



IAN
RANKIN

A novel by the Edgar Award–winning author of *A Question of Blood*

**BLEEDING
HEARTS**

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Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group USA
237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017
Visit our Web site at www.HachetteBookGroupUSA.com

First eBook Edition: June 2008
Originally published in Great Britain by Headline

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ISBN: 978-0-7595-6979-9

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Fleshmarket Alley

For Elliot and Fawn

PART ONE

ONE

SHE HAD JUST OVER THREE HOURS TO LIVE, and I was sipping grapefruit juice and tonic in the hotel bar.

“You know what it’s like these days,” I said, “only the toughest are making it. No room for bleeding hearts.”

My companion was a businessman himself. He too was recovering from the recent highs and lows of the ’80s, and he nodded as vigorously as the whiskey in him would allow.

“Bleeding hearts,” he said, “are for the operating table, not for business.”

“I’ll drink to that,” I said, though of course in my line of work bleeding hearts *are* the business.

Gerry had asked me a little while ago what I did for a living, and I’d told him import-export, then asked what he did. See, I slipped up once; I manufactured a career for myself only to find the guy I was drinking with was in the same line of work. Not good. These days I’m better, much cagier, and I don’t drink on the day of a hit. Not a drop. Not anymore. Word was, I was slipping. Bullshit naturally but sometimes rumors are difficult to throw off. It’s not as though I could put an ad in the newspaper. But I knew a few good clean hits would give the lie to this particular little slander.

Then again, today’s hit was no prize: it had been handed to me, a gift. I knew where she’d be and what she’d be doing. I didn’t just know what she looked like, I knew pretty well what she’d be wearing. I knew a whole lot about her. I wasn’t going to have to work for this one, but prospective future employers wouldn’t know that. All they’d see was the score sheet. Well, I’d take all the easy targets going.

“So what do you buy and sell, Mark?” Gerry asked.

I was Mark Wesley. I was English. Gerry was English too, but as international businessmen we spoke to one another in mid-Atlantic: the lingua franca of the deal. We were jealous of our American cousins, but would never admit it.

“Whatever it takes, Gerry,” I said.

“I’m into that.” Gerry toasted me with whiskey. It was 3 P.M. local time. The whiskies were six quid a hit, not much more than my own soft drink. I’ve drunk in hotel bars all over the Western world and this one looked like all of them. Dimly lit even in daytime, the same bottles behind the polished bar, the same liveried barman pouring from them. I find the sameness comforting. I hate to go to a strange place, somewhere where you can’t find any focus, anything recognizable to grab on to. I hate Egypt: even the Coke signs were written in Arabic, and all the numerals were wrong, plus everyone was wearing the wrong clothes. I hate Third World countries; I won’t do hits there unless the money is particularly interesting. I like to be somewhere with clean hospitals and facilities, dry sheets on the bed, English-speaking smiles.

“Well, Gerry,” I said, “been nice talking to you.”

“Same here, Mark.” He opened his wallet and eased out a business card. “Here, just in case.”

I studied it. Gerald Fritch, Marketing Strategist. There was a company name, phone, fax, and car-phone number, and an address in Liverpool. I put the card in my pocket, then patted my jacket.

“Sorry, I can’t swap. No cards on me just now.”

“That’s all right.”

“But the drinks are on me.”

“Well, I don’t know—”

“My pleasure, Gerry.” The barman handed me the bill, and I signed my name and room number.

“After all,” I said, “you never know when I might need a favor.”

Gerry nodded. “You need friends in business. A face you can trust.”

“It’s true, Gerry, it’s all about trust in our game.”

Obviously, as you can see, I was in a philosophical mood.

Back up in my room, I put out the DO NOT DISTURB sign, locked the door, and wedged a chair under the handle. The bed had already been made, the bathroom towels changed, but you couldn’t be too careful. A maid might look in anyway. There was never much of a pause between them knocking at your door and them unlocking it.

I took the suitcase from the bottom of the wardrobe and laid it on the bed, then checked the little Scotch tape seal I’d left on it. The seal was still intact. I broke it with my thumbnail and unlocked the suitcase. I lifted out some shirts and T-shirts until I came to the dark blue raincoat. This I lifted out and laid on the bed. I then pulled on my kid-leather driving gloves before going any further. With these on, I unfolded the coat. Inside, wrapped in plastic, was my rifle.

It’s impossible to be too careful, and no matter how careful you are you leave traces. I try to keep up with advances in forensic science, and I know all of us leave traces wherever we are: fibers, hairs, fingerprint, a smear of grease from a finger or arm. These days, they can match you from the DNA in a single hair. That’s why the rifle was wrapped in plastic: it left fewer traces than cloth.

The gun was beautiful. I’d cleaned it carefully in Max’s workshop, then checked it for identifiers and other distinguishing marks. Max does a good job of taking off serial numbers, but I always like to be sure. I’d spent some time with the rifle, getting to know it, its weight and its few foibles. I’d practiced over several days, making sure I got rid of all the spent bullets and cartridge cases, just so the gun couldn’t be traced back to them. Every gun leaves particular and unique marks on a bullet. I didn’t believe that at first either, but apparently it’s true.

The ammo was a problem. I didn’t really want to tamper with it. Each cartridge case carries a head stamp, which identifies it. I’d tried filing off the head stamps from a few cartridges, and they didn’t seem to make any difference to the accuracy of my shooting. But on the day, *nothing* could go wrong. So I asked Max and he said the bullets could be traced back to a consignment which had accompanied the British Army units to Kuwait during the Gulf War. (I didn’t ask how Max had got hold of them; probably the same source as the rifle itself.) See, some snipers like to make their own ammo. That way they know they can trust it. But I’m not skilled that way, and I don’t think it matters anyway. Max sometimes made up ammo for me, but his eyes weren’t so great these days.

