



# CHAPTER 1

Tristram Bleeker's mind went blank. Staring down the wrong end of a gun will have that effect on a man. His mouth was dry. His palms were sweaty. He found himself utterly incapable of summoning a single coherent thought.

Not that he had much experience of these things, but it was not a normal gun. Instead of the typical straight barrel, the muzzle of this one flared out like the bell of a trombone. He kept his eyes fixed down the centre line of it, as if he might discern the spark in the darkness that would herald the eventful end to his previously uneventful life. It was like looking into the nostril of an irritable dragon. One that could barbecue you with a single breath.

'Do I need to repeat the question?' asked the voice at the other end of the weapon. It sounded oddly weary, as if Tristram were the tenth or so person it had held at gunpoint that day and the process was becoming entirely tedious.

Tristram's lips moved but no words emerged.

The voice tutted. 'This is not going well.'

It wasn't. In these circumstances, the cliché was that your life should flash before your eyes, but that wasn't happening for Tristram. Instead, the first ten minutes of his interview kept

replaying in his head, over and over, as if his mind were trying to process how things had reached this alarming state of affairs. He must've done something very wrong at some point. Tristram was good in interviews – everybody said so. He was personable, articulate and a master of brevity. He'd been warned to expect the unexpected today and, to that point, he thought he'd dealt well with the curveballs thrown his way. Then he'd found himself staring down the barrel of this weird gun.

'The question,' said the voice, sounding increasingly irritated, 'was . . . how well do you handle pressure?'

'I . . . I . . .' stuttered Tristram.

'Never mind. I think we have our answer.'

Tristram was dimly aware of the sound of one of the doors being opened behind him. A female gasp followed. 'Vincent!'

'I'm in the middle of something, Grace.'

'I can see that. Put that horrible gun away this instant.'

After what felt like a very long time, the dragon's head turned away and was replaced by the face of a man who looked in need of a shower, a shave, a decent meal and about a month's worth of sleep. It belonged to the individual who had been holding Tristram at gunpoint: Vincent Banecroft, editor of *The Stranger Times* and former Fleet Street legend.

The view of Banecroft's face was only a minor improvement on that of the gun. His eyes were sunken and dark. For a moment, his eyelids closed and Tristram wondered if perhaps Banecroft were about to fall asleep, but then they shot open again abruptly. A master of multitasking, Banecroft placed the gun down beside him, sneered across the table and lit a cigarette.

Grace, the friendly matronly black woman from behind the reception desk, appeared at Banecroft's shoulder, bearing a tray loaded with two mugs and a plate of biscuits.

'Sorry about that, Tristram. Mr Banecroft can be a little . . .'

'Insightful,' finished Banecroft.

Grace's brow furrowed. 'I am pretty sure that is not the word I was looking for.'

'It should have been.' Banecroft held aloft two sheets of paper, which Tristram recognized as his CV. 'Mr Bleeker here, who is applying for the role of assistant editor at this publication, has a first-class degree in journalism from the University of Leeds, followed by seven years' experience working for a mixed bag of publications, ranging from national newspapers to more specialist magazines, and it is his dream to work here because of his lifelong interest in the paranormal. His portfolio is frankly outstanding and his references so glowing that the reader is required to wear protective eyewear or risk permanent damage to their retinas while perusing them.'

'I know,' said Grace, before adding pointedly through gritted teeth, 'he is perfect for the job.'

'Exactly,' said Banecroft, as he dropped Tristram's CV into the wastepaper basket at the side of his desk then casually flicked cigarette ash after it. 'My point being – if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, I find myself highly suspicious as to why it is applying for the role of the bread-loving aquatic bird we are so ducking desperate to fill.'

Grace's face scrunched up for a second before she shook her head. 'No. You have lost me.'

Tristram coughed and was surprised to realize he had recovered the power of speech. ‘I think what Mr Banecroft is trying to say is that I am overqualified for the role.’

‘No. I am not trying to say anything. What I am saying is that you are perfectly qualified for the role. Too perfect. Now, run along before I lose my temper, and do let your handlers know that if they try this kind of thing again, next time I will not take it in such good spirits. Speaking of which . . .’

Banecroft picked up the bottle of Irish whiskey that sat on his desk and poured himself a healthy measure, then kept pouring past the point of unhealthy all the way to death wish.

‘There’s clearly been a misunderstanding here,’ said Tristram, trying to sound jovial. ‘Nobody has sent me.’

‘Right.’ Banecroft patted the gun. ‘Well, you’ve got until the count of ten before I shoot you. Then, if nobody claims the body after a week, I shall offer your corpse a full and grovelling apology.’

‘Vincent!’ exclaimed Grace. ‘You’re being unreasonable. Even for you – and that really is saying something.’

‘Four,’ announced Banecroft.

‘OK,’ said Tristram. ‘I get it. You’re testing me.’

‘Nope. Five.’

Tristram failed to keep the edge of panic from his voice. ‘What happened to one through to three?’

‘I said what I was counting to, never said where I was counting from. Six.’

Tristram looked up at Grace. ‘He’s kidding, right?’

The woman gave an expansive shrug, which resulted in a

splash of tea spilling over the lip of one of the mugs. 'With the good Lord as my witness, I cannot promise that.'

'Seven.'

Tristram got to his feet. 'You people are crazy!'

Banecroft picked up the gun. 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but Chekhov here will make you holier than Grace. Eight.'

'I will be reporting you to the police.'

Banecroft raised the gun while looking up at Grace. 'Holier? Do you get it? I thought it was quite good.'

'It was not,' said Grace.

'You've no appreciation of wordplay. That's your problem. Nine.'

Tristram turned and ran for the nearest exit. En route, he tripped over one of the many piles of books on the floor and crashed headfirst through the door. In his hurry, he'd left through a different door from the one he'd come in, and this was how he came to find himself sprawled on the threadbare carpet of an open-plan office area.

