'Two English, please,' Carlyle called over to the owner. 'I'll have a coffee and she'll have orange juice.'

While they waited for their food to arrive, Carlyle showed the girl the books that he had bought for her the night before. Looking through the colouring books, the girl muttered unhappily under

her breath and Carlyle realised that he hadn't brought along any pens.

'Sorry,' he shrugged.

Seeming to ignore him, the girl carefully put the books to one side.

'Here.' Carlyle picked up the atlas and offered it to her. When she didn't take it, he opened it, found the pages covering Eastern Europe and laid it down in front of her. 'Is this where you are from?'

The girl scanned the countries without showing any sign of recognition. Carlyle tapped Russia on the page and pointed at the girl. 'Russia,' he said clearly. 'Are you from there?'

She shook her head and turned to the next page. They were interrupted just then by the arrival of two large plates of food and both spent the next five minutes eating in hungry silence. Carlyle ate quickly and methodically, swallowing his last piece of toast and washing it down with coffee while the girl was still munching on her second sausage.

In the end, she was not able to eat all of her breakfast. Never one to let food go to waste, Carlyle quickly swapped plates. Eyes down, he began gobbling up the girl's leftovers. As he finished off the last mouthful of beans, he looked up. The girl gave him a dirty look.

'Sorry,' Carlyle grinned, 'but I was still hungry.' To his left, he noticed that the owner was placing a tray of Danish pastries on the counter. They looked good. Carlyle gestured at the tray. 'I'll have one of those and another coffee. Thanks.' He turned back to the girl. 'Would you like anything else?'

She showed him another picture on the menu. 'Ice cream.'

What an interesting English vocabulary you have, Carlyle thought. He turned to the owner: 'Ice cream for breakfast it is.'

The owner nodded. 'We have vanilla, strawberry, pistachio, chocolate . . .'

'шоколад!'

'шоколад? Chocolate?' The man smiled. 'Okay . . . chocolate.'

The girl slid out of her chair and the pair of them disappeared behind the counter. Carlyle heard boxes being shifted around and some giggling, before the girl returned triumphantly with three massive scoops of chocolate ice cream.

He watched her demolish the first scoop before standing up and stepping over to the counter, where the owner was lifting his pastry from the tray.

'What language was that you were speaking?' Carlyle asked quietly.

The man looked at him in surprise.

Carlyle pulled his ID from his pocket but didn't open it. 'You know that I am police?'

The man placed Carlyle's Danish on the counter. 'Yes.'

'So where are you from?'

The man turned to the Gaggia coffee-machine. 'I am from the Ukraine. More than twenty years now. And so is the girl.' He gave the policeman a stern look. 'You should know that.'

I do now, Carlyle thought. Thank you.

By the time Carlyle returned to the table, the girl had finished her ice cream. He handed her a napkin and gestured for her to wipe her mouth. As she did so, his phone started vibrating. There was no number ID, but he picked it up anyway. 'Hello?'

'Inspector Carlyle?'

'Yes.'

'This is Hilary Green of Westminster Social Services. What are you doing?' The woman sounded as annoyed as he himself felt.

Waiting for you, love, Carlyle thought, as I have been for the last twelve bloody hours.

'Where are you?'

He bit his lip and took a deep breath simultaneously. Then he told Ms Green that they would be back at the station in two minutes.

While he paid the bill, the girl re-opened the atlas and started flicking through the pages. She stopped at a map of the United Kingdom, surrounded by little drawings of famous landmarks. Holding up the book, she pointed to Buckingham Palace: 'мій будинок.'

‘What?’ Carlyle looked at the café-owner for help.

‘Ось де я живу!’ the girl yelled.

‘She’s a little princess,’ the café-owner laughed. ‘She says that she lives in Buckingham Palace!’