The ammo was .338 Lapua Magnum. It was full-metal-jacket: military stuff usually is, since it fulfills the Geneva Convention’s requirements for the most “humane” type of bullet.

Well, I’m no animal, I wasn’t about to contravene the Geneva Convention.

Max had actually been able to offer a choice of weapons. That’s why I use him. He asks few questions and has excellent facilities. That he lives in the middle of nowhere is a bonus, since I can practice all day without disturbing anyone. Then there’s his daughter, Belinda, who would be bonus enough in herself. I always take her a present if I’ve been away somewhere. Not that I’d . . . you know

not with Max about. He's very protective of her, and she of him. They remind me of Beauty and the Beast. ~~Bel's got short fair hair, eyes slightly slanted like a cat's, and a long straight nose. Her face looks like it's been polished.~~ Max on the other hand has been battling cancer for years. He's lost about a quarter of his face, I suppose, and keeps his right side, from below the eye to just above the lips, covered with a white plastic prosthesis. Sometimes Bel calls him the Phantom of the Opera. He takes it from her. He wouldn't take it from anyone else.

I think that's why he's always pleased to see me. It's not just that I have cash on me and something I want, but he doesn't see many people. Or rather, he doesn't let many people see him. He spends all day in his workshop, cleaning, filing, and polishing his guns. And he spends a lot of his nights there, too.

He had a Remington 700, pre-fitted with a Redfield telescopic sight. The U.S. Marines use this military version of the Varmint as sniper rifles. I'd used one before, and had nothing against it. More interesting though was a Sterling Sniper Rifle. Most people I'd met thought only cars were made in Dagenham, but that's where the Sterling was crafted. It was user-friendly, down to the cheek rest and the grooved receiver. You could fit it with any mounting plate you wanted, to accommodate any telescope or night sight. I admit, it was tempting.

There were others, too. Max didn't have them, but he knew where he could get them: an L39A1, the ugly Mauser SP66, a Fusil Modele 1 Type A. I decided I wanted British; call me sentimental. And finally Max handed over the gun we'd both known I'd opt for: a Model PM.

The manufacturers, Accuracy International, call it the PM. I don't know what the letters stand for, maybe Post Mortem. But the British Army knows it as Sniper Rifle L96A1. A mouthful, you'll agree, which is why Max and I stick to calling it the PM. There are several versions, and Max was offering the Super Magnum (hence the .338 Lapua Magnum ammo). The gun itself is not what you'd call a beauty, and as I unwrapped it in my hotel room it looked even less lovely, since I'd covered its camouflage with some camouflage of my own.

The PM is olive green in color, fine if you are hiding in the trees, but not so inconspicuous when surrounded by the gray concrete of a city street. So in Max's workshop I'd wound some gray adhesive tape around it, wearing my gloves all the time so as not to leave prints on the tape. As a result, the PM now looked like the ballistic equivalent of the Invisible Man, all bandaged except for the bits I needed left open to access. It was a neat job of binding; the wrapping around the stainless-steel barrel alone had taken a couple of hours.

The PM is a long rifle, its barrel nearly four inches longer than the Remington. It's also heavy, even though it's mostly plastic, albeit high-impact plastic: double the weight of the Remington, and over four pounds heavier than the Sterling. I didn't mind though; it wasn't as if I'd be carrying it through the jungle. I made it even longer by fitting a flash hider of my own construction. (Max smiled with half of his face as he watched me. Like me, he is an admirer of beauty and craft, and the best you could say of my finished product was that it worked.)

All the guns Max had offered me were bolt-action, all were 7.62mm, and all had barrels with four grooves and a right-hand twist. They differed in styles and muzzle velocity, in length and weight, but they shared one common characteristic. They were all lethal.

In the end, I decided I didn't require the integral bipod: at the angle I'd be shooting from, it would hinder rather than help. So I took that off, minimally reducing the weight. Although the Super Magnum accepts a five-round box, I knew I'd have two bullets at most, preferably only one. With bolt-action rifles, you sometimes didn't have time for a second shot. While you were working the bolt, your quarry was scuttling to safety.

I picked the gun up at last, and stood in my bedroom staring into the full-length mirror on the wardrobe door. ~~The curtains were closed, so I was able to do this. I'd already fitted the telescopic sight.~~ Ah, Max had made things so difficult. He could give me a Redfield, a Parker-Hale, the Zeiss Diavari ZA . . . even the old No. 32 sniping telescope. But the PM wasn't geared up for these, so instead of fussing and having to make my own special sight-mounting plate, I opted for a Schmidt and Bender 6342 telescopic sight, all the time telling myself I was maybe, for once, going to too much trouble.

I was ready to pick off a flea from a cat's whisker at six hundred yards, when all I had to do was hit a human target, out in the open, at something like a tenth of that. What was I doing buying all this lavish craft and expertise when something bashed together in China would achieve the same objective? Max had an answer.

"You like quality, you like style."

True, Max, true. If my targets were suddenly to depart this world, I wanted them to have the best send-off I could give them. I checked my watch, then double-checked with the clock-radio.

She had just over two hours to live.

TWO

EVERYTHING WAS WAITING FOR ELEANOR RICKS.