Three people were seated behind desks and drinking mugs of tea: a portly white man in a three-piece tartan suit, an East Asian man tossing a yo-yo up and down, and a black teenaged girl with purple hair, who didn't look up from her phone.

Tristram pointed behind him in the direction of Banecroft's office. 'That man is a monster.'

His words were met with a round of nonchalant nods. Then, the portly gent in the three-piece suit turned to his colleagues. 'I have to say, these new biscuits are a bit dry.'

## CHAPTER 2

Grace opened her notepad to a fresh page as Banecroft slumped into the chair he traditionally occupied for these meetings. It occurred to her that if they lost any more staff, he would soon be able to stay in his office and they could go to him, rather than him having to stomp ill-temperedly out to the bullpen.

‘Right,’ Banecroft began. ‘Let’s get this parade of ineptitude kicked off, shall we? Grace – please do the honours.’

She spoke as she wrote. ‘Weekly editorial meeting. Present – the staff of *The Stranger Times*.’

‘Remaining staff,’ muttered Ox under his breath, still fiddling with his yo-yo.

‘What was that?’ snapped Banecroft.

‘I was just pointing out that we are the remaining staff. Since we lost Hannah.’

‘Lost? We haven’t lost her,’ said Banecroft. ‘She isn’t stuck down the back of the sofa. She walked out on us and went scurrying back to the philandering phallus she was supposed to be divorcing.’

‘Why, though?’ asked Reggie, readjusting his waistcoat.

Banecroft threw up his hands in exasperation. ‘We have gone

over this several times in the last three weeks. She just informed me she was leaving and then she left. All of you seem to be having difficulty grasping these two salient pieces of information.'

'But what did you say to her?' asked Stella.

'How is that relevant?'

She pushed her purple hair out of her eyes. 'Because, boss, you have a tendency to say truly awful things in the way other people have a tendency to breathe.'

Banecroft shot a look at the young girl. 'And yet, I am somehow seen as the kind of easy-going cuddly boss who can be slagged off in a meeting by an apprentice reporter and that reporter can inexplicably still expect to have her job at the end of it.'

'You can't fire me. You ain't got enough staff as it is. I'm currently second in line for the job of assistant editor.'

'Hang on,' said Ox. He pointed at himself and then at Reggie. 'Which of us do you think is below you on that list?'

'Both of you,' interrupted Banecroft with a shrug. 'Grace is clearly number one.'

The idea made Grace feel queasy. 'Don't you dare,' she warned. 'Perhaps you should just ring Hannah and apologize?'

'For what?'

'Everything,' said Stella.

'Anything,' offered Ox.

'Being you,' concluded Reggie.

'All right,' said Banecroft, leaning forward. 'First things first – you are all skirting dangerously close to mutiny. Second – as it happens, I have attempted to ring Hannah. Not, I hasten to add,



to apologize, but rather to see if the woman has come to her senses. Her phone keeps going to voicemail.’ His eyes scanned the group. ‘Has anyone else had any luck getting hold of her?’

The paper’s remaining staff avoided meeting his gaze. Grace had been trying Hannah’s phone several times a day but had received no response beyond the single word – ‘sorry’ – that her former colleague had texted on the first morning of her absence. Grace knew for a fact that none of the others had had any more success.

Banecroft folded his arms as he sat back in his chair. ‘That’s what I thought. You can all keep pretending this is somehow my fault, but the reality is she walked out on all of us.’

Nobody had anything to say to this.

Since Hannah’s shocking departure, morale in the office had taken a nosedive. She had worked there only a few months, yet had somehow become the glue that held them together. In the weeks that followed, the cloud of depression that hung over the place had manifested itself in the form of petty squabbles and hurtful remarks among the group. Reggie had even got into a disagreement with Manny, the perpetually relaxed Rastafarian who ran the printing press on the ground floor. Having an argument with Manny was like trying to punch a cloud.

Everyone felt as if they’d lost a friend. Worse than that was the unspoken realization that the person they thought was a good friend apparently wasn’t. True friends don’t just up and disappear out of your life.

‘Now,’ said Banecroft, ‘if we’re all done having our little tantrums, we have a newspaper to publish.’

‘To do that,’ replied Grace, ‘we really do need an assistant editor.’

‘We can muddle through for another week until an appropriate candidate comes along.’

‘Really? Last week’s edition had two page sevens.’

‘And,’ added Reggie, ‘a crossword that had the clues from three weeks ago reprinted alongside the wrong puzzle.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Grace, who had been fielding irate phone calls about the error ever since. She’d had no idea that people took crosswords so seriously. There had technically been a death threat. ‘Technically’ because, as Ox had put it, the intersection in the Venn diagram of individuals who complete crosswords and those who firebomb buildings was either empty or humanity was already doomed. ‘Not to mention the story about Mr Adam Wallace’s ghost frequenting that lap-dancing club in Chinatown and inappropriately touching the ladies.’

‘Ah,’ said Ox. ‘That makes sense. That geezer outside this morning . . .’

‘Was the very much alive Mr Wallace,’ confirmed Stella. ‘Accompanied by his missus, who was proper vexed.’

‘I admit,’ said Reggie, ‘that I received some very bad information regarding that story. However, while the reports of his death have been greatly exaggerated, I believe the ones about his behaviour are accurate.’

‘Still, though – not exactly paranormal, is it?’

Reggie looked affronted. ‘You can talk. At least I can spell. You submitted a half-page article about an unidentified frying object over Bolton.’

‘That’s nowhere near as bad as—’ Ox stopped. He looked across the room at Banecroft, whose chin had dipped on to his chest and eyes had closed.

Of the many things worrying Grace, this was the thing that concerned her most of all. Vincent Banecroft had never been what you would call healthy, but in the last few weeks he had really gone downhill. Falling asleep mid-conversation had become a new and alarming trend. His distracted, listless air also alarmed her, and while describing Vincent Banecroft as being more irritable than usual was akin to accusing the sea of being more wet, he was. He really was. His fury, while often unjustifiable, had always felt as if it had some sense of purpose behind it. Now, however, it seemed entirely scattershot.

