Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Babylon Gene

Written by Alex Churton

Published by Head of Zeus

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE BABYLON GENE

ALEX CHURTON



First published in the UK in 2012 by Head of Zeus, Ltd.

Copyright © Alex Churton, 2012

The moral right of Alex Churton to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (TPB) 9781908800114
ISBN(E) 9781908800848

Printed in Germany.

Head of Zeus, Ltd
Clerkenwell House
45-47 Clerkenwell Green
London, EC1R 0HT

www.headofzeus.com

Author's Note

The Babylon Gene is a work of fiction based on real events and situations of recent history. While interpretations of those events and situations are entirely the author's, the historical, scientific and theological background to the story has been thoroughly researched.

The Yezidis are a real people, the inheritors of an ancient spiritual and historical tradition. All of the Yezidi characters in the novel are fictional. The characters' involvement in military and intelligence operations is likewise fictional. A select bibliography is included at the end of the novel.

I dedicate this work to the cherished memory of my late friend, Michael Embleton, who stood by the book, and me, through thick and thin.

No eternal reward will forgive us now for wasting the dawn.

Jim Morrison, 'THE WASP (Texas Radio and the Big Beat)';
The Doors, 1971


Batman
TURKEY
Hakkari
Hakkari Mts.
Güzeldere
Mt. Judi
Nerva Zheri
LAKE URMIA
Amadiya
Dohuk
Shariya
LALISH
SHEIKHAN
SYRIA
IRAN
JEBEL SINJAR
Tel Afar
Sinjar
MOSUL
Bashiqa
GREAT ZAB RIVER
Suleimaniya
ASHE
in
Northern IRAQ
Kirkuk
TIGRIS RIVER
EUPHRATES
Falluja
BAGHDAD
0
50
100 miles

1

The seven hills of Istanbul were awash with rain. Mahmut Aslan shook his blue nylon jacket and handed it to his male secretary.

'So, Ali, what's new?'

Ali gripped the jacket tightly; rain splashed over his shiny shoes. 'Did sir enjoy his holiday?'

'Yes, sir enjoyed his holiday and is thrilled to be back. The very sight of you, Corporal Ali, fills me with optimism.'

'Optimism, sir?'

'My next holiday cannot be far away.'

Ali winced. First goal to the Colonel.

The district of Ümraniye, where Colonel Aslan had his office, was nothing to write home about, but Ali Wilmaz liked his desk job. It was a lot better than clean-up ops on the Iraqi border.

In May '93, Ali had seen thirty unarmed colleagues executed by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Diyarbakir province, southeast Turkey. Now, in spite of more than a decade of elimination tactics – and the odd political concession – the PKK was back at war. Nobody relished a posting to the southeast; it was a dirty war.

'Coffee, Colonel?'

'Later, Ali.' Aslan looked up from the pile of reports on his desk. 'Why wasn't my coffee here when I arrived?'

'You were late, sir.'

'Then why isn't it cold on my desk?'

Ali coughed. 'You're often late, Colonel.'

'Of course I'm late! Half of Istanbul is late when it rains!'

'Of course, sir. The rain.'

'Of course, Ali. And Ali…'

'Sir!'

'Clean your shoes. You're not a seagull!'

Ali retreated to the makeshift reception.

Aslan slumped back in his moulded plastic chair, lifted his feet onto the desk, lit his pipe and contemplated the ghostly ripple of reflected rainfall that hovered over the portrait of the great Mustapha Kemal Atatürk opposite.

Everything Aslan did came under Atatürk's keen eye; dead for sixty-six years, the giant still watched over Turkey. Atatürk, father of the Turks – a man with a dream.

Aslan ground his teeth around the pipe stem. Should he turn on the desk light. The dim room suited his melancholy. Adding the tedious half-light of a 60 watt bulb would be sacrilegious. His lair was a temple of gloom.

What had he done to deserve this fifth-floor excuse for an office in the National Security Council's Police Liaison Department, perched high – but not high enough – above one of the dreariest quarters of Istanbul?

What had he done? Aslan had done everything: exemplary field operations, intelligence gathering, and the grin-and-bear-it arse-licking that goes with any elevation through the poisoned gateau of bureaucracy. As the interface between the government's security operations and the military-dominated National Security Council, he tried to avoid making enemies, but sometimes standing tall meant standing in someone's way. His loyalty was simple: Turkey. No party; no philosophy. Turkey was the only cause Aslan took as sacred.