She'd woken that morning after a drugged sleep, knowing yet another day was waiting out there, ready to bite her. Breakfast and her husband, Freddy, were waiting in the kitchen, as was Mrs. Elfman. When Eleanor and Freddy were both working, Mrs. Elfman came in and got breakfast ready, then cleaned everything away and tidied the rooms. When they weren't working, she did the cleaning but no cooking. Freddy insisted that one or the other of them *had* to be capable of preparing cereal or sausage and eggs and a pot of coffee, so long as their minds weren't on work. Funny, usually Eleanor ended up cooking if Mrs. Elfman wasn't around, even if she had to go to work while Freddy was "resting." Today, however, was a workday for both of them.

Freddy Ricks was an actor, of consequence (albeit in TV sitcoms) in the early '80s but now squeezing a living from character parts and not many of them. He'd tried some stage acting but didn't like it, and had wasted a good deal of their joint savings by spending fruitless time in Hollywood, trying to call up favors from producers and directors who'd moved on from British TV. Today, he was starring in a commercial for breakfast cereal. It would be head and shoulders only, and he'd be wearing a yellow oilskin sou'wester and a puzzled expression. He had two lines to say, but they'd dub another actor's voice on later. Freddy couldn't understand why his own voice wasn't good enough for them. It had, as he pointed out, been quite good enough for the twelve million viewers who'd tuned in to *Stand by Your Man* every week of its runs in 1983-4.

He sat at the table munching cornflakes and reading his preferred tabloid. He looked furious, but then these days he always looked furious. The radio sat on the draining board, volume turned down low because Freddy didn't like it. But Mrs. Elfman liked it, and she angled her head toward it, trying to catch the words, while at the same time washing last night's dishes.

"Morning, Mrs. E."

"Morning, Mrs. Ricks, how did you sleep?"

"Like a log, thanks."

"All right for some," Freddy muttered from behind his cereal spoon. Eleanor ignored him, and so did Mrs. Elfman. Eleanor poured herself a mug of black coffee.

"Want some breakfast, Mrs. Ricks?"

"No thanks."

"It's the most important meal of the day."

"I'm still full from last night." This was a lie, but what else could she say: If I eat a single morsel I'm liable to be throwing up all morning? Mrs. Elfman would think she was joking.

"Is Archie up?"

"Who knows?" growled Freddy.

Archie was their son, seventeen years old and the computer player in a pop group. Eleanor had never heard of anyone playing the computer as a musical instrument, until Archie had shown her. No

his band was making its second record, the first having been a success in local clubs. She went to the bottom of the stairs and called him. There was no answer.

“He’s like bloody Dracula,” complained Freddy. “Never seen in daylight hours.” Mrs. Elfman threw him a nasty look, and Eleanor went through to her study.

Eleanor Ricks was a freelance investigative journalist who had somehow managed to make a name for herself without recourse to the usual “investigations” of pop stars, media celebrities, and royalty. But then one day she’d found that magazines wanted to send round journalists to profile *her*, and she started to rethink her career. So now, after years of newspaper and magazine articles, she was finally going into television—just, it seemed, as Freddy was moving out of it. Poor Freddy: she gave him a moment’s thought, then started work.

Today she was interviewing Molly Prendergast, the secretary of state for social security. They were meeting at a central hotel. They wouldn’t be talking about anything concerning the department of social security, or Molly Prendergast’s position there, or even her standing in her own political party. It was much more personal, which was why they were meeting in a hotel rather than at the department’s offices.

It was Eleanor’s idea. She reckoned she’d get more out of Molly Prendergast on neutral ground. She didn’t want to hear a politician talking; she wanted to hear a mother . . .

She went through her notes again, her list of questions, press clippings, video footage. She spoke with her researchers and assistant by phone. This was an initial interview, not intended for broadcast. Eleanor would make a tape recording, but just for her own use. There wouldn’t be any cameras or technicians there, just two women having a chat and a drink. Then, if Prendergast looked useful to the project, there’d be a request for a proper on-screen interview, asking the same or similar questions again. Eleanor knew that the Molly Prendergast she got today would not be the one she’d get at a later date. On screen, the politician would be much more cautious, more guarded. But Eleanor would use her anyway: Prendergast was a name, and this story needed a name to get it some publicity. Or so Joe kept telling her.

The batteries for her tape recorder had been charging up overnight. She checked them, taping her voice then winding it back to listen. The recorder, though small, had a stereo microphone built into it and a tiny but powerful external speaker. She would take three C90 tapes with her, though it was expected to be an hour-long interview. Well, it might overrun, or a tape might snap. What was she thinking of? It wouldn’t overrun. Two C90s would do it. But she’d best take a lot of batteries.

She rewound the video compilation and studied it again, then went to her computer and tweaked some of her questions, deleting one and adding two new ones. She printed off this new sheet and read it over one more time. Then she faxed it to her producer, who phoned back with the okay.

“You’re sure?” Eleanor asked.

“I’m sure. Look, don’t worry about this, Lainie.” She hated him calling her Lainie. One day, she’d tell him to his face . . . No, that wasn’t true, was it? It was a small price to pay for Joe Draper’s backing. Joe was an excellent producer, if, like so many of his television colleagues, a bit of a prima donna. He’d earned his money doing a cop drama series and a couple of sitcoms (one of them with Freddy playing the errant next-door neighbor), then had set up his own production company, which specialized in documentaries and docu-dramas. These were good days for independent producers, so long as you knew your market and had a few contacts in the TV broadcasting companies. Joe had plenty of friends: the weekend coke parties at his home in Wiltshire were *very* popular. He’d invited her along a couple of times, but had neglected to invite Freddy.

“You forget, Joe, I’m new to this, I can’t be laid back like you.” Okay, so she was fishing for a

compliment, and of course, Joe knew it.