All that aside, the effects of whatever was going on were being felt on the paper itself. What she had begun to think of as the ‘old’ Vincent Banecroft never would have allowed all the recent screw-ups to get past him. It was as if he were only half here. Going through the motions.

Grace looked round and saw the faces of her other colleagues mirroring her own concern. Then Banecroft broke the tension by passing wind loudly. It appeared to wake him up, and his eyes flashed suddenly.

‘Now,’ he said, without missing a beat, ‘if you’ve all finished, I would like to remind you that it is not your job to point out other people’s screw-ups. As editor, that is both my job and my privilege.’

Stella folded her arms huffily. ‘It’s the job of the assistant

editor to make sure the screw-ups don't happen in the first place. That's why we need one.'

'And we will get one, eventually.'

'I thought it was gonna be that woman who wore all the scarfs and smelled of patchouli oil?'

'We had a fundamental disagreement.'

'What a shock,' said Reggie, which earned him a particularly dirty look from Banecroft.

'The woman didn't believe in double letters.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Case in point – she didn't believe the word "sorry" should have two Rs in it. Said it was wasteful. Bad for the environment.'

This last statement was met with confused expressions all round.

'I don't—' started Stella.

'Not just that,' continued Banecroft as he placed his slippered feet upon the desk and tipped his chair backwards to balance on its rear legs. 'She also believed that capital letters were elitist and punctuation was divisive.'

A long moment of quiet followed as everyone in the room tried to figure out exactly how such rules would work. Eventually, it was Ox who broke the silence. 'Even for this place, that is odd.'

Stella raised her hand. 'What about that nice old dude who was in reception last week? Big white beard. Looked like Santa.'

Banecroft turned to Grace and raised an eyebrow. 'Would you like to field this one?'

Grace blessed herself. 'He said he could not work on full moons

as he needed to make a' – her face twisted into a sour expression – 'blood sacrifice.' She blessed herself again.

'That's right,' said Banecroft. 'Looked like Santa but loved him some Satan.'

'But . . .' Stella faltered, 'he had leather patches on his elbows. Leather patches,' she repeated forlornly.

'And the bloke from this morning?' asked Ox.

Banecroft gave him a blank look.

'Really?' Ox continued in disbelief. 'Came flying out of your office, like, twenty minutes ago, claiming you'd threatened to shoot him?'

'Oh, that one. Yes, he was too good to be true.'

Ox looked at the others with wide eyes before turning back to Banecroft. 'What does that even mean?'

'Clearly a Trojan horse sent by our enemies in a transparent attempt to destroy us.'

'More fool them,' shot Ox. 'We don't need any help doing that.'

Reggie shifted in his seat and straightened his waistcoat. 'Do you not think that is, perhaps, a touch paranoid?'

Banecroft yawned before responding. 'Have you been here for the past few months? You can't be paranoid if you have documented proof that people are literally out to get you. There's still a dent in the wall from the werewolf and I can't be the only one who, every time I take a dump, remembers the hidden camera installed in the new bathroom by the loony cult?'

'Maybe,' conceded Grace. 'Or maybe you're finding fault with all the candidates because none of them are Hannah?'

‘Yes, that’s it. You’ve found me out. I’m in love with that woman I was constantly at loggerheads with.’

‘Judging by the sarcastic tone you employed while making that statement,’ she responded, ‘I am going to assume you have never, ever seen a romantic comedy film.’

‘Have you lot been eating brownies with the Rastafarian or something? Look, if it will stop you all clucking like tedious hens, as it happens, I have the assistant-editor situation in hand.’

Grace’s eyebrows shot up her forehead. ‘You do?’

‘Yes. I’m going to ask Stanley Roker to come in for a chat.’

‘Stanley?’ echoed Stella. ‘The fella you called the worst kind of tabloid-scribbling parasite? That guy?’

‘Yes.’

‘Stanley’s all right,’ said Ox softly.

‘I’m not saying he isn’t,’ she replied. ‘But he’ – she bobbed her head in Banecroft’s direction – ‘said he wouldn’t trust the guy as far as he could throw this building.’

‘We don’t need to like or trust him,’ said Banecroft. ‘You all liked and trusted the previous assistant editor and look where that got us. Stanley Roker is many things, and while several of those things are reprehensible, one of them is that he is an individual with extensive experience in the newspaper business. He may have written some fetid tripe over the years, but it has always been correctly spelled and fact-checked fetid tripe. Now, we need to move on.’

‘Quite right.’

The staff turned as one towards the corner of the room from where the new voice had come, Banecroft doing so vigorously

enough to send himself toppling back in his chair and on to the floor. One of his slippers liberated itself from his foot and hit him on the head.

He got to his feet and joined his colleagues in gawping at the woman who was sitting behind a desk on the far side of the room, peeling a satsuma. She was rotund, about sixty, and was wearing a wax jacket and deerstalker hat. Her face was heart-shaped with ruddy cheeks, and she looked as if she would be more at home tramping around her country estate with a couple of collies than sitting in a newspaper office in Manchester. By way of greeting she gave them a cheerful grin.

‘Who the hell are you?’ asked Banecroft.

‘Elizabeth Cavendish the Third, but please call me Betty.’

To Grace’s ears, she sounded similar to one of those useful posh people who appeared on TV occasionally. The type that owned a lot of land but were still happy to shove a hand up a cow’s rear end if the situation required it.

‘How long have you been sitting there?’

‘Long enough.’

‘And, more importantly, how on earth did you get in here without any of us seeing you?’

She shrugged, popped a segment of satsuma into her mouth and chewed briefly before answering. ‘I’m a woman of a certain age. The world has got very good at ignoring us – Hollywood in particular. Unless you’re Meryl Streep or Helen Mirren, you just have to hang around and hope someone needs a grandma at some point. And don’t get me started on the gender disparity among newsreaders.’

