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Opening Extract from...

Scattered Remains

Written by Douglas Watkinson

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It was one of those days you look forward to for months but the moment it arrives you long for it to be over and done with. Jaikie left for London with Corrigan at about 8.30 and I won't go as far as to say that I never expected to see him again, but I did run a few grim-ending scenarios through my mind to test their probability. I couldn't link any of them to the appearance of Patrick Scott in our lives, but the plate that had held one of his bones together couldn't be explained away as easily as I would have liked. All morning I fought the notion that because Laura had poked around in his records, they'd been wiped. But there was no other explanation. Then SOU had stepped in and where they go trouble has usually been before, or will shortly follow. And Richard Slater bothered me. I'd read him over the years on all sorts of things, from capital punishment to cooking the perfect venison roast, but why he'd be interested in me was a mystery.

Eventually, I justified my concerns as the niggles of an old copper expecting the worst, preparing for a thunderbolt out of a bright blue sky. I was succumbing to an old weakness, seeing everything around me as a potential crime and everyone who crossed my path as parties to it. It must have made me lousy company and I apologised to Laura over lunch at her favourite London restaurant, The Mango Tree in Belgravia.

"It isn't so much the old copper who gets worked up as the man himself," she said so neatly. "Worrying, especially about your children, is your default position."

She went on to add that she didn't mind. She had come to London to see *All Good Men and True* and planned on enjoying it. Our itinerary was as follows: after lunch, an hour or so at the Tate Modern, then onto the Royal Overseas League where we'd booked a room for the night, change into our finery and then off to the pictures. It sounded like a good way to pass the time, but I still couldn't settle to it.

Paul Gauguin didn't help, either. Laura had bought tickets to a special exhibition of his work and, in odd moments during the past month, she'd briefed me on the man, starting with his death at 54, an age close to my heart, shall we say. But as I stood in the Tate before those fabulous, primitive paintings, I couldn't get past their creator being a man who abandoned his wife and five children and fell out with most of his friends. Was painting his excuse for that? And, more seriously, how would he answer the charge of abuse against young Tahitian girls? Was their immortality as works of art a fair price to have paid?

Back at the Overseas League we lay on the bed and talked it over, tried to make a case for the man who had punched his own wife in the face and drawn blood, then painted something as vibrant as The Swineherd, as sensuous as Nevermore, as powerful as the self-portrait behind bars. We struggled and gave up, but somehow managed to doze off and sleep for over an hour.

We woke to find ourselves in our usual dilemma. I knew we were going to be late, Laura was convinced that we had plenty of time: two opposing theories working towards mustering in the lobby by seven o'clock to be picked up by a limo. Somehow we managed it, me in a DJ so old that I can't remember buying it, Laura in a blue silk dress she had bought for the occasion. It set off the silver jewellery she was so fond of, the long earrings, an heirloom necklace, bracelets and finger rings.

As we stepped out of the lift, Jaikie was entering the building. He didn't wait for applause from those around him, but came straight over to us, kissed Laura left and right and told her how wonderful she looked. He embraced me without comment but then, as he held open the big mahogany door for us, he whispered, "You too, Dad. The suit. Still looks great."

Out in the courtyard, Corrigan had replaced the Mini with a stretch limo in the back of which was Jodie Falconer, dressed to kill, slim and sparkly, hair piled high showing more of her face than she usually would. She was nervous about a host of things. Top of her list was the fear that she'd somehow barged us out of the way. She deferred to us more than she needed to, even addressed us as Dr Peterson and Mr Hawk until I threatened to call her My Learned Friend, Miss Falconer, QC, even though she was still a pupil. After a few failed attempts she settled on our Christian names.

The Odeon at Leicester Square proclaims above its entrance that it's "fanatical about film". It clearly doesn't feel the same way about architecture, being one of the ugliest buildings in London, its facade finished in slabs of black granite. When Corrigan dropped us off outside we were hit by strobing light from cameras, calls to Jaikie from shapes and faces behind them, wanting to know who the new girlfriend was. He paused to be gracious, introduced her as an old schoolfriend, now a London barrister so they had better watch their steps. They wanted to know her name. He told them. Somebody asked what had happened to Sophie Kent. He pretended not to have heard the question.

We walked across the carpet towards the entrance, driven by the human sheepdogs of the PR company, prominent among whom was the blonde

bamboo cane Jaikie had moaned about the previous day. The cameras followed us, so too the voices, until another car drew up behind the limo and left us blinking in sudden darkness.

We followed Jaikie into the foyer where there were people to meet, hands to shake, names and faces to remember. He asked Laura if she and I could manage. She said that we'd try and looked round for the ladies' toilet. He then all but arranged an escort to take her there, but at that point the bamboo cane did us all a favour and whisked him and Jodie away to meet people far more important than us. One of them was Richard Slater, a man with a bespectacled face that reminded me of a dozen others with its two clothes brushes of white hair either side of a bald dome and a bushy moustache trying to make up for the lack.

It struck me, as I waited for Laura, that just 20 years ago the foyer would have been overhung by a cloud of smoke but tonight all that remained of that indifference to dying were a few hardened smokers outside on the forecourt, shivering as they grabbed a last cigarette. I shivered with them, not from cold but from recalling how much the habit had cost me. My wife.