At least his holidays had improved. Thailand had been a lot more entertaining for a widower than sunny, divided Cyprus.

Aslan tore off the precious few vacation days from his roll calendar to reveal the date: Wednesday 10 March 2004.

*

The red bulb on his nicotine-greased phone flickered into half-life with a strangled whine.

'Celalettin Celik for you, sir.'

'Put him through, Ali.'

'Colonel Aslan?'

'Yes, Celik, what is it?'

'I have a press conference in half an hour, Colonel. Any comments before I request a news blackout?'

Aslan squinted, looked up at General Atatürk for inspiration, found none, and took a sharp intake of pipe smoke. What the hell was Istanbul's police chief talking about?

'I pride myself, Celik, on knowing most of what's happening in this city, but mind-reading is not my strong suit.'

'Terrorism, Colonel. You've heard, surely?'

Aslan drank deeply from the coffee his secretary had just handed him. 'Thank you, Ali. You can go.'

'Sir, there's just—'

'Later, Ali.' Aslan returned his attention to the police chief as Ali lingered in the doorway. 'Terrorism? More than heard of it, Celik.'

'Pardon me, Colonel. I meant have you heard about last night?'

'I've just come off a late plane from Bangkok. I haven't even had time to wash.'

'Welcome home, Colonel. I'm surprised your secretary has not already acquainted you with the facts.'

'My secretary, Celik, can hardly make a decent cup of coffee.' Aslan emptied the cup and winked at the anxious Ali, indicating with his left hand that he'd best stay. 'So, what is it?'

'Bomb. Masonic Lodge in Kartal District.'

'Freemasons?' Aslan licked his forefinger and smoothed his thin, fair eyebrows.

'There are fatalities. Our boys have sealed the place off, naturally.'

Aslan thought for a second, then clenched his fist. 'Tell the press as little as possible. Don't speculate. Just the usual things:

"Highly experienced teams of experts are covering all leads." The voice of calm and reason. You do it so well.'

Aslan winked at Ali again. 'Now, Celik, you've spoken to the governor, haven't you?'

'Of course, Colonel. Late last night. He's already made a statement. Announced a full press briefing for Monday morning.'

'Man's a lunatic.' Aslan swept back his long, blonde hair and took a deep breath. 'I'll meet you at the scene in an hour.' He looked at the sheets of rain belting against the stained windows. 'Better make that an hour and a half.'

Aslan slammed the receiver into its cradle. 'Ali!'

'Sir!'

'Soap.'

2

Hemmed in by rusting Dogans and Sahins, Ali deftly manoeuvred his boss's olive BMW up the steep slipperiness of Suleiman Caddesi. The snail's pace soon slowed to a mechanical rigor mortis.

Aslan pondered the scene. A traffic jam is a perfectly democratic phenomenon, he thought. When the wheels stop moving, everyone's equal.

He cleared some condensation from the rear window. If Ümraniye was soulless, Kartal was pure carrion: grey commercial blocks stripped to the bone. The occasional swathe of faded pink-and-yellow tiling, intended to subdue the monotony, became itself monotonous: lined up above the drab shop fronts like so many rotten teeth.

Down came the rain, blurring everything.

'It's the wipers, sir.'

Aslan looked up from Ali's briefing document on the previous night's events, spread across his knees. 'Wipers, Ali? Is that what they're calling terrorists these days?'

'No, sir. These old cars. Their wipers can't deal with the rain. That's why people are always late in Istanbul.'

Aslan shook his head at Ali's perennial genius for stating the obvious. 'Was it raining last night, Ali?'

'Belting down, sir.'

'Deduction?'

'Sir?'

'Well, Corporal Ali, those guys who hit the Association of the

Grand Temple of Free and Accepted Masons of Turkey must have arrived late.'

'I don't understand, sir.'

'Most of the Freemasons had left by the time the shooting started.'

'Amateurs, sir. Hitching a ride on the al-Qaeda bandwagon.'

'Paid to think, are you, Corporal?'

'Forgive me, Colonel.'

'Not at all. You think away. Many a fool taught his teacher a lesson.'

'If you say so, sir.'

'Don't you read your Rumi?'

'Sir?'

'Our great mystic poet, Jalaluddin Rumi.'

'Not since he gave up football, sir.'

Aslan laughed. 'Your first goal of the day, Ali. Well done.'

'We're nearly there, Colonel.'