‘What?’ said Banecroft.

‘Should I pick any free desk?’ asked Betty, waving a hand about. ‘Or is there a system?’

‘What?’ repeated Banecroft, with the air of a man about to lose it. As soon as he got a grip on exactly what ‘it’ was.

‘Sorry,’ said Betty. ‘I’ve got ahead of myself again, haven’t I? I do have a tendency to ramble. I must apologize. Chitty-chatty Betty. That’s what the girls called me at school. Children can be so cruel, can’t they? One girl – Dorothy Wilkins – once stuck chewing gum to my seat. Horrible little thing. Wonder where she is now. Probably married to a government minister. All the worst ones are. Anyway, yes – with apologies to the frankly awful-sounding tabloid chappie you mentioned, I am the new assistant editor.’

‘Over my dead body,’ snorted Banecroft.

Betty wrinkled her nose. ‘Well, that would certainly explain the smell.’

‘Let me get this straight – you thought the best way to apply for the job was to sneak into the building, join a meeting to which you weren’t invited, and then insult me?’

Betty looked genuinely perplexed. ‘Have I insulted you? I mean, I’m fairly sure you’ve insulted most of the people in this room during the course of this meeting, but I don’t recall me or anyone else insulting you.’ She popped another slice of satsuma into her mouth and chewed contemplatively. ‘What surprisingly thin skin you have.’

‘Let me save you some time. You’ve definitely, one hundred per cent failed the interview. Now, will you be leaving of your own



volition, or shall I get Chekhov to show you out? That is the name of my—'

'Blunderbuss,' Betty finished. 'Yes, I know. Very clever. That will not be necessary. I will be going nowhere, though, as I'm afraid you have crucially misunderstood something. I am not applying for the role of assistant editor; I have already been given it.' She pulled a letter from one of her jacket pockets and held it up. 'I have here a missive from this newspaper's proprietor, Mrs Harnforth, explaining as much. A copy of it has just been emailed to' – Betty pointed – 'Grace, is it not?'

Grace nodded.

'Hello. Lovely to meet you. I've heard only good things.'

'Impossible,' said Banecroft.

'Excuse me?' said Grace, affronted.

'Not you.' Banecroft gave a dismissive wave and focused his attention on Betty. 'You cannot be the assistant editor as I and I alone have the ability to hire and fire.'

Betty popped in another piece of satsuma. 'Entirely incorrect.'

'It is in my contract.'

'You do not have a contract.'

'I have a verbal contract.'

Betty raised an eyebrow and looked round the room. 'Oh dear. Do you have any witnesses to this contract, as Mrs Harnforth clearly doesn't remember it?'

'It was an implied contract.'

This earned Banecroft the double-eyebrow raise. 'Let's just let that phrase percolate for a minute, shall we?'

Banecroft stamped his foot. 'Fine. I resign.'

Betty nodded. 'While obviously we are very sad to see you go, the newspaper thanks you for your service. On the upside, you have to admire how dynamic and fast-moving an organization we are. I mean, I've only been here five minutes and I've already been promoted. Not a hint of a glass ceiling. How refreshing. The *Six O'Clock News* could learn a lot from us.' She tossed two final satsuma segments into her mouth, chewed expansively and gulped them down, before favouring the room with a benign smile.

Grace looked at her colleagues and then back to Banecroft. The vein in his forehead was throbbing. She had a sudden urge to flee the area and take every piece of breakable furniture with her.

Betty swallowed. 'I see you're still here. Shall we assume that resignation was merely a joke that didn't hit the mark?'

Banecroft spoke through gritted teeth. 'I wish to speak to Mrs Harnforth immediately.'

Betty got to her feet. 'I'm afraid that is impossible, but as I am here as her representative, I will be delighted to discuss your concerns.' She waved a hand in the direction of the door to Banecroft's office.

The two of them locked eyes for an uncomfortable amount of time. Any passing polar ice caps would have gone up in a puff of steam had they been unlucky enough to get caught between the pair. Betty held her smile throughout. Eventually, Banecroft took a step towards the office.

'Lovely,' said Betty, sounding cheerful. 'And look on the bright side – I am a massive fan of punctuation.'

# Ghost Cancelled

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**In what is being claimed as a world first, the ghost of Arnold Franklin, long associated with the Frog and Trumpet public house in Stoke-on-Trent, is claiming that he has been cancelled.** Through the medium of a medium, Mr Franklin was quoted as saying, ‘I’ve haunted this pub for forty-seven years, ever since I had a heart attack while performing my gags during the open-mic night, and I’m very popular with the patrons. Then, this new landlady comes in – a woman, if you know what I mean – and next thing I know, she’s calling in an exorcist.’

In response, publican Mabel Clarke, who has owned the pub for fifteen years, said, ‘To be honest, he was just getting tedious. He does hilarious “voices”, so he says, which I think are racist, but they’re so hard to identify it’s impossible to be sure. He spends most of his time in the ladies loos, and we had to stop hanging mistletoe because of his poltergeist pervery. That, coupled with the jokes. If I have to hear the one about the two nuns and the bar of soap again, I’ll scream, but at least that one isn’t offensive.

‘He keeps banging on about how he can’t say anything any more. The reality is, he’s got nothing new to say. It’s just the same four jokes over and over again. He says he takes the piss out of everybody, but we’ve asked every patron and, along with the nuns, “everybody” translates to women, black people and one-eyed dwarves.’

## CHAPTER 3

The countryside thundered past in a blur, unobserved by Hannah as she stared out the window of the people carrier, lost in her own thoughts. With a pang of regret, she realized that at this time on a Monday morning she was usually in the weekly editorial meeting, attempting to assemble some idea of what that week's edition might look like from the trail of destruction Banecroft habitually left in his wake.

She blinked a couple of times. She couldn't think about that now. For better or worse, she had made her choice.

Seventeen days ago, on a Friday evening, she had been leaving work, heading home after another challenging week of getting an edition of *The Stranger Times* to print. By the time she reached her flat, everything had changed. She resigned the following day.