And that's when I saw him. To me, with my practised eye and incipient paranoia, he stood out like a sore thumb. He too was waiting. Forty years old and dressed in a bog standard dinner jacket, white shirt and black tie, he could have been mistaken for any one of 10,000 men in London that night, but he was putting on a show of impatience with a few too many clicks of the tongue and glances at his watch, all for the benefit of the SO14 officers who made up the royal protection detail. I counted six of them and they were ignoring him. Had he been standing alone in the foyer he would have been an object of suspicion, but a man waiting for his wife to come out of a toilet has instant credibility. He saw me watching him and gave me a smile of mutual forbearance before looking away. And in that moment I thought I might have got it wrong. This was a film premiere, for God's sake, not the starting point of a general strike, a revolution or a military takeover. So I left it at that, save for asking Laura when she finally emerged from the Ladies if there'd been many other people in there. Quite a few, she said, but she hadn't bothered to do a head count.

Once inside the theatre we were treated like aristocracy. Jaikie was a couple of rows in front of us and turned to point me out to the people next to him. They waved. I waved back. Five minutes later, and against all licensing laws I know of, I was brought a scotch with ice to calm my nerves. Laura said she hoped it wouldn't send me to sleep. I told her

there was every chance I'd never sleep again. I was back at Jaikie's first school, watching him be a shepherd in the nativity play. He'd got his lines wrong and cried. There was nothing I could do for him then, there was nothing I could do for him now.

Then it started, this film I'd heard so much about. I'd been told the story several times but hadn't really taken it in. A young British Army Sergeant is taken hostage, along with two comrades, by a small band of Vichy French in Casablanca, November 1942. Being just after the allied landings at Safi, Port-Lyautey and Fedala, the collaborating Frenchmen try to use their hostages as bargaining tools to escape from Morocco, but one of them loses his nerve and shoots the captives. Drawn by whatever doubt, a young US Army Lieutenant who had witnessed the atrocity returns in the night to where the three Brits were killed. He finds the young Sergeant still alive, drags him through the dangerous city, and in doing so saves his life.

By chance the British Sergeant and the Lieutenant meet again in 1945 in Italy, just after the battle of Ravenna. Each has changed in his different ways, but this time it is the American who needs saving, though not from his enemies. Three years of war have left him dangerously unhinged and his own men plan to murder him. The young British NCO uses everything in his power, from subtle argument to brute force, and saves his life.

At the end of the screening, the audience rose to its feet and applauded. The lead actors were introduced individually. Josh Hartnett and Jacob Hawk had heard it all before, in Los Angeles and in New York, but there was something about hearing it in London, they later told me, which made all the difference.

As the auditorium cleared, preparations were being made in the foyer for those involved in the film to be presented to the guests of honour, royalty from just down the road on The Mall. A girdle of onlookers formed and we were invited to the front of it. As the SO14 faction prowled between government ministers, high ranking civil servants, army chiefs and the US embassy mob, I resisted the urge to point out to those who didn't yet know that the tall one, fair hair, army cut, was mine.

The clatter of applause for the film and the performances resumed, led by the young prince and his girlfriend as they began to walk down the line. I saw Jaikie be introduced to them, step forward and laugh at something the prince said, a comment about army protocol. Jaikie turned to Jodie. She came forward, nervous

but coping well in her role as the star's new love interest. The prince liked the look of her. There were more words, more looks, more laughter.

And that's when I saw him again out of the corner of my eye, the man in the bog standard dinner jacket. He came from way over the other side of the foyer, breaking the circle gently as he squeezed through it. He paused for a moment, walked towards the prince. The SO14 blokes moved. So did Corrigan. So did I. But as the man approached, he veered slightly to his right. The prince wasn't his target after all. He stopped, drew something like a mustard jar from his pocket, unscrewed the lid, then threw its contents in Jaikie's face. Jaikie roared in terror and slapped both hands to his head. The sound was swamped by shouts and screams from those around. Within seconds the protection officers had the prince and his girlfriend out of reach, heading towards the exit, into a car and away. Only Corrigan seemed interested in the attacker. He drew his side arm, ran out of the building.

One of Laura's aunts described her niece to me as being superb in a crisis - it was everyday life she found so difficult to cope with. I knew what the aunt meant. My youngest son had just been attacked, sulphuric acid had been thrown at him by someone I could have stopped. Within minutes it would break up his beautiful face, eat it away, quite possibly blind him, and although I was right in front of him now and had taken him by the shoulders, I had no plan for the next critical 30 seconds. Laura had. She stepped out of her shoes and ran to Jaikie. She pushed Jodie and me aside, one hand each, and took hold of him. She dragged him by the arm, causing him to stumble, but she was strong enough to prevent a fall.

"Toilet!" she shrieked.

Strange, I remember thinking, even at a moment like that. She usually called it a lavatory.

"Move!" she said next and people in our path fell away.

"Paramedics!" she yelled at the bamboo cane who instantly reached for her mobile and dialled. I opened the door to the Ladies' toilet and in we went.

"Water!" she yelled and before the word was out of her mouth Jodie had the nearest tap running at full force.