Through the rain engulfing the BMW's big windscreen, Aslan could just see lines of policemen in their soaked blue jackets directing traffic away from the site of the atrocity. A CNN Turkey News transit van was obscured behind a pack of foreign photographers, TV cameramen, producers and journalists, many of them pleading with the young policemen. The policemen nervously fingered their pistol holsters.

Behind the excited throng, exhibiting their customary patience in the face of officialdom, waited the more familiar faces of news-hacks from *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet* and *Sabah* – Turkey's mass circulation dailies.

Ali slammed on the brakes and Aslan lurched forwards, his broad forehead hitting the back of the driver's seat.

'Arsehole!' Ali tore into the driver who'd skidded close to the BMW, trying to avoid a gas cylinder truck.

'Easy, easy,' counselled Aslan to his unnerved driver. 'It's only a gas truck. You can't go thirty metres in this city without one of these crawlers climbing up your arse.'

A fist banged on the nearside window of the BMW. Aslan instinctively reached for his Beretta, holstered to his left shin, then recognised the anxious face of Celik leaning out of the adjacent Merc. 'Celik! How many atrocities do you want in twenty-four hours?' Aslan lowered his window.

'Join us in my car, Colonel. I don't want any more reporters on my back. Ever since we discussed joining the EU they think they can do what they like. We can enter from the side.'

'The EU?'

'Very amusing, Colonel.' Ali stifled a laugh as he made eye contact with Aslan in the rear-view mirror.

'Thank you, Ali. Now see to the car. And Ali—'

'Sir?'

'Stay with it till I call you.'

Ali began reversing the BMW.

'Not now, Ali! Let me get out first!'

'Can I help with the door, sir?'

'Bugger the door, Ali! I'll do it myself. Like everything else round here.' Aslan heaved his big frame out of the BMW and squeezed into the back seat of Celik's Merc.

Celik was chewing an outsize thumbnail; his bloodshot eyes avoided Aslan's stare. 'Thank you, Colonel. Make yourself comfortable.'

'You were right to call me.'

'You know I'd never do anything without informing the NSC.'

'I'm not the National Security Council, Celik. Just the liaison department. And where would you be without us, eh?'

Celik gave a half smile. It was a good job he was a flexible thinker, as the complexities of the Turkish justice system were mind-boggling. His loyalties were split between the city governor, Muammar Güler; the head of the moderately Islamic Justice and Development Party – the AKP – Recep Tayip Erdogan; and the vehemently secular army. And of course there was always the chaotic court of public opinion to answer to as well. It was a lot of pressure to bear, even for Celik's broad shoulders.

Celik buttoned up his grey British Gannex raincoat and ushered Aslan out of his car and into a side alley, away from the klaxons and the rain. He tried to think of something ingratiating to say to the roughly dressed colonel. He wanted to say how much like Turkish movie heartthrob Cüneyt Arkin Aslan looked, with his slicked-back mane and tanned, ready-for-action features, but Celik doubted the compliment would have much effect. There was something annoying about Aslan. Whatever it was, it marked him out from the usual egotists, place-men and slippery smilers who populated the government. Aslan was neither easily flattered nor easily impressed. But was it modesty – or conceit?

Celik pushed the stainless-steel bar of a fire-exit door.

'Where's the light, Chief?'

Celik fumbled for the switch. Aslan heard it click, but no light appeared. The men edged forward, touching the cold concrete walls of the service corridor. Aslan felt glass crunch beneath his shoes. 'So much for the bulb.'

'The blast, Colonel.'

'Possibly.'

As they rounded a corner, the men's breathing eased. In the darkness, they could just make out a dull, door-shaped halo. Aslan gave it a hard kick. Swinging wide, the exit bar rattling in its own echo, the steel proscenium revealed a horrible scene.

3

In the grimy light of the washed-out morning, the men's eyes slowly adjusted to the gloom. The once-tidy *meyhane* was now a mangled web of steel and Formica tables, wooden chairs, broken olive oil bottles and mineral water tumblers strewn across a swamp of stale melons, cheese, pools of raki, red wine, bottled beer, bread rolls and cutlery. About the many gaping craters in the plaster, faded photographs of Alpine scenery, portraits of Atatürk, and kitsch Kaiser Wilhelms now dangled awkwardly, their glass shelters shattered. Blood congealed on table tops beneath electric wiring weirdly suspended from cracks in the false ceiling.