~~“Lainie, you’re the best. Just do what you’re best at. Talk to her, open her up, then sit back and look interested. That’s it. You know, like you were a . . .”~~ Here it came, another of Joe’s tortured similes. “A lion tamer. You go in there, crack your whip, and when she starts to do the trick, you can relax and take the applause.”

“You really think it’s that simple, Joe?”

“No, it’s hard work. But the secret is, don’t make it *look* like hard work. It should be smooth like the baize on a snooker table, so smooth she doesn’t know she’s been potted till she’s falling into the pocket.” He laughed then, and she laughed with him, amazed at herself. “Look, Lainie, this is going to be good TV, I can feel it. You’ve got a great idea, and you’re going about it the right way: human interest. It’s been a winning formula since TV had diapers on. Now go to it!”

She smiled tiredly. “All right, Joe, I will.” Then she hung up the phone.

Satisfied, Eleanor phoned for a bike messenger. She wrote a covering note, put it with a copy of the questions into a large manila envelope, and wrote Prendergast’s name and her home address on the front of it. When the bike arrived she hesitated before letting him take the envelope. Then she closed the door and exhaled. She thought she might throw up, but didn’t. That was it. Those were the questions she’d be running with. There was little else to do until five o’clock but panic and take a few pills and try on clothes. Maybe she’d go out for a little while to calm herself down, walk to Regent’s Park and along the perimeter of the zoo. The fresh air and the grass and trees, the children playing and running or staring through the fence at the animals; these things usually calmed her. Even the jets overhead could have an effect. But it was fifty-fifty. Half the time, after they calmed her she had to sit on a park bench and cry. She’d bawl and hide her face in her coat, and couldn’t explain to anyone why she was doing it.

She couldn’t explain, but she knew all the same. She was doing it because she was scared.

In the end she stayed home. She was soaking in the bath when the phone rang. Mrs. Elfman had already gone home, having once more informed Eleanor that she would not touch Archie’s room until he’d sorted the worst of it out for himself. Freddy had left for his sou’wester cereal slot, not even saying good-bye or wishing her luck. She knew he wouldn’t be home again. He’d stop in one of his many pubs to talk to other embittered men. It would be seven or eight before he came back here. As for Archie, well, she hadn’t seen him in days anyway.

She’d let the phone ring for a while—what could be so important?—but then realized it might be Molly Prendergast querying or nixing one of the new questions. Eleanor reached up and unhooked the receiver from the extension on the wall above the bath. It had seemed mad at the time, a phone in the bathroom, but it came in useful more often than they’d thought.

“Hello?”

“Eleanor?”

“Geoffrey, is that you?”

“Who else?”

“You always seem to catch me in the bath.”

“Lucky me. Can we talk?”

“What about?”

“I think you know.”

Geoffrey Johns was Eleanor’s solicitor, and had been for fifteen years. Occasionally, her journalism had landed her with an injunction, a libel suit, or a court appearance. She knew Geoffrey very well indeed. She could imagine him seated in his grandfather’s chair in his grandfather’s office

(also at one time his father's office). The office was stuffy and gloomy, the chair uncomfortable, but Geoffrey wouldn't make any changes. He even used a Bakelite telephone, with a little drawer in the base for a notepad. The phone was a reproduction and had cost him a small fortune.

"Humor me," she said, lying back farther in the water. A telephone engineer had told her she couldn't electrocute herself, even if the receiver fell in the water. Not enough volts or something. All she'd feel was a tingle. He'd leered as he'd said it. Just a tingle.

"I think you know," Geoffrey Johns repeated, drawling the words out beyond their natural limits. Eleanor had a feeling he spoke so slowly because he charged by the hour. When she didn't say anything he sighed loudly. "Are you doing anything today?"

"Nothing much. I've an interview this afternoon."

"I thought we might meet."

"I don't think that's necessary."

"No?" Another silence, another pause. "Look, Eleanor—"

"Geoffrey, is there something you want to say?"

"I . . . no, I suppose not."

"Look, Geoffrey, you're one of the dearest people I know." She halted. It was an old joke between them.

"My rates are actually very reasonable," he supplied, sounding mollified. "What about next week I'll buy you lunch."

She ran the sponge between her breasts and then over them. "That sounds heavenly."

"Do you want to fix a date now?"

"You know what I'm like, Geoffrey, I'd only end up changing it. Let's wait."

"Fine. Well, as the Americans say, have a nice day."

"It's past two, Geoffrey, the best of the day's already over."

"Don't remind me," said Geoffrey Johns.

She reached up to replace the receiver in its cradle, and wondered if Geoffrey would try charging her for the call. She wouldn't put it past him. She lay in the tub a little longer, until there was just enough hot water left in the tap to let her shower off. She ran her fingers through her hair, enjoying the sensation, then toweled briskly and set off naked to the bedroom for her clothes.

She'd had her yellow and blue dress cleaned specially, and was glad the day was sunny. The dress worked best in sunlight.

THREE

I TOOK A CAB FROM THE HOTEL.

My destination was only a ten-minute walk away, but I knew I'd be less conspicuous in a taxi. London cabdrivers aren't, in my experience, the all-knowing and inquisitive individuals they're often made out to be. They nod at you when you tell them your destination, and that's about it. Of course, mine had one comment ready as I got into his cab.

"What you got there then, a bazooka or something?"

"Photographic equipment," I answered, though he showed no interest. I had maneuvered the long metal box into the back of the cab, where, angled between the top corner of the rear window and the bottom front corner of the door diametrically opposite, it afforded me scant space for myself. It was longer than it needed to be; but it was also the shortest adequate box I could find.

It was silver in color, with three clasp-locks and a black handle. I'd bought it in a specialist shop for photographers. It was used for carrying around rolls of precious background paper. The shop assistant had tried to sell me some graduated sheets—they were on special offer—but I'd declined. I didn't mind the box being too big. It did anything but announce that there was a gun inside.