Laura took Jaikie's head in both hands and forced it down into the sink, sideways on. As water rose up on the right hand side of his face, she dowsed the other side with water she was cupping in

her free hand. As it drenched him we paused for the first moment since the attack. Laura saw where the acid had spattered Jaikie's jacket. It was still black, not bleached. She stooped and sniffed it, then said to Jodie, "Turn it off."

Laura pulled Jaikie upright and turned him to face us. The shock of the attack followed by being half drowned had reduced him to gasping for air. "Jaikie, it isn't acid," she said. "It's vinegar, cider vinegar I think. But it isn't acid."

Jaikie stared at her, eyes red and watery, then fell into her arms with relief. Our three minutes of hell was over. I turned and ran out into the foyer. The crowd of onlookers was breaking up, moving on, but the film people had stayed to see if Jaikie was alright. I yelled at one of the protection officers.

"D'you get him?"

"Who?" he asked.

"Man who threw it. Age 40. Caucasian. Five ten. For Christ's sake, who do you think?"

A colleague joined him, a thick-necked, early 30s man trembling with relief. "Thank Christ he didn't get the Ginga or the bird."

Odd how sometimes rage quickens you, other times it slows you right down. It seemed to take an age for me to turn and face this man and mutter, "What?"

"The prince," he explained. "It could have been the prince."

"Never mind the fucking prince, that was my son." He tried to move away. I grabbed his arm. His colleagues didn't move to defend him. And he still hadn't answered my question.

"I said that was my son! Does that make a difference?"

I was up close to him, but standing at a distance it seemed, watching myself, hearing myself insist on an answer.

"Well does it?"

Then I heard Jaikie, way out on the edge somewhere, calling, "Dad… Dad."

He'd emerged from the Ladies with Laura and Jodie to find me on the verge of ripping someone's head off. He hurried over, placed a hand on my shoulder and turned me towards him. I didn't see him too clearly but I heard him well enough. "Dad, you must have left The Map in your other jacket."

No one but Jaikie, Laura and I knew what he was referring to. The protection officer came into proper focus, more bewildered than terrified, yet pleased to have been spared the consequence of my

anger. Jaikie's eyes were still streaming but he was smiling. I threw my arms round him and clung on.

The reception was held at the National Liberal Club in Whitehall Place, one of those rounded corner buildings the Victorians were so good at. Subsequent generations had felt the need to ruin the ground floor and turn it into shops, a bank, a small Tesco's, but once inside and up on the first floor you can still get a whiff of Liberal tradition. It's helped by portraits of Liberal Party leaders all around the colonnaded main room, the most interesting of them being Jeremy Thorpe, cleverly concealed behind a massive pillar, along with the scandal that forced him to resign.

The celebration itself was a select and expensive affair, animated and congratulatory, some people even congratulating me when they learned that I was Jacob Hawk's father. First among them was Richard Slater, who descended on me as if we were old friends, took my hand and shook it even though it hadn't been offered.

"You must be so proud," he said, a statement I was to hear over and over again in the next couple of hours. He introduced me to his wife. "Imogen, darling, this is Nathan Hawk, Jacob's father."

Imogen Slater was more restrained than her husband, with a grounded sense of what was really important. "You must have been terrified when that maniac struck," she said. "Some jealous nutter, no doubt, but your companion, where is she?" She glanced round to see Laura being introduced by Jaikie to the rest of the cast. She stood taller than most of them. "Such presence of mind," Imogen Slater continued. "Such swift action…"

"Just thank God it wasn't the real thing," said her husband. "If it had been, if it had been…" He took another glass of champagne from a passing waiter and offered me one as if the drinks were on him. I asked the waiter to get me a double scotch in a tall glass with ice all the way to the top. Slater beckoned to a tall man in his early 50s whose immediate features were his large nose and oversized ears.

"Ralph, come and meet Nathan Hawk."

Ralph Askew, MP, was an old friend and a film buff, said Slater, adding with softly spoken regard that he was also Under Secretary at the Department of Energy.

"Hawk. Nathan Hawk, 37 murders," said the old friend, now revealing a mouth with too many teeth in it. "I read Richard's piece about you in *The Guardian*."

"It was meant to be about Jacob," I said.

"That's Dickie for you, all too easily side-tracked. It's an honour to meet you, Mr Hawk." He shook my hand for a second time. "Thirty-seven? My God, most people in this country have never seen one dead body, let alone 37 who've been murdered. And as for that performance your son gave? Reminded me of a young Michael Redgrave, if you know what I mean."

I wiped away the fleck of spittle that had landed on my cheek. "How far back do you and Richard go?"

"Cambridge. Don't see as much of each other as we'd both like, but this film was a perfect opportunity to put that right." He lowered his voice as if to share a confidence. "I thought he might be able to get me through the door, to be honest. I've always been a bit of a film fanatic and my grandfather was in Italy during the war."

We had attracted some of Askew's friends and colleagues who were equally dazzled by Jaikie's performance and while I wanted to ask Slater why he'd featured me in an article about my son, I bore in mind that I'd already lost my temper once that evening. To do so a second time would smack of self-indulgence.