Last week, she had accepted an invitation from her not-quite ex-husband Karl to have dinner. Up until about a month ago, he had been trying constantly to speak to her after she had decided – admittedly at the last minute – that she did want a chunk of the money due to her from the divorce settlement after all. Her change of heart had been brought about by the realization that her *not* wanting it might give the impression that Karl deserved to keep it.

More importantly, she had realized there were several good causes she could support with it. It was nice to think that something good could come out of the years she had dedicated to their sham of a marriage. She also had to admit that a small part of her took a giddy delight in just how much it would annoy Karl.

He hadn't always been this way, but even before their split, she had been disturbed to realize that Karl had sold to himself a personal narrative whereby he had somehow clawed his way up from the streets to become a self-made man. As if a private education and a sizeable inheritance hadn't played a rather significant role in his success. It was all smoke and mirrors, as were their tax returns, which showed quite how ludicrous an effort Karl had gone to in order to avoid paying anything close to a reasonable amount of tax. She'd only seen the accounts for the first time as part of the divorce negotiations, and the more she thought about them, the more embarrassing it felt. To have been both married to someone who behaved like that and so wilfully ignorant not to have noticed. She'd stupidly assumed that his constant whingeing about freeloaders living off their tax meant that they were actually paying some.

She'd had no interest in engaging with Karl, as she knew he would pull every trick in the book to convince her not to give 'his' money away. It had therefore been a relief when the messages had stopped. She'd heard nothing from him for almost a month. When he'd got in touch again, he'd done something disconcertingly unexpected. He'd apologized. Karl never apologized. Until that point, Hannah had been entirely convinced he didn't even know what an apology was. What's more, it had been a proper apology.

Apologies were fast becoming a lost art form, thanks to the repeated warping of the concept. There was the ‘I’m sorry if anybody was offended’ apology; the ‘I’m sorry that somebody thinks I said this thing that I didn’t say’ apology; and its near-identical twin, the ‘I’m sorry if you misunderstood what I said’ apology. There were numerous variations, but they all amounted to the fact that the person wasn’t sorry at all.

Karl had been truly sorry, and not just about the money. It had been about everything. He’d asked her to have dinner with him one last time – so they could leave their marriage on good terms, at the very least. Hannah wasn’t an idiot – not any more. The man had always been a superb liar, but something about this felt very different. Besides, in those few weeks of radio silence, an awful lot had happened, so she had gone to dinner.

Over the starter, he’d expressed regret for his appalling behaviour throughout their marriage. He was ashamed of the man he’d been and the way he’d treated her.

Over the main course, he’d explained how he was a new man after attending a retreat run by the Pinter Institute. It was the brainchild of Hollywood icon turned twenty-first-century new-age business tycoon, Winona Pinter. Pinter had been all over the press in the last few years, and hardly ever for her acting. While the mainstream media was thrilled to report on the latest Pinter frippery – be it space-scented candles or yoga studios for pets – they also did a sterling job of keeping her name out there.

Along with the products came the successful lines of food and books, followed by online courses, and finally, for the very, very lucky few, the retreats. They were exclusive, or to put it in more

simple terms, obscenely expensive. So expensive that, much to the papers' annoyance, none of them knew exactly how expensive. Before being accepted on any of the retreats, delegates had to go through a screening process. Although the Institute denied it, of course, places were offered only to people for whom money was no object, or at least to those who liked to pretend it wasn't.

In truth, Hannah had found the entire dinner rather unsettling. Yes, it had been only one night, but Karl hadn't been Karl. Over the course of their marriage, Hannah had become numb to the fact that her husband's eyes would rove the room perpetually. After a while, she had wondered if he even knew he was doing it. It had therefore been very odd when he had shown zero interest in the waitress's low-cut top or in the other patrons as they walked about the restaurant. Back in the early days of their marriage, when she had brought up his behaviour, he'd assured her it was all in her mind. Looking back, she realized she'd allowed herself the soft option of accepting feeble explanations rather than standing up for herself.

With this version of Karl, though, his wandering eye hadn't been an issue. During one meal, he had quite possibly made more eye contact with her than he had during their entire marriage. What's more, he'd done so while owning up to being a narcissist who'd gone looking for self-worth in meaningless sex rather than trying to value himself and the people he truly loved. Hannah had been prepared for Karl's attempts to beg, cajole and manipulate her, as he had done many times before, but this had been either raw honesty or he'd found a depth to his acting abilities that Winona Pinter herself would have envied.

Before dessert she'd excused herself to visit the ladies' room. Without intending to, she'd stood behind a screen of Swiss cheese plants and surreptitiously watched the 'new' Karl from a distance. He had sat there, patiently waiting for her return, his eyes fixed on the table in front of him. He didn't even make an attempt to flirt with the waitress, something he would have previously done as automatically as breathing.

Over coffee, he'd floated the idea that maybe, just maybe, they could give it another go. Hannah had been reluctant. It had been Karl who had suggested that perhaps she take a little time to reflect on what she wanted from the rest of her life. Perhaps she could go on a Pinter Institute retreat too? Get her head together.

And so here she was.

She was jolted out of her reverie as the people carrier took a sharp right turn off the road and pulled up in front of a pair of large metal gates. Tall electric fences hemmed the estate boundary, and bore prominent signage warning just how un-fun a high-voltage shock could be. After a couple of seconds, the gates opened. To her right, Hannah looked out at the Pennines, just visible over the serried ranks of tall coniferous trees that crowded the road from either side. The Pinter Institute valued privacy, to the point that several square miles of forest surrounded it. The only way to photograph it was from space.

The property had been renamed Pinter Institute HQ, not least because the Institute was keen to disassociate it from its past. Hannah had spent a couple of hours last night digging into the history of the place just because they seemed so keen not to mention its previous name – Ranford House.