In the movies, the local assassin tends to carry a small attaché case. His rifle will be inside, broken down into stock, fore-end, and barrel. He simply clips the parts together and attaches his telescopic sight. Of course, in real life even if you get hold of such a weapon, it would not be anything like as accurate as a solid one-piece construction. Normally, I'd carry my rifle hanging from a special pouch inside my raincoat, but the PM was just too long and too heavy. So instead of walking, I was taking a taxi to the office.

I'd been watching the weather for a couple of hours, and had even phoned from the hotel for the latest Met Office report. Clear, but without bright sunshine. In other words, perfect conditions, the sun being a sniper's worst enemy. I was chewing gum and doing some breathing exercises, though I doubted they'd be effective in my present cramped condition. But it was only a few minutes until the driver was pulling up to the curb and dropping me outside the office block.

This was a Saturday, remember, and though I was in central London my destination wasn't one of the main thoroughfares. So the street was quiet. Cars and taxis waited for the lights to change farther down the road, but the shops were doing slow business and all the offices were closed. The shops were at street level, the usual mix of ceramics studios, small art galleries, shoe shops, and travel agents. I paid the driver and eased the carrying case out onto the pavement. I stood there until he'd driven off. Across the street were more shops with offices above, and the Craigmead Hotel. It was one of those old understated hotels with overstated room rates. I knew this because I'd toyed with staying there before opting for a much safer choice.

The building I was standing outside was a typical central London office complex, with four steps up to an imposing front door, and a facade which in some parts of the city would hide a huge family home broken up into flats. Indeed, the building next door had been converted to flats on all but its first

and second floors. My chosen site, however, was currently being gutted and reshaped to offer, as the billboard outside put it, LUXURY OFFICE ACCOMMODATION FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.

I'd been along here yesterday and the day before, and again earlier today. During the week, the place was busy with workmen, but this being Saturday the main door was locked tight, and there was no sign of life inside. That's why I'd chosen it over the flats next door, which offered the easier target but would probably be in use on weekends. I walked up to the main door and worked the lock. It was simple Yale, not even permanently fixed. The real locks would come later on in the renovation.

Meantime, there being little inside worth stealing, the contractors hadn't bothered with a quality lock. They hadn't got round to installing the alarm system yet either: another reason for my choice. Wires led out of the front wall into fresh air. Later, they'd be hooked up to the alarm and a casing put over the whole. But for now security was not the main concern.

I'm not the world's greatest locksmith, but any housing-project teenager could have been into the place in seconds. I walked into the entrance hall, taking my carrying case with me, and closed the door behind me. I stood there for a minute listening to the silence. I could smell drying plaster and wet paint, planed wood and varnish. The downstairs looked like a building site. There were planks and panels of drywall and bags of cement and plaster and rolls of insulation. Some of the floorboards had been lifted to allow access to wiring ducts, but I didn't see any fresh rolls of electrical cable: the stuff was probably too valuable to be left lying around. The electrical contractor would take it away with him every night in his van and bring it back again the next day. I knew a few electricians; they're careful that way.

There were also no power tools lying around, and very few tools of any description. I guessed they'd be locked away somewhere inside the building. There was a telephone on the floor, one of the old slimline models with the angular receiver resting over the dial. It was chipped and dotted with paint, but more surprising was attached to a phone jack on the wall. I lifted the receiver, and heard the familiar tone. I suppose it made sense: this was going to be a long job; there'd have to be some means of communication between the gang and their base. I put back the receiver and stood up.

Since I hadn't been in the place before, I knew I had to get to know it quickly. I left the case in the reception area and headed upstairs. Some doors had been fitted, but none were locked, except one to a storage area. I presumed that was where the tools were kept.

I found the office I needed on the third floor.

The second floor was too close to ground level. There was always the chance of some pedestrian glancing up, though they so seldom did. The fourth floor, on the other hand, made the angle a little too difficult. I might have accepted its challenge, but I knew I needed a good hit. No time for games today; it had to be fast and mundane. Well, not *too* mundane. There was always my calling card.

My chosen office was as chaotic as any other part of the building. They were fitting a false ceiling from which fell electrical outlets, probably for use with desktop computers. The ceiling they were putting up, a grid of white plastic strips, would be hiding the real ceiling, which was ornately corniced with an even more ornate central ceiling rose, presumably at one time surrounding the room's main light fitting, a chandelier perhaps. Well, they're fucking up old buildings everywhere, aren't they?

I checked my exits: there was only the front door. It looked like they were working on a fire exit at the rear of the building, but meantime they'd left all their ladders and scaffolding there, effectively barricading the door. So when I left, I'd have to leave through the front door. But that didn't worry me. I've found that just as attack is the best form of defense, so boldness can be the best form of disguise. It's the person slinking away who looks suspicious, not the one walking toward you. Besides, attention was going to be elsewhere, wasn't it?

The window was fine. There was some ineffective double glazing, which could be slid open, and behind which lay the original sash window. I unscrewed the window lock and tried opening it. The pulleys stuck for a moment, their ropes crusted with white paint, and then they gave with an audible squeak and the window lifted an inch. With more effort, I opened it a second and then a third inch. This wasn't ideal. It meant the telescopic sight would be pointing through the glass, while the muzzle would be stuck into fresh air. But I'd carried out an assassination before under near-identical conditions. To be honest, I could probably have forced the window open a bit farther, but I think I was looking for just a *little* challenge.