Even so, as we chatted I began to see what Jaikie had meant when he said that Slater was so good at making him talk. He was asking, in his syrupy way, about me, Jaikie, Laura, the others, questions which on their own were of no account, whereas the sum of the answers might have formed a revealing profile. I fobbed him off with lies and under-statement.

"He never stops being the investigative journalist of his youth, do you Dickie?" Askew chided at one stage. "Mr Hawk came here to enjoy his son's performance, not to be grilled by you."

Slater apologised and was soon drawn away by people who valued his opinion about the film more than I did. Our little group broke up as Askew and his crowd moved on to the next guest on their network, the next drink being offered. The waiter brought mine, which I took downstairs and out into the stone canyon of Whitehall Place.

The chauffeured cars were lined up, so close together they might have been one grotesque, segmented creature. Most of the

drivers were chatting by their vehicles, a handful were crammed into the back of a limousine watching a football match on a laptop. Corrigan's limo was the last in the line and he was on his own, stretched out on the back seat, asleep. I banged on the roof and in a split second he was up in a sitting position, fully awake, having drawn his side arm. He saw who was peering in at him through the smokey glass, holstered the Glock and got out. He gazed at me apprehensively, I like to think, but in the orangey darkness of that part of London I couldn't be sure. He offered me a cigarette from a crumpled packet and I shook my head. He lit one for himself and the smoke from it hung around us, no breeze to move it on.

"You told your boss what happened?" I asked.

"Sure."

I'd expected more than a one syllable answer. "And he said?"

"Pity you didn't catch the bastard."

I took a swig of the whisky, rattled the ice. "You knew the attack was on the cards, didn't you?"

It was there again, his trademark unflinching stare, and after a stalemate silence he got back into the limo, cigarette and all, and I went back to the party for a top-up.

-5-

Next morning, or rather later the same one, I phoned Jaikie and left a message saying I hoped he and Jodie had recovered from last night's excitement and that Laura and I would be heading back to Winchendon after breakfast. As I spoke, Laura whispered that I should say again how wonderful he was in *All Good Men and True*, but I pretended I hadn't heard her.

The car ride home was subdued which, according to Laura, was hardly surprising. Laying aside that some jealous nutter had thrown vinegar in Jaikie's face, the film opening, the celebration party afterwards, had been a glamorous, glitzy event. The M40 at its best is a length of tarmac.

"Jealous nutter?" I said.

"That's what the morning papers are calling the attacker."

"That's how Richard Slater's wife described him. Why does that bother me? Who wants that attack made light of?"

Laura hadn't the faintest idea, she said. I reminded her that at least I'd been vindicated, that I'd been right to worry about Jaikie's safety, even though none of my grim-ending scenarios had included a mock acid attack. I added that I intended to keep him close by me for a week or two.

At Winchendon I pulled up outside Laura's house, a much altered Victorian clay-tiled cottage standing three doors down from the church and very much in its shadow. A spinster's cottage if ever there was one. Laura's description, not mine.

I knew straightaway that it had been broken into. It had an affronted look to it, like that of an elderly woman to whom an improper suggestion had been made, then acted upon. In less floral terms, the place had been well and truly turned over. In the hall, shoes had been scooped from the cupboard and lay scattered on the tiles. The drawers in

the hall table stood open, map books, gloves, keys had been tossed in all directions. In the downstairs cloakroom, the lid on the cistern had been removed and dropped, broken in half. Alongside it were pieces of frosted glass. This was the entry point. A small window pane had been punched in, a hand had reached through to the catch and in they had come.

In the living room the armchairs had been upended, a coffee table turned over and pushed aside, stereo and television toppled and pulled across the room. Books had been taken from the shelves in armfuls, then dropped in piles. DVDs had been frisbeed against the walls. Most of the ornaments on the mantelpiece and in the recesses had been broken.

"How dare they!" she said, for the third or fourth time. "How bloody dare they!"

Up in her bedroom a single forearm had swept her dressing table of all her make-up, perfumes and knick-knacks. Her clothes had been ripped from their hangers, her underwear taken from its drawer and scattered. She stooped and picked up a lacy favourite and looked at me. I shook my head, though I'm not sure what I was dismissing. Possibly the notion that any of this mattered in the great scheme of things. It was a mental platitude I didn't really believe, so I didn't voice it.

"What's been taken?" I asked.

She went over to her jewellery box on the bed where its contents had been emptied out onto the duvet.

"Nothing, as far as I can see, not even gold rings, a pearl necklace…"

Having checked every room in the house, we ended up in her cubby hole of an office under the stairs. Such papers as were there had been swept aside, pens and pencils tipped out of a clay pot. Her laptop had been taken out of its case and booted up.

"What was on it?" I asked.

"Everything or nothing, depending on how you look at it. I'll stop my credit cards, tell the bank…"

She'd fought it off up until then, but now gave way to the nausea that most victims of a break-in feel, the sense of having been stripped naked, violated, defiled. She flopped into the swivel chair at her desk and asked, "What the hell were they after?"

I'd no idea, but I was damned sure it wasn't her bank details. Even so, she began the long haul of cancelling her credit cards and acquiring new ones while I phoned the local police station, hoping to speak to an old acquaintance there, Detective Sergeant Jim Kelloway. He was on

holiday, back on Monday, said the Duty Officer but he'd get someone round to the house as soon as possible.