'Another triumph for a cause,' muttered Aslan.

'But which cause, Colonel?'

'Not Turkey's, Celik. Not ours.'

The broken glass doors of the restaurant scraped open. Three men in white chemical-resistant suits entered the dusty dining area.

'Bomb disposal, Colonel. It's a formality. Gives the TV people something to show anxious viewers.'

'Right.' Aslan pointed to a large double door to the left of the toilets. 'And through there is the Lodge itself?'

'Yes, my respected friend. Through there is the Lodge of the Association of the Grand Temple of Free and Accepted Masons of Turkey.'

Aslan's eyebrows arched as his eyes widened. 'All part of Istanbul's rich cultural heritage, no doubt. Must we be blindfolded before entering?' Aslan tried the door handle.

'Locked, Colonel. I've spoken to the Worshipful Master—'

'The who?'

'It's what we – pardon me, *they* call the president of a Lodge. "Worshipful" just means respected. It comes from England originally.'

'And "Master" just means Master?'

'A traditional honorific, Colonel. Master of the Craft. "Craft" being their word for the brotherhood of Freemasons. Anyhow, he was anxious we would not violate the Lodge.'

'Violate it? It's not sacred, is it?'

'I suppose they would like a member to be present. A formality, nothing more.'

Aslan reached into his breast pocket and withdrew a small steel contraption, like a penknife. He plunged it quickly into the lock and played with the mechanism.

'But Colonel…'

'Relax, Celik.' Aslan pushed the doors open.

An oil generator pumped a weak current into a globe-like pearl bulb in the centre of the ceiling: a precaution against Istanbul's occasional power cuts.

Below the light, a chequered floor was arranged with richly upholstered seats, set to the left and the right like choir stalls before an altar.

'So this is Freemasonry!' exclaimed Aslan as he took in the precise arrangement of the furniture – the tall, mahogany throne positioned where you might expect to find the altar, the row of high-backed chairs behind it, and the tattered pre-war Turkish flag that hung over them.

'You've never visited a Lodge before, Colonel?'

'I confess, never. I've seen pictures of course.' Aslan strode across the chequered floor. 'Clever of them to see life as a chess game.' He sat down on the leather-cushioned throne, its gold-leaf wearing thin. 'And this is?'

'The throne of Suleiman,' replied the police chief, 'where the Worshipful Master sits. And those special seats behind you are for the Past Masters – retired Worshipful Masters.'

Aslan felt a frisson of power as he spread his palms along the elegant leather armrests of King Solomon's throne. 'Feels good, Chief. But I think I need to do some reading. So, the terrorists missed their target.'

'We can't be sure of that, Colonel.'

Celik sat himself down behind a low lectern halfway down the front row of seats. On it rested a leather-bound copy of the Koran in Turkish. 'There's something odd about last night's events.'

Aslan sat up in his throne. 'No doubt of that, Celik.'

'This was nothing like the November attacks on the British Consulate, that British-owned bank and the synagogues. They were well planned, well financed – a big operation. Trucks filled with bombs. Dozens of dead. Hundreds of wounded. Big publicity for the fundamentalist cause. It made al-Qaeda look bold and powerful. And the message was obvious to anyone who watched the news.'

Aslan sighed. 'Let's stick to last night. What happened?'

Celik spread his fingers around the volume of the Koran. 'Two men carrying automatics burst into the *meyhane* at 10.59 p.m. One set off explosives strapped to his body.'

'So we won't be interviewing him.'

'Destiny decreed only two victims.'

'The other being the waiter, right? I read that in Ali's brief.'

'Forty-seven years old. Before the bomb went off, grenades were thrown and shots were fired at the diners – about forty of them. Four were wounded. The second bomber's explosives failed to detonate properly. He lost a hand and is on the critical list with stomach wounds.'

'My heart bleeds. What kind of bombs were they carrying?'

'Pipe bombs. Fourteen of them, stuffed into hunting jackets, packed with nails and wired by batteries. Another twist—'

Aslan stood up abruptly. 'Yes?'

'They brought bottles of petrol. The survivor was carried to an ambulance screaming "Damn Israel!" Said he wanted to burn the Freemasons alive.'

'If only we had a time machine, we could send these dupes back to the Middle Ages where they'd be happy.'

'It's the paperback culture, Colonel. A kind of nostalgia.'

'Romantics with pipe bombs. Potent blend. Not my idea of a night out.'

'Love and suicide have always been close, Colonel.'