I peered out. No one was looking back at me. I couldn't see anyone in the shops over the road, and no one was staring from the hotel windows farther along. In fact, some of the shops looked like they were closing for the day. My watch said 5:25. Yes, some of them, most of them, would close at 5:30. The tourists and visitors at the Craigmear Hotel wouldn't be in their rooms, they'd still be out enjoying the summer weather. By six o'clock, the street would be dead. I only had to wait.

I brought the case upstairs and opened it. I couldn't find a chair, but there was a wooden crate which I upended. It seemed strong enough, so I placed it by the window and sat on it. The PM lay on the floor in front of me, along with two bullets. I sat there thinking about cartridges. You wouldn't think something so small and so fixed in its purpose could be quite so complex. Straight or bottleneck? Belted, rimmed, semirimmed, rimless, or rebated? Center-fire or rim-fire? Then there was the primer compound. I knew that Max mixed his own compound using lead styphnate, antimony sulfide, and barium nitrate, but in a ratio he kept to himself. I picked up one of the bullets by its base and tip. What, I wondered, is it like to be shot? I knew the answer in forensic terms. I knew the kinds of entrance and exit wounds left by different guns at different ranges and using different ammunition. I had to know this sort of thing, so I could determine each individual hit. Some snipers go for the head shot; some of them call it a JFK. Not me.

I go for the heart.

What else did I think about in that room, as the traffic moved past like the dull soothing roll of waves on a shore? I didn't think about anything else. I emptied my mind. I could have been in a trance, had anyone seen me. I let my shoulders slump, my head fall forward, my jaw muscles relax. I kept my fingers spread wide, not clenched. And with my eyes slightly out of focus, I watched the second hand go round on my watch. Finally I came out of it, and found myself wondering what I would order for dinner. Some dark meat in a sauce rich enough to merit a good red wine. It was five minutes to six. I picked up the PM, undid the bolt, pushed home the first bullet, and slid the bolt forward. Then I took a small homemade cushion from my jacket pocket and placed it between my shoulder and the stock of the rifle. I had to be careful of the recoil.

This was a dangerous time. If anyone saw me now, they wouldn't just see a man at a window, they'd see the barrel of a gun, a black telescopic sight, and a sniper taking aim. But the few pedestrians were too busy to look up. They were hurrying home, or to some restaurant appointment. They carried shopping bags. They kept their eyes to the treacherous London paving slabs. If a cracked slab didn't get you, then the dog shit might. Besides, they couldn't look straight ahead; that was to invite a stranger's stare, an unwanted meeting of eyes.

The sight was beautiful; it was as if I were standing a few feet from the hotel steps. There was a central revolving door, and ordinary push-pull doors to either side. Most people going into or coming out of the hotel seemed to use the ordinary doors. I wondered which one she would use. It was six

now, dead on the hour. I blinked slowly, keeping my eyes clear. One minute past six. Then two minutes past. I took deep breaths, releasing them slowly. I'd taken my eye away from the telescope. I could see the hotel entrance well enough without it. Now a car was drawing up outside the hotel. There was a liveried chauffeur in the front. He made no effort to get out and open the back doors. The man and woman got out by themselves. He looked like a diplomat; the car carried a diplomatic plate below its radiator grille. They walked up the three carpeted steps to the revolving door. And now two women were coming out.

Two women.

I put my eye to the telescopic sight. Yes. I pulled the gun in tight against my cushioned shoulder, adjusted my hands a fraction, and put my finger on the trigger. The two women were smiling, talking. The diplomat and his wife had moved past them. Now the women were craning their necks, looking for taxis. Another car drew up and one of the women pointed toward it. She started down a step, and her companion followed. The sun appeared from behind a cloud, highlighting the yellow and blue design on her dress. I squeezed the trigger.

Straightaway, I pulled the gun in from the window. I knew the hit had been good. She'd fallen backward as if pushed hard in the chest. The other woman didn't realize for a moment what had happened. She was probably thinking fainting fit or heart attack. But now she'd seen the blood and she was looking around, then crawling down the steps on her hands and knees, taking cover behind the diplomat's car. The driver was out of the car and looking around. He'd pulled a pistol from inside his jacket and was screaming at the diplomat to get indoors. The driver in the other car seemed to have ducked down in his seat.

And now there were sirens. You were always hearing sirens in central London—ambulances, fire engines. But these were police cars and they were screaming to a stop outside the hotel. I stood up and moved away from the window. It was impossible, they couldn't be here so quickly. I took another look. Some of the police were armed, and they were making for the block next to this one, the block with all the flats in it. Passersby were being ordered to take cover, the woman was yelling and crying from the cover of the car, the armed chauffeur was crouching over the lifeless body. He put his hands up when the police took aim at him, and started to explain who he was. It might take them a little while to believe him.

I knew I had seconds to get out. They'd turn their attention to this building next. I put the gun back in its box along with the unused bullet, closed the box, and left it there. Normally I'd take the gun away with me and break it up, then dispose of it. Max never wanted my guns back, and I couldn't blame him. But I knew I couldn't risk walking out with that carrying case.

As I walked downstairs, the idea came to me. There was a hospital just a few blocks away. I picked up the telephone and dialed 999, then asked for an ambulance.

"I'm a severe hemophiliac, and I've just had a terrible accident. I think there's hemorrhaging to the head." I gave them the address, then hung up and went in search of a brick. There were some just inside the front door. I picked one up and smashed it into my forehead, making sure the edge of the brick made the initial contact. I touched my forehead with the palm of my hand. There was blood.

And then from outside came the sound of a muffled explosion: my calling card.