About half an hour later a car pulled up on the gravel. I went to the front door only to find that it wasn't a pair of uniforms walking towards me but George Corrigan. I must have smiled, though I certainly hadn't meant to.

"What's funny?" he asked.

"You just happened to be in the area?"

"You think SOU and local forces don't liaise?"

When Laura appeared, he made a low-key attempt at being sympathetic. It was a monstrous thing to have done, he agreed, to have rampaged through her house like this, even though they didn't appear to have taken anything. In some ways that made it worse. Did Laura know anyone who might be responsible, a spiteful neighbour, an ex-partner, an aggrieved patient? She couldn't think of anyone.

He asked her for a guided tour of the place. It took about half an hour and occasionally I heard soft Irish concern oozing out of him above my head; but when they finally entered the kitchen it was obvious that he hadn't been consoling her so much as quizzing her.

"Dr Peterson says you've got a few ideas, based on an orthopaedic plate you found?"

I was keen to discover how much he already knew so I took him through the basics of finding the plate, naming Patrick Scott, and the subsequent disappearance of his records. As far as I could tell it came as news to him, though nothing to get excited about.

"Takes you nowhere, does it," he said. "Not to the attack on Jaikie, nor to the break-in here."

"Oh, I know who's behind that. You had this house turned over while we were in London."

I saw him calculate his options, all of them versions of outrage, denial or acceptance. In the end he appealed to Laura, as if being a doctor she might be able to give me something for my unwelcome opinion.

"Why would I do such a thing?"

"Somebody's afraid that a country GP has unearthed something significant about Patrick Scott. Maybe it's valuable and they want to use it, maybe it's damning and they want it buried alongside him. I don't care. All I want is for it to lead me to whoever killed him."

"If he's dead."

"Of course he's bloody dead. Something that was once inside his body, holding part of it together, has turned up in a local field. Don't you want to know where the rest of him is?"

Hands outstretched, he gestured round the overturned house. "So this is, what? A warning to Dr Peterson, telling her to back off?"

"A warning to me as well. Or do you think somebody threw vinegar at my son to bring out the flavour in him?"

He smiled and turned away. "I'll get the usual forensic stuff done here, so if you could leave it as is for the rest of the day…?"

Laura nodded and I suggested that she spend a few nights at Beech Tree. She went upstairs to pack what she needed.

"You know, solving straight murders is one thing," said Corrigan quietly. "This Patrick Scott business is quite another. You might be out of your depth here, Mr Hawk. The under-tow could drag you down."

"Don't go all tidal on me, George."

He smiled down at the floor, in restrained tolerance. "I expected a smart-arsed response, but this comes from the heart: you can't bring Patrick back to life so why not just leave him in peace."

"Or what?"

He winced as if the answer was obvious. "Or I can't guarantee your safety."

"That sounds like a threat. What next? I know where you live, where all your children live?"

"Not at all. Though I do, as a matter of course. Ellie, she works in an orphanage in Nepal…"

"What the fuck has that got to do with it?"

"…and Fee in Tokyo, Electric City. Con, New Orleans. To say nothing of Jaikie, who I've grown really fond of."

Not for the first time in my life I was confronted by a man half my age, wanting to take his head and slam it down against the kitchen table before he realised what was happening. Corrigan wasn't just young, however, he was big and fit and well-trained. I'd wait till he turned to go, part the gathering red mist and punch him in the back. However tough you are, a kidney punch feels like a sword running upwards through your torso…

"Don't even think about it," he whispered. He'd read my mind. "Your temper was always your undoing, the reason you were offered early retirement. Full pension, eh, even after striking a fellow officer?"

Never mind Patrick Scott's past, this SOU henchman had been digging into mine. It wouldn't have been difficult. A few old colleagues would

have been willing to tell the tale, some of them against me, most of them for.

I hadn't quite given up on the idea of a stand-up fight, but Laura entered the kitchen, her presence forcing me to see things more clearly.

"What's so special about Patrick Scott?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"You're just a messenger, eh?"

He turned to Laura. "I'm sorry about all this, Doctor. Truly I am. Call if you need me."

He handed her a business card, then took a pace backwards, and then another before turning and heading for the front door.

I spent the rest of the afternoon dwelling on the indignity of having been put in my place by George Corrigan. After several failed attempts to snap me out of it, Laura left for evening duty at the surgery. I tried to dissuade her. If her colleagues wouldn't indulge her on this occasion, when would they? She wouldn't hear of it.

Corrigan had offended me not just with his muted threats but his belief that whatever made Patrick Scott so important was beyond the scope of a detective with 37 murders under his belt. Important to whom, I wondered? I tried to give what little evidence I had a crime context and ran it against some old favourites. Big business and the attendant corruption, always a popular choice, but at this stage difficult to tie in with a muddy field in Dorton. A government *faux pas*, then, polite French for sexual intrigue, always worth considering and Corrigan was indeed a government employee. Terrorism. That would have been top of most people's list. Not mine, given its growing popularity as a handy panacea.