The Ranfords had achieved their wealth in the most old-fashioned of ways: conquest. The family had been high up in the British Army even before it was called that, and they specialized in making sure that when one of them was sent somewhere in anger, the next brother in line would follow directly behind to ask if anyone minded terribly if he were to take this bit of land that nobody – at least nobody of consequence – appeared to be using. In this manner, the Ranfords claimed chunks of every new territory that the British Empire acquired – plantations in America, mines in Africa, railways in India; they owned vast swathes of assets the world over. The Ranford system worked, although it did result in the occasional loss of a son or two, either on the front lines or at the hands of the odd local who was a particularly sore loser.

Keen to show off their immense wealth, the Ranfords had built Ranford House at the foot of the Pennines to take advantage of the family's well-known love of nature – chiefly, shooting or chasing it down with dogs.

If Wikipedia was to be believed, the place had a blighted history. During construction of the house, several of the builders had died in unfortunate accidents, which began the house's reputation for being cursed. Once completed, it was one of the most magnificent manors in all of Britain, although it seems the Ranford family rarely enjoyed life there. Lord Albert Ranford lost his young wife when she died in childbirth in 1896. The baby survived – their only offspring, William. By all accounts, the lord of the manor was consumed by grief, to the point that he all but ignored his son.

William was considered odd, and not just in the way most aristocracy is. He was expelled from Eton for ‘ungentlemanly behaviour’ – something that was almost without precedent. Later, his playboy years were briefly interrupted by a stint keeping up the family tradition for warmongering with a disastrous commission in command of a battalion during the Great War. A report sent back from the front by a superior officer contained the damning sentence, ‘I have never met a man with less regard for the value of human life than William Ranford.’

While the young Ranford’s military career led to a great deal of death and destruction, he returned home unscathed, and resumed being an embarrassment to his father in other ways. The pair were estranged for most of William’s adult life, but they must have put aside their differences at some point, given that following the untimely death of his father, William became Lord Ranford. The elder perished in a bizarre hunting accident and reports stated that he died in his weeping son’s arms.

The bad luck continued and two years later William was crippled after a fall from a horse. Following his accident, events took a darker turn. William became obsessed with regaining the use of his legs by any means necessary, and when medical science failed him, he began to explore other avenues.

Details became sketchy after that, drawing more on rumour than on reported fact. A young girl died at Ranford House. The family received a pay-off and the matter went away, but regular reports soon surfaced of strange goings-on and unusual individuals frequenting the place. A large number of staff, many of whom came from families that had served the Ranfords for generations,

left and were replaced by outsiders. Then, the Second World War broke out.

William Ranford was hardly alone among the aristocracy in being a vocal admirer of Hitler, but most of his contemporaries did a far better job of rowing back their feelings once war had been declared. Ranford was far too rich to face internment or similar for his political leanings, but he was also far too stubborn to realign himself with prevailing sentiments. In 1942, his betrayal by one of his staff led to the discovery of what the press dubbed ‘the stash’.

Ranford, convinced that Nazi victory was inevitable, had built up and concealed a vast stockpile of supplies on the estate, intended as a gift for Hitler, to assist the Nazi war machine once it landed on British shores. The discovery caused outrage and Ranford fled to Switzerland, to live out the rest of his days in exile. Ranford House was seized as an asset, and after serving time as a convalescent hospital for returning soldiers it was briefly a private school. It passed through a few different sets of hands before sitting empty for several years and then being taken on by its current owners.

As the forest at the side of the road fell away to reveal the stern Victorian grandeur of Ranford House, Hannah caught her breath. Framed by the mountains behind it, the house was far too big for anyone to need, and its walls were constructed from the kind of thick granite that could withstand a full-on artillery barrage. Gargoyles sat atop the crenelations, fighting off ivy as they gurned down upon the world. The immense sprawl of surrounding lawns was broken up by ornate water features – probably

to give the peacocks and other fowl that roamed the place something to perch on.

The people carrier pulled up at the end of the long driveway where a dozen Pinter Institute staff, all dressed in black tops and white trousers or skirts, were lined up on either side of the broad steps that led to the main doors, ready to greet their latest retreat delegate. As soon as the vehicle came to a stop, its passenger-side door drew open.

A man who looked like a life-sized Ken doll approached and bowed his head. ‘Hello, Mrs Drinkwater. I am your personal experience facilitator, Anton.’

Hannah opened her mouth to correct him but stopped herself. Willis was her maiden name, but given her reason for being here, Drinkwater was once again appropriate, even though it jarred.

She looked along the line of staff and their fixed expressions. Hannah had never been greeted by a welcoming committee before. It was a rather disconcerting experience. Like something out of *Downton Abbey*. She wasn’t sure if she was supposed to shake everyone’s hand or ignore them or introduce herself or bow or . . .

So consumed was she by her sudden social anxiety at how to handle this unexpected situation, she inadvertently left a lasting impression on everyone present. As she stepped out of the car, her heel caught the edge of the door sill and she faceplanted on to the gravel.

An excellent start.

## CHAPTER 4

Stanley Roker was uncomfortable.

First off, he had been sitting, slumped down, in his van for several hours now, and kept having to stretch out bits of himself to stop them from falling asleep. His ankle, while ostensibly healed from the break it sustained when he was dropped from a height by a quarter-faced magical bastard who still regularly visited him in his nightmares, still ached like a bugger if he used it too much or too little. He had not kept up with his physio.

It being one of August's better days, the van was uncomfortably hot, all the more so given he couldn't roll down the windows because of his allergies. And then there was the fact that he was experiencing 'digestive discomfort' – mainly in the form of heartburn, although he had spent the last hour wondering if there wasn't some sort of field toilet he could install in the van. An empty Snapple bottle, while an invaluable tool of the trade, could only do so much.

All these factors were potential reasons for Stanley's discomfort but, while he tried to convince himself otherwise, they were not the root cause of his black mood. No. Stanley Roker was feeling uncomfortable because he was uncomfortable doing what he

was doing. This was awkward because Stanley Roker was doing what Stanley Roker did best.