'Among young fools, perhaps. If I'd mentioned suicide to my late beloved, she'd have killed me.'

The banter quickly evaporated into silence. Aslan's eyes rose to the bulb in the ceiling. It had begun to flicker. 'Jews… Freemasons… That broadens the palette. Anyone admitted responsibility?'

'Not yet, Colonel. Not even IBDA-C.'

'IBDA-C, the Islamic Great Eastern Raiders Front… Weren't they first to claim responsibility for the November bombings?'

Celik nodded.

'And did not our dear IBDA-C use pipe bombs in the mid-nineties?'

'That was against churches and nightclubs, Colonel.' Celik shook his head. 'IBDA-C weren't up to the November bombings. Not on their own, anyway. But something like this maybe?'

Aslan stared at the throne of King Solomon. 'This is no chair for me, Celik. Suleiman had wisdom and was beloved of God.' He inhaled deeply. 'So, what do we have?'

Celik shrugged. 'The usual suspects.'

'Is this usual?'

4

The sinuous strings of the first movement of Debussy's *La Mer* washed about the apartment. A storm was brewing. Toby Ashe looked up from his laptop to see the gorgeous figure of a golden-tanned blonde entering with a goblet of red wine, wearing one of his own white shirts and little else. Ashe turned back to his emails.

'Can I drink this?' asked the girl in a pleasant, county accent.

'Didn't you have enough last night?'

The girl knocked it back in one. 'Ugh!'

'That would be your last cigarette.'

'I'm giving up.'

'Self-denial, Amanda? Hadn't thought of you as an ascetic.'

'A what?'

'Kind of nun.'

The girl approached and ran her fingers through the long strands of Ashe's tousled, copper-brown hair. 'A very horny nun.'

'Weren't you going?'

'Is that what you want, Toby Ashe?'

He thought for a second. 'Right now, yes.'

'Well fuck you then!' Amanda turned to the bedroom door, paused for a second, then launched the goblet at Ashe. The glass shattered on the back of his chair and fell into the sheepskin rug.

Unruffled, Ashe turned from his Mac and looked sympathetically towards Amanda.

'If you really want to throw the book at me, Amanda, why not try one of mine?'

Amanda's lively blue eyes focused on a small pile of paperbacks on the windowsill. Grabbing the first that came to hand, she hurled it hard at Ashe's head.

Ashe ducked and returned to his laptop. 'Judging from the weight and texture of your chosen missile, Amanda, I should say I've been struck by my most popular work to date, *The Generous Gene*. Pity you didn't read it first.'

Slamming the bedroom door behind her, a muffled voice emerged from within. 'I didn't come for your books!'

'Blast!' Ashe's eye alighted on a familiar email address. '*Now* what do they want?' Faced with a choice of two possible worlds, his index finger hovered on the mouse: to open or not to open. He bit his lip. There was work to be done, but there was something about Amanda's rage which turned him on.

Ashe entered the bedroom calmly, half expecting to be hit by another book. Amanda had stripped off his shirt and now lay sprawled on the crumpled bed.

'Just because your real parents didn't want you, Toby, it's no excuse to be so bloody difficult.'

'*Vicious*, Amanda? What I didn't tell you last night was that my dear adopted parents regularly informed me that I was nothing less than a miracle. A gift from above.'

'A *git* from above, more like. Typical of you to suggest you adopted them, rather than the other way round.'

'Which way round would you like it?'

'You know what I like.'

'You can keep those on.'

'Which? Knickers or stilettos?'

'Both. It's always interesting with the knickers.'

'Heightens pleasure, does it?'

'You were made for fucking, Amanda.'

'Who isn't?'

*

Post coitum, triste. Sex with Amanda had been exciting and Ashe wondered if dismissing her as a one-night stand had really been a good idea. But something was wrong in his life: lengthening shadows were threatening to envelop him, and poor Amanda had turned up at just the wrong moment.

For the last seven of his thirty-three years, Ashe had made the cathedral city of Lichfield, Staffordshire, his base. The first time he had set foot in this ancient market town, whose grand cathedral gave it city status, he had felt at once a kind of peace, almost a homecoming. He was not surprised to discover later that writers throughout history had described Lichfield as England's 'omphalos': a kind of primordial navel, a centre and fount for the country's soul.