I kept coming back to the simplicity of the case. Whatever had happened to this kid, surely he had parents, siblings, a wife, girlfriend, a boyfriend who must at least have wondered what had happened to him? Or was I the only person in the world who gave a toss? And was that self-righteousness on my part genuine or a sign that I was getting drunk? I screwed the cap back on the bottle, returned it to the cupboard and rinsed out the glass, all my way of pretending that I hadn't drunk three double scotches in under forty minutes. I made coffee. None of it did any good. When Laura arrived home after surgery, she found me asleep in Maggie's Dad's rocker, in the pitch dark with the coffee brewed and forgotten.

“Where’s Jaikie?” were her first words and for some reason they pissed me off. “Only I thought you said you’d keep him close by for a week or two.”

“When he gets home I will.”

She picked up the glass I’d used, still in the drainer, and placed it on the shelf where it lived.

“I’ll make some fresh coffee,” she said. “Not that it does any good, of course.”

Jaikie and Jodie arrived back from London late that evening, driven by a fully rested Jamal. They were brimming over with the day they’d had, another round of back-slapping and pedestal hopping, questions from the press about being drenched in cider vinegar. Neither of them showed any concern that in just 24 hours the assault had gone from being a sinister mock acid attack to a schoolboy prank. Jaikie rambled on about how much people had loved the film, the script, the direction, his performance and how the reviews in the morning papers had been spectacular, especially one from Richard Slater. And that bloke, Ralph Askew, had phoned just before lunch to say how impressed he and his friends had been, so gripped, so moved, so thoroughly transported…

Jodie laughed. “Jaikie couldn’t remember who Ralph Askew was.”

“I still can’t place the guy but according to Slater he’s an MP, Under Secretary for some department or other.”

“MP for Selingthwaite,” said Jodie, filling in the blanks. “Under Secretary at the Department of Energy and Climate Change. They’re old mates from uni, haven’t seen each other for 12 years.”

That jarred for some reason. “Those were his words?”

“Verbatim.”

“Only ‘we don’t see as much of each other as we’d both like to’ was how he described it to me. Does that suggest a 12-year gap? How did Slater get your number, Jaikie?”

“I gave it to him when he interviewed me,” he replied, sheepishly.

“So now you’ve got his. Keep it. I might need it.”

In the pause that followed it was Jodie who spotted that something closer to home was amiss. Laura hadn’t been her usual self, offering praise and confidence to all who asked for it. She’d been quiet and still bore the marks, especially around her eyes, of a traumatic day.

“Laura, are you…?” Jodie began.

“I’m fine, dear, thank you.”

"She's anything but," I said and told them about the break-in.

They were horrified, expressing their concern with rounds of hugging and distance kissing until Laura had had enough. She excused herself, saying she was thoroughly exhausted and did we mind if she went to bed. With my bedroom being directly above our heads, the kids and I decamped to the kitchen and tried to talk quietly. Jaikie poked around in the fridge for leftovers but with nobody having been here for two days, there wasn't much to graze from. He made himself a cheese sandwich in the end, offered to make Jodie one, but the news about Laura had spoiled her appetite.

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked me.

Her faith in my ability to sort the problem out was flattering and a good deal more assured than my own.

"I don't know, hunt the killer down like a dog and in the last ten minutes chase him along the M4, kick box him all round Heathrow, cling onto the wings of the airplane he escapes in…" She smiled politely. "Something, I'll do something."

"You know, Dad, maybe the papers are right. Jealous nutter?"

"It isn't just about you," said Jodie sharply.

He turned away from her and for the first time since they'd met up again I sensed an awkwardness between them, but quickly put it down to my cluttered feelings and soon our chat became more sociable, the talk smaller. As it veered off yet again in the direction of how brilliant Jaikie had been in *All Good Men and True* and he began to quote phrases from the morning reviews, I said it was time for me to hit the sack. Jodie rose from the table and Jaikie followed her lead.

"Dad, by the way, am I still insured to drive the Land Rover?"

"What makes you think you ever were?"

"Ah, that means you'll have to drive Jodie back to her dad's. Where's the key?"

"On the hook by the back door," I said, eventually. "Drive slowly. Will your father still be up, Jodie?"

"Definitely. Paperwork."

While they went through to the living room to fetch her bag and jacket, I cleared away the fallout from the cheese sandwich and as I did so, my selective hearing began to twitch.

"…I tell him now?" Jaikie whispered.

"Not now," Jodie hissed. "Enough on his plate."

"Okay."

"But you must, *must* tell him."

I'd been right earlier, then, all was not well in paradise. I guessed they were talking about money. Jaikie had borrowed from me and from Laura, though not in the last 48 hours. Perhaps he hadn't needed to because the film company had taken care of everything. Or perhaps he'd tried tapping Jodie and she'd asked him the question I'd been avoiding: Why haven't you got any cash?

When the kids left, I phoned Martin. As Jodie had said, he was still up and working. The monkeys from the ministry, the DEFRA jobsworths, were on his back demanding to be given chapter and verse on his turkeys, but when I finally got his attention he too was relieved that the attack on Jaikie had only been the work of a jealous nutter. I didn't set him straight, just told him about the break-in. He was suitably furious.

"Martin, the spot where Jan found the plate, have you still got it marked?"

"Wooden stake, right through its heart."

"I want you to dig a bloody great hole, six feet deep, 20 across."