I'd planted the device in the morning. It was at the bottom of a dustbin in an alley behind some restaurants. The alley was about five hundred yards from the Craigmear Hotel. It was a small bomb, just big enough to make a noise. The alley was a dead end, so I doubted anyone would be hurt. Its purpose was to deflect attention while I walked away from the scene. I knew it would still deflect attention, but I doubted I'd be able to walk away without being spotted by the police.

Now there was another siren, not a police car but an ambulance. God bless them, the emergency services know that when a hemophiliac phones them up, it has to be priority. I unlocked the main door and looked out. Sure enough, the ambulance had drawn up outside. One of the ambulance men was opening the back door, the other was climbing out from the driver's side.

Together they pulled a stretcher from the back of the ambulance, maneuvered it onto the pavement, and wheeled it toward the front door. Someone, a policeman probably, called out to them and asked what they were doing.

"Emergency!" one of them called back.

I held the door open for them. I had a hand to my bloody forehead, and an embarrassed smile on my face.

"Tripped and fell," I said.

"Not surprised with all this rubbish lying around."

"I was working upstairs."

I let them put me onto the stretcher. I thought it would look better for the audience.

"Do you have your card?" one of them asked.

"It's in my wallet at home."

"You're always supposed to carry it. What's your factor level?"

"One percent."

They were putting me in the ambulance now. The armed police were still in the apartment block. People were looking toward the source of the explosion from a few moments before.

"What the hell's happened here?" one ambulance man asked the other.

"Christ knows." The second ambulance man tore open a packet and brought out a compress, which he pressed to my forehead. He placed my hand on it. "Here, you know the drill. Plenty of pressure."

The driver closed the ambulance doors from the outside, leaving me with his colleague. Nobody stopped us as we left the scene. I was sitting up, thinking I wasn't safe yet.

"Is this your card?" The ambulance man had picked something off the floor. He started reading it. "Gerald Flicht, Marketing Strategist."

"My business card. It must have fallen out of my pocket." I held out my hand and he gave me back the card. "The company I'm working for, they're supposed to be moving into the new office next week."

"It's an old card then, the Liverpool address?"

"Yes," I said, "our old offices."

"Are you factor eight or nine, Mr. Flicht?"

"Factor eight," I told him.

"We've got a good hematology department, you'll be all right."

"Thank you."

"To tell you the truth, you'd have been as quick walking there."

Yes, we were already bumping through the hospital gates and up to the Emergency entrance. This was about as far as I could take the charade. I knew that behind the compress the bleeding was already stopping. They took me into Emergency and gave a nurse my details. She went off to call someone from hematology, and the ambulance men went back to their vehicle. I sat for a few moments in the empty reception area, then got up and headed for the door. The ambulance was still there, but there was no sign of the ambulance men. They'd probably gone for a cup of tea and a cigarette. I walked down the slope to the hospital's main entrance, and deposited the compress in a wastebasket. There were two public telephones on the wall, and I called my hotel.

“Can I speak to Mr. Wesley, please? Room two-oh-three.”

“Sorry,” said the receptionist after a moment, “I’m getting no reply.”

“Can I leave a message? It’s very important. Tell Mr. Wesley there’s been a change of plans, he has to be in Liverpool tonight. This is Mr. Snipes from the head office.”

“Is there a number where he can contact you, Mr. Snipes?” I gave her a fictitious phone number prefixed with the Liverpool code, then hung up the phone. There was a lot of police activity on the streets as I walked back to my hotel.

The thing was, the police would find the PM, and then they’d want to speak to the man who’d been taken away in the ambulance. The nurse in Emergency could tell them I’d given the name Gerald Fritch, and the ambulance man could add that my business card had carried a Liverpool address. From all of which, they could track down either Fritch’s Liverpool home or his employers and be told he was on a trip to London, staying at the Allington Hotel.

Which would bring them to me.

The Allington’s automatic doors hissed open, and I walked up to the reception desk.

“Any idea what’s going on? There are police all over the place.”

The receptionist hadn’t looked up yet. “I heard a bang earlier on,” she said. “I don’t know what it’s about though.”

“Any messages for me? Wesley, room two-oh-three.”

Now she looked up. “Goodness, Mr. Wesley, what happened to you?”

I touched my forehead. “Tripped and fell. Bloody London pavements.”

“Dear me. I think we’ve got some Band-Aids.”

“I’ve some in my room, thanks.” I paused. “No messages then?”

“Yes, there’s a message, came not ten minutes ago.” She handed it to me, and I read it.

“Shit,” I said in exasperation, letting my shoulders slump for the second time that day. “Can you make my bill up, please? Looks like I’ll be checking out.”

I couldn’t risk taking a cab straight from the Allington to another hotel—the cabbie would be able to tell police my destination—so I walked about a bit, lugging my suitcase with me. It was lighter than before, about fourteen pounds lighter, and too big for the purpose. Having used nearly all my cash settling my bill, I drew two hundred out of a cash machine. The first two hotels I tried were both full, but the third had a small single room with a shower but no bath. The hotel sold souvenirs to guests, including a large tote bag with the hotel name emblazoned front and back. I bought one and took it upstairs with me. Later that evening, I took my now empty suitcase to King’s Cross. Luggage lockers are hard to find in central London, so I deposited the case in the left-luggage room at King’s Cross station. Seeing the size of the case, the man behind the desk braced himself before attempting to lift it, then was caught off-balance by how light it was.

I took another cab back to my hotel and settled down to watch the news. But I couldn’t concentrate. They seemed to think I’d hit the wrong person. They thought I was after the diplomat. Well, that would help muddy the water, I didn’t mind that at all. Then they mentioned that police had taken away a large box from a building across from the hotel. They showed the alley where my little device had gone off. The metal bin looked like torn wrapping. Nobody had been injured there, though two kitchen assistants in a Chinese restaurant had been treated for shock and cuts from flying glass.