He was slumped in his seat to avoid being seen by the owner of the silver BMW across the road. It was currently parked up outside of the offices of a production company co-owned by a major celebrity. A fixture of Saturday-evening TV. Somebody you would recognize. Even if you had never watched any of the shows, you'd have caught the adverts featuring him, his celebrity wife and their three darling children hawking the implicit promise that if Middle Englanders started doing their shopping at a certain supermarket, they and their entire family would somehow become as stunningly attractive and as blissfully happy as Mr and Mrs Celeb. Stanley was staking out the offices because he had it on good authority that at some point that morning the aforementioned celebrity would nip out for a couple of hours and meet a man he had been seeing for several years.

Of course, the days were long gone when outing someone as gay was considered news in its own right. People still wanted to know – of course they did – however, all but the most unreconstructed understood that you couldn't admit to or, worse still, act on that instinct. Luckily, that didn't matter in this case. There was a wronged woman in the picture. A man violating the sacred bonds of matrimony. The gay thing was just incidental. It wasn't, but the point was everybody could pretend it was.

This was a great story in the Stanley Roker meaning of the words. That is, it was going to be an enormous payday, and one he very much needed, given he owed serious money to some serious people who were seriously weird. Being in debt to a supernatural

gangster was playing havoc with his sleep. The dreams were something else.

Subconsciously, he rubbed his right shoulder at the site of the tattoo that wasn't really a tattoo. The windfall from this job would clear his debt to Ferry and there would be enough left over to mean that he could stop sleeping in the van. It was therefore particularly inconvenient for Stanley Roker to be having his first ever crisis of conscience.

It had been only a few months since the fateful night that had changed his life for ever. Stanley was a victim – one who had been lucky to get away alive. However, he had become convinced that in the broader scheme of things, he was on the receiving end of his comeuppance – for all the crappy things he'd done over the years. Karma was a bitch. These days, he spent a lot of time wondering if it was too late for his soul to be saved. Doing that while doing what he was doing right now was not a happy mix.

His acute discomfort was replaced by alarm as the passenger door of his van opened and a slender woman of around sixty, wearing a vintage burgundy coat, climbed in and slid on to the seat. Her hair was cut puckishly short and dyed a light shade of pink. Somehow on her it looked elegant.

'What the—'

'Hello, Stanley.'

'Who the hell are you?'

The woman offered a manicured hand. 'Alicia Harnforth, delighted to make your acquaintance. Although, as I am the proprietor of *The Stranger Times*, you have technically worked for me already.'

‘No, I haven’t.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Come, come now, Stanley.’ She reached into the inside pocket of her immaculately tailored jacket and, between two fingers, withdrew from it a slip of newspaper. She held it up. ‘This first-person account of a night when the writer was mugged, and then offered help by a kindly nurse who took him back to her apartment when he refused to go to hospital, only for her to transform into a . . . What was it?’ She unfolded the article and scanned the text. ‘Oh, yes – a terrifying, arachnid-like demonic being intent on consuming her victim in every way imaginable. Very dramatic. That wasn’t written by you, was it?’

‘It was anonymous,’ said Stanley rather feebly.

‘From the public,’ she replied, tucking the article back in her jacket. ‘Thank you, by the way, for your assistance with that situation a couple of months ago. I appreciate it.’

‘Yeah, whatever. What are you doing here? Scratch that – how did you know where I was? And come to that – that door was locked. How did you open it?’

‘So many questions. In answer to at least some of them . . .’ She casually twirled the index finger of her left hand and the empty sandwich wrappers, sweet packets, soft-drink cans and miscellaneous detritus that formed a thick layer in the passenger-side footwell rose in the air and casually floated into the empty doughnut box beside Stanley. Its lid then closed softly. ‘There,’ she said. ‘That’s better.’ She looked round the van and tsked. ‘Not that the whole thing couldn’t do with a deep clean. Or being set on fire for the insurance money.’



Stanley folded his arms, determined to appear unimpressed. 'Did you just come here to offer your valeting services?'

'No. I've come here for two reasons: one, to help you, and two, to ask you to help me.'

Stanley nodded. 'I see. Bit of quid pro quo, is it?'

'Actually, no,' said Mrs Harnforth. 'I know you desperately want to track down the thing that attacked you, to prove to your estranged wife that your version of events is true. In that regard, I can tell you the creature you're looking for is called a Balarig. As you've experienced, it's a nasty beast that essentially works in a similar way to a black widow spider. If your wife had not interrupted you when she did, rest assured you would have experienced one of the most excruciating deaths imaginable. Unfortunately, Balarigs are masters of camouflage. The good news is there may be a way of tracking this one.' She reached into the other inside pocket of her jacket and produced a business card. 'This is the number of a gentleman called Jackie Rodriguez.'

'It says here he's a painter and decorator?'

'He is,' she agreed. 'A fair to middling one. He is also the finest tracker I've ever seen.'

'And let me guess – he'll help me if I help you?'

Mrs Harnforth shook her head. 'No. He will help you because I have asked him to help you. You really are a terribly suspicious person, Stanley.'

'I can't think why.' He studied the card again then met her gaze. 'So, what do you want my help with?'

'I find myself in the unusual position of needing to conduct an investigation. I mean, I have done many investigations, of a sort,

but none quite like this. I would like to avail of your particular expertise.'

'And what expertise would that be?'

'I need someone who can find things out and who is prepared to circumvent the law in order to do so. Someone with a finely honed ability to identify points of weakness and how to take advantage of them. In short, I need you to be you, Stanley.'

He sighed. 'To be honest, I'm thoroughly sick of being me.'

'Well then, here's the good news – you will do the kind of things you have been doing for quite some time now, but on this occasion you'll be on the side of the angels.'

'Does that side pay well?'

Mrs Harnforth's laughter was soft and melodious. 'Depends how you define it. Not to rush you, but I'm afraid we're up against it, so I need you to start on this right away.'