I explained that I wanted it done before the police started poking their noses in, which wasn't likely but possible. He said he'd get Jan working on it right away.

"Is there anyone else you can ask besides Jan?"

"Have you got a problem with him?"

I said I hadn't, but since neither of us had seen him pick up the plate that night, it was just possible that he hadn't done so.

"That he put it there himself, you mean? Why would he do that?"

"Just allow me a few unreasonable suspicions."

"Right, I'll call Phil Mason, first thing. He's as thick as a brick but a good worker." He then tried to fake complete disinterest, but I could almost see the eyes sparkling with boyish delight. "Is it just a big hole you want, or are we looking for something in particular?"

"A skeleton, you bloody fool."

I couldn't bring myself to tell him that he wouldn't find one, but I wanted him to look all the same. Just in case.

-6-

I surfaced next morning to the sound of Jaikie downstairs talking to someone on his phone. The actor's voice was penetrating walls, rounding corners, going through oak doors even when he spoke softly. He was talking to Jamal who had sent him a text earlier saying he would be late, there had been an accident on the M25 and he was stuck between one junction and another. Terrible, terrible. I sensed pure delight in Jaikie's side of the conversation. Jamal, the fanatical time-keeper, thief of those extra few minutes in bed, had had his comeuppance delivered by a jack-knifed juggernaut.

I dressed and went downstairs and only then realised that Laura wasn't in the house, neither in bed behind me nor in the kitchen ahead.

"She's left a note by the kettle," said Jaikie. "Shall I read it to you?"

I didn't care for a simple message to be delivered with all the colour he would give it. I clicked my fingers and he passed it to me. The time on it was 5.30am and announced her intention to have Plum Tree Cottage up and running again by the end of the day. She knew I would offer to help, she said, but she would rather do it on her own. It was a job that needed tackling head on, without interference. The word interference had been crossed out and replaced by distraction. She hoped I understood but she would ring me throughout the day. Laura. Love to Jaikie.

It was lunchtime before I couldn't stand the thought of her clearing up alone any longer. I walked Dogge round to her house, taking the cut through the churchyard, and found her crouched in the boiler house, torch in one hand, instruction manual in the other, trying to master the central heating.

"It's the same every year," she said, without looking up from what she was doing. "I forget how to forward the damn thing so it's back to the instruction book and…" I leaned over her and pressed the forward button. "…and then along comes a hero."

“Who would that be?”

“I forget his name. Some kind of bird, I think.”

“Mr Dove from number 14?”

She smiled dutifully and stood up, knee joints clicking to her embarrassment.

“How’ve you got on?” I asked.

She beckoned with a crooked finger and I followed her through the back door into the house. In the kitchen, lined up and ready for a tip run, stood a dozen black bin bags, full. I glanced through to the living room and from what I could see the armchairs, the coffee table, the books were back in their places. I went to check.

“Jesus, you’ve done it.” I said in disbelief. “In eight hours.”

“Plus inventory for the insurance company,” she said, nodding at her laptop.

She explained that items beyond repair had gone into the bin bags, things that were still in one piece went back in their original places. Certainly she’d had a few pangs of sadness on the way, brought on by specific items. The china dogs which had sat on her grandmother's mantelpiece for 50 years and then on hers another 20 had finally been put down. She would miss their company, but on the other hand they weren’t flesh and blood. A carriage clock that had stood on her father’s desk had been smashed beyond repair, but there were far too many other ways of telling the time these days. A mirror she was fond of had gone, leaving only a pale impression of itself behind. Her mother had used the mirror to check her face, just before leaving the house. Laura did the same, but in recent years had begun to see her mother looking back at her, so it was time for a change anyway.

I asked about the family photos. There weren’t many but the few there had been she treasured: several of her younger brother, killed in a road accident at 25, her parents in youth and old age, herself as a girl, then a young woman. They were all on disc, she said, so those here that had been ripped out of their broken frames could be replaced.

We stood for a while and in time we heard the central heating pipes creak into life.

“I began to feel cold when I stopped working,” she said.

The house wasn’t cold, it had simply been robbed of a particular kind of warmth.

“Where's Jaikie today?” she asked.

“At home. You haven’t lent him any more money, have you?”

“No.”

I smiled. “So you have lent him some.”

“I should've been ready for that, shouldn’t I. Fifty pounds, until he can change some dollars.”

I looked round again at what she had achieved in so short a space of time. It was, as she’d promised in her note, up and running again but all too raw and recent to be lived in for a while.

“It’ll take time to become yours again,” I said. “You’d better spend the rest of the week with me.”

She came up close, took my hands and put my arms around her waist. “Is that you at your romantic best?”

My phone trilled that I’d just received a text message. It was from Martin Falconer and said: “Hole dug. Bodies found.”

“Bodies?” said Laura. “Plural?”

I called Martin, who told me that he’d found the skeletons of two foxes which must have been ploughed in last winter. At least it explained why the dogs had been so interested in the place.

“No human remains?” I asked.

“Sorry, mate, no.”