Ashe's decision to quit London in May '97 had served him well, despite the scepticism of his many friends who had moved to the capital straight after graduating from Oxford and stayed there. Having left behind a successful career in TV documentaries to focus on his writing, Ashe found Lichfield's relaxed pleasures and jewel-box of characters less distracting. He devoted his prodigious energies to producing a series of books – works that combined popular science with what Ashe called 'experimental spirituality'. Thanks to two non-fiction international bestsellers, he could enjoy a pleasant lifestyle, so long as he kept his head.

The Generous Gene, his most widely appreciated book, was both a humorous refutation of popular atheism and a vindication of spiritual knowledge in a sane mind. Every age has its prophets of atheism and every age has its defenders of the spiritual life, though Ashe disdained to appear as a prophet of anything. Resolutely refusing all requests for media appearances and interviews, the man behind the bestsellers remained invisible to the general public. Ashe could have gathered a devoted following if he had wanted one; such behaviour would have attracted greater sales, but not contentment.

Ashe's problem was his *other* job. It made him feel a kind of fraud, or ghost: someone removed from life. Strolling about the

cold Cathedral Close in search of clarity, Ashe passed by the sandstone tombs of forgotten medieval dignitaries, clinging for salvation to the walls of the three-spired cathedral. He knew that even if he decided to see Amanda again, an invisible wall would always separate them, like the wall that kept the lesser servants of the Church outside the warm Lady Chapel within.

For he could tell neither Amanda nor anybody else that he had been recruited for the Secret Intelligence Service while studying psychology and behavioural sciences at Oxford. A tutor's recommendation, a useful bout of 'playing soldiers' with the Oxford Training Corps, and a rugged talent for mountaineering, as well as impressive intellectual skills, had led to a secret rendezvous and subsequent invitation to join the Service shortly after graduation. Ashe liked to think it was chiefly loyalty to his country that had made him accept the burden of working for the Service, but in truth he was attracted to the idea of unknown agencies being determinative not only in science but in global power-politics as well. His superiors, nevertheless, had detected a maverick quality in Ashe which had, to date, kept him confined largely to research, presentational and advisory roles. Ashe had to slake his thirst for active adventure in foreign expeditions that served none but his own need to be relieved of discipline.

Surely now was the time to seize that holiday and head for France's Languedoc region. Caught between Amanda's attention seeking and a communication (unopened) from that Other Job, why not take this chance to accomplish the hike he had long dreamed of doing, from the medieval Cathar castles of the Corbières across the Pyrenees to Catalonia and the medieval churches of Lérida; lush vineyards, romance and *no responsibilities*.

Fired up with this new decisiveness, Ashe dashed back to his apartment, located in what had been the old Swan Hotel, across from the pool that had once been the cathedral's moat. A quick scout of the net would secure him a first-class ticket to a better state of mind.

The apartment door was open. Ashe found a note lying on his old Bang & Olufsen record deck: eloquence, scrawled with a black mascara brush.

I only seem to go for bastards, Toby Ashe,
and I'm not sure about you.

The inevitable phone number. The open door was symbolic; the note, he surmised, desperate. Ashe screwed it up. He opened the CD player in his black hi-fi stack. Out with the melancholy waves of Debussy, in with the boundless, star-bound freedom of Jimi Hendrix.

Soon the flat was vibrating with the magma-swamp, earth-core bass of 'Hey Baby (New Rising Sun)'. Hendrix's angel extended her mysterious invitation to step into her world 'a while'. Long enough, presumably, to realise that she was The One: the angel of love, liberty and an elusive wisdom lost on the timid and the earth-chained.

Ashe poured himself an early tumbler of Talisker and typed his password into his Mac. Still flashing in a corner of the screen was that familiar greeting code:

OB_B5pearl.

He toyed with the mouse. What if he had already left for France when the message had arrived? He could be out of Lichfield in minutes. They'd probably never know.

OB_B5pearl.

He knew what it meant. A call from on high. An obligation. Tired of being at the beck and call of… someone, this was the fate of the man who knew something; he would never be left alone. To know is to be a marked man.

Ashe stared at the delete button. It grew and grew until it filled his mind's eye. Delete and go! Delete and freedom. The angel was calling him.

'Fuck it!' said Ashe, out loud.

OB_B5pearl.

He double-clicked. The message was stark, boringly simple:

Saturday, noon.

Ashe sat back in his upright chair. Caught again. *England expects*… He sent a blank reply, deleted the message, swigged back the malt, looked at his watch and turned off the *New Rising Sun*.