Stanley tapped the business card against his knee.

'Stanley?'

'I'm thinking.'

'I'm sure you are,' said Mrs Harnforth, 'but that wasn't my question.' She pointed in the direction of a man exiting the offices opposite. 'I'm not the world's most avid TV watcher but isn't that whatshisname from that thing?'

Stanley looked at the man getting into the BMW, down at the business card and then back up again. 'That . . . is none of your business.'

## CHAPTER 5

Banecroft had met Betty only a matter of minutes ago, but had already assembled quite a substantial list of things about her that irritated him. Leaving aside the fact that she had turned up to his meeting unannounced, seeming to appear from literally nowhere (something he found intensely annoying and had caused him to fall on his arse in front of his staff, which was more annoying still), she had then gone on to contradict him, overrule him and finally call his bluff. She had done all of that while eating a satsuma and failing to offer him or anyone else a single segment. Banecroft couldn't abide bad manners, at least not in other people.

As if that litany wasn't enough, she had given her name as Elizabeth Cavendish the Third. Banecroft had never met anybody of whom he felt the world needed two further iterations. Yes, Reggie styled himself as Reginald Fairfax the Third, but that was so obviously an affectation adopted by someone who had changed their name in order to leave a former life behind, that Banecroft let it slide. There probably wasn't even one Reginald Fairfax.

He allowed her to enter his office first, and she managed to reach his desk and pick up Chekhov before he had even closed the

door. He added her possession of an annoying burst of speed to the list.

‘Please do not touch things you do not understand.’

‘What a terrible principle,’ said Betty, not looking up from turning Chekhov over in her hands. ‘How are you supposed to gain an understanding of something without touching it?’

‘That is a valuable weapon.’

‘Oh, I know,’ she replied. ‘It’s a Balander Blunderbuss. Magnificent piece of engineering. That’s why it’s a shame to see it being kept in such shoddy condition.’

He snatched the firearm from her hands. ‘Are you trying to annoy me?’

She held up a hand in mock defence as she sat down on the opposite side of the desk. ‘I can’t see how I would need to. Being annoyed appears to be your default setting.’

‘On the contrary,’ offered Banecroft. ‘I have a gloriously sunny disposition. It’s just that nothing good has happened in quite some time to set it off.’

‘Dear oh dear, let’s do something about that right now.’ Betty pulled a brown paper bag from one of the pockets of her wax jacket and held it out. ‘Would sir care for a jelly baby?’

‘No.’

She gave the bag an encouraging jiggle. ‘Are you sure? I’ve never seen anyone look angry while enjoying a jelly baby. It simply cannot be done.’

‘Thanks, but I’d rather stay angry.’

Betty raised her eyebrows. ‘Interesting statement that, don’t you think? A man could do worse than ruminate on it.’

‘Oh, good God,’ he said, sitting down and placing the blunderbuss on the ground behind him, well out of Betty’s reach, ‘save us all from the amateur psychoanalysis.’

She withdrew the bag and dived her other hand into it. ‘Fine. Have it your way.’ She fished out an orange jelly baby and popped it in her mouth.

‘It doesn’t appear I’m going to have anything my way. And I should say thank you for gatecrashing my meeting and attempting to humiliate me in front of my staff.’

Betty placed a hand to her mouth and swallowed. ‘That was certainly not my intention. However, if you expect people to cower in the face of this spiteful demigod act you have going on, you should anticipate coming a cropper every now and then. Some of us aren’t easily intimidated, I’m afraid.’

‘In which case, can I ask what it is that you do? More specifically, as you are apparently my new assistant editor, am I allowed to ask what your experience is in the newspaper business?’

‘Well, I’ve bought a few over the years – copies of papers, I mean. In truth, not that many recently, but then it’s rather a dying medium, isn’t it?’

‘It is,’ agreed Banecroft. ‘Personally, I think it’s been going downhill ever since they started to allow individuals with no idea about newspapers to hold positions of power within the management structure.’

‘Touché,’ said Betty with a grin. ‘I knew if you kept plugging away, you’d land a shot eventually. Well done.’

‘Thank you.’

‘And your point is well taken. While I’m happy to muck in and

help anywhere I can, I certainly do not have your expertise, or even that of Reginald, Ox, Grace or Stella.'

Banecroft tilted his head at this.

Betty widened her eyes in innocence. 'It's just good manners to learn the names of the people you shall be working with.'

'I was about to ask how you knew them, but let me guess – Grace is still emailing reports to Mrs Harnforth?'

'Indeed she is. She has quite an interesting writing style.'

'I am familiar with it. Like a gossip columnist with Tourette's whose tic is to randomly name-check Jesus.'

Betty bobbed her head and chuckled. 'That's spot on. Can I ask, is Stanley Roker working here now?'

'On a freelance basis. I was going to change that, but the position I was considering him for has gone to someone far less qualified.'

Betty favoured him with a broad grin. 'An underqualified woman being promoted over a man. What a refreshing reversal of the norm.'

'To be fair, our previous assistant editor was female, but she proved to be . . . Seeing as you're now the assistant editor, can you come up with alternative word choices for "disloyal" and "flaky"?''

This earned Banecroft a raise of Betty's bushy eyebrows. 'You pretend otherwise, but her departure has really bothered you, hasn't it?'

'Back to this, are we? Would you like me to lie down on a couch, Dr Freud?'

'No, but a shower wouldn't go amiss.'

Banecroft folded his arms. ‘You seem to be under the false impression that your duties include acting as my mammy. They don’t.’

In response, Betty stretched out her arms and yawned. It was one of those full-bodied yawns that stops conversation dead until its completion. Banecroft had no choice but to sit there and endure it. He considered reaching his hand into his desk drawer for his bottle of whiskey, but he hesitated. He then got annoyed with himself for doing so.

Once she’d finally finished, Betty smacked her lips and rolled her head around her neck. ‘Oh, speaking of my duties, Mrs Harnforth