They did not, of course, speculate as to how police had arrived on the scene so quickly. But I was thinking about it. I was tumbling it in my mind, and not coming up with any clever answers.

Tomorrow; there'd be time for thinking tomorrow. I was exhausted. I didn't feel like meat and wine anymore. I felt like sleep.

FOUR

THERE WAS LITTLE LOVE LOST between Freddy Ricks and Geoffrey Johns, despite which, the solicitor was not surprised to receive Freddy's call.

Freddy was half drunk, as per usual, and sounded dazed.

"Have you heard?"

"Yes," Geoffrey Johns said, "I've heard." He was seated in his living room, a glass of Armagnac trembling beside him on the arm of the sofa.

"Jesus Christ," wailed Freddy Ricks, "she's been *shot!*"

"Freddy, I'm . . . I'm so sorry." Geoffrey Johns took a sip of burning liquid. "Does Archie know?"

"Archie?" It took Freddy an understandable moment to recognize the name of his son. "I haven't seen him. I had to go down to the . . . they wanted me to identify her. Then they had to ask me some questions."

"Is that why you're phoning?"

"What? No, no . . . well, yes, in a way. I mean, there are things I have to do, and there are about fifty reporters at the garden gate, and . . . well, Geoffrey, I know we've had our differences, but you *are* our solicitor."

"I understand, Freddy. I'll be straight over."

In Vine Street police station, Chief Inspector Bob Broome was deciding what to say to the press. They were clamoring around the entrance to the gloomy station. Even on sunny days, Vine Street, a high narrow conduit between Regent Street and Piccadilly, got little light, though it managed to get all the available traffic fumes and grime. Broome reckoned the station had affected him. He thought he could remember days when he used to be cheerful. His last smile had been a couple of days ago, his last full-throated laugh several months back. Nobody bothered trying to tell him jokes anymore. The prisoners in the cells were a more obliging target.

"So what've we got, Dave?"

Detective Inspector Dave Edmond sat opposite Broome. He had a reputation as a dour bugger, too. People seeing them together usually gave the pair a wide berth, like you would a plague ship. While Broome was tall and thin with an undertaker's pallor, Edmond was round and tanned. He'd just returned from a fortnight in Spain, spent guzzling San Miguel on some beach.

"Well, sir," he said, "we're still taking statements. The gun's down at the lab. We've got technicians in the office building, but they won't be able to report before tomorrow."

There was a knock at the door and a female officer came in with a couple of faxes for Broome. He laid them to one side and watched her leave, then turned back to Edmond. His every action was slow and considered, like he was on tranquilizers, but Edmond for one knew the boss was just being careful.

"What about the gun?"

“Sergeant Wills is the pop-pop guru,” Edmond said, “so I’ve sent him to take a look at it. He probably knows more than any of the eggheads in the ballistics section. From the description I gave him, he said it sounds military.”

“Let’s not muck about, Dave, it’s the Demolition Man again. You can spot his MO a mile away.” Edmond nodded. “Unless it’s a copycat.”

“What are the chances?”

Edmond shrugged. “A hundred to one?”

“And the rest. What about the phone call, did we take a recording?”

Edmond shook his head. “The officer who took the call has typed out what he remembers of the conversation.” He handed over a single sheet of paper.

The door opened again. It was a detective constable this time, smiling apologetically as he came with more sheets of paper for the chief inspector. Outside, there were sounds of frenzied activity. When the DC had gone, Broome got up, went to the door, and pulled a chair against it, jamming the back of the chair under the knob. Then he walked slowly back to his desk.

“Shame we didn’t get it on tape though,” he said, picking up Edmond’s sheet of paper. “‘Male, English, aged between twenty and seventy-five.’ Yes, very useful. ‘Call didn’t sound long distance.’” Broome looked up from the report. “And all he said was that there was going to be a shooting outside the Craigmead Hotel.”

“Normally, it would be treated as a crank, but the officer got the impression this one wasn’t playing games. A very educated voice, quite matter-of-fact with just enough emotion. We couldn’t have got men there any quicker.”

“We could if we hadn’t armed some of them first.”

“The man who called, who do you think it was?”

“I suppose it could have been the Demolition Man himself. Maybe he’s gone off his trolley, wants us to catch him or play some sort of cat-and-mouse with him. Or it could be someone who spotted him, but then why not warn those people on the steps?” Broome paused. His office wasn’t much bigger than an interview room; in some ways, it was even less inviting. He liked it because it made people who came here feel uncomfortable. But Dave Edmond seemed to like it too . . . “The people on the steps, that’s another thing. We’ve got a journalist, a secretary of state, and some senior guy from an East European embassy.”

“So which one was the target?” Edmond asked.

“Exactly. I mean, did he get who he was going after? If not, the other two better be careful. Remember, he’s shot the wrong bloody person before.”

Edmond nodded. “It’ll be out of our hands soon anyway.”

This was true: Scotland Yard and the anti-terrorist unit would pick over the bones. But this was Bob Broome’s manor, and he wasn’t about to just hand the case over and catch a good night’s sleep.

“Bollocks,” he said. “What about this other phone call, the one to the Craigmead?”

“We’re talking to the receptionist again. All she knows is that a man called wanting to speak to Eleanor Ricks. Ricks was paged, but she ignored it.”

“She hadn’t left?”

“No, the receptionist says she walked past the desk while her name was being put out over the loudspeakers.”

“Was the secretary of state with her?”

“Yes. But she says she didn’t hear anything.”

“So maybe Eleanor Ricks didn’t hear anything either?”

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