We arrived at Beech Tree as Jaikie was returning from a hike along the Winchendon Valley, delighted to have been on his own for an hour or two. Nobody had followed him there, wanting to know if he and Jodie were an item, if Sophie Kent really was history. It was refreshing, invigorating, liberating, he went on, it had taken him back to those halcyon days when he was an ordinary bloke, out for an ordinary walk, with an ordinary dog…

The lad was protesting too much, methought.

Meantime, Laura had found three tuna steaks in the freezer and, together with vegetables she’d been given by one of her patients, was turning them into a five-star meal. As we sat down to eat it Jaikie said for no reason whatsoever, “Dad, d’you remember that bloke Jack Blundell?”

“I do, though I never had the pleasure of meeting him.”

Jaikie explained to Laura that 15 years ago, when Fee was determined to Save the World, to feed the poor and hungry, she’d met an ageing tramp in Thame and invited him to live in a rusty old caravan at our previous house. Maggie and I had no idea that he was there, though she did say she thought the kids were eating more these days. Stuff that

was in the fridge overnight for tomorrow's lunch kept disappearing. So did an old jacket of mine and a few T-shirts.

"How long did he stay?" asked Laura.

"Only three weeks," said Jaikie. "Left in a bit of a hurry one evening, halfway through a cottage pie Mum had made. He casually asked what sort of man our father was and Ellie, aged eight at the time, said he was a policeman sort of man. Jack put down his knife and fork, packed his carrier bag and 30 seconds later was gone. We never saw him again."

"When did you find out?" she asked me.

"Two years later."

Jaikie smiled. "Dad was always slow on the uptake. He bought Mum this set of casserole dishes…"

"Her 39th birthday…"

"One day, Con laid the lids down on the floor and walked across an imaginary river using them as stepping stones. All of them broke. Mum stuck them together and swore us to secrecy. Christmas Day, Dad takes off the lid to the sprouts and says, "Maggie, this lid's been broken." She confessed to having dropped it. It took him another year to realise they'd *all* been broken, by which time he could hardly lose his rag."

I wanted the family stories to end right there and apologised to Laura for the two we'd already had. "They're like dreams," I said. "Your own are fascinating, other people's are plain boring."

"I'd hardly call what Ellie did boring," said Jaikie.

Indulgent as ever, Laura asked him to elaborate.

"She swallowed Mum's engagement ring. Our GP said that if she didn't throw it up within an hour they'd have to wait for nature to take its course."

Perhaps drawn to the medical implications, Laura seemed interested. "And did she?"

"Half an hour later she threw up like a real pro and there it was."

I wish I could say that it was a eureka moment, but it was more a case of Jesus Christ why didn't I think of that before. It must have shown on my face.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"I may not know the who and why of this murder yet, but I think I know how they disposed of his body."

Laura stopped loading the dishwasher and came back to the table.

"I said it didn't involve blood and guts, right? That's exactly what it *does* involve."

As we drove to the Zawadskis' house I asked Jaikie to phone Martin and tell him to meet us there. Martin wanted to know why.

"Just be there!" I yelled at the phone.

The place had once been two cottages in a terrace of eight and was small enough now so God knows how any family could have lived in the originals. Victorian and built of stone with slated roofs, their main advantage had always been their closeness to the office, standing as they did overlooking the valley half a mile from the main farmhouse. We parked on a cinder lay-by behind a second-hand Audi and a BMW, tokens of the upward aspirations of Jan's neighbours.

The night was cold, remarkable for being the first one of an approaching winter, and our breath seemed to drift from our mouths as if trying to drag us away from our purpose. I knocked on the door and set off the Zawadskis' German Shepherd. The front door opened six inches and Katya Zawadski peered out into the darkness, concerned to see three people on her doorstep at this time of night. Doubtless in her family history a visit at this time of night was never friendly. This one wasn't exactly affable.

She relaxed when she recognised Laura and removed the safety chain in a fluster of embarrassment at her initial suspicions. Jan had come up behind her by now, having taken the dog into the kitchen, and he recognised me from the night I'd been combine harvesting in Long Field. I stepped over the threshold, shook his hand and some of the tension caused by our arrival fell away.

Jaikie, for once the only person in the room nobody recognised, introduced himself as my son and gave them his professional smile before turning it more gently on the two little girls who were descending the open stairs to see what the fuss was about. Both were in their pyjamas, one of them clinging to a soggy piece of blanket, the other clutching a tattered teddy bear. Jaikie waved to them, Katya turned and spoke with a soothing voice in a mixture of Polish and English.

"Back to bed, my darlings."

"I woke them," I said. "Forgive me."

She was a tall woman, a fact made all the more apparent by the low beamed ceilings. Her blonde hair was tied back in a pony-tail, fully revealing her face, straining it a little. Her eyes were pale blue, intelligent eyes, seeking an explanation as to why we were there. Her husband removed a couple of soft toys from the sofa, dropped them into a basket and Laura and Jaikie took their places. Now that I saw him in

more detail I can only describe his looks as Eastern European, a smooth, square face with untrusting eyes betraying a nervous disposition. Over my shoulder he spotted the headlights from Martin's pickup pulling up outside and went to greet his boss.

"What's all this about, Nathan?" Martin asked. The dog in the kitchen, hearing another strange voice, barked again. Jan called in Polish for her to be quiet.

"Actually, it's her I wanted to talk to you about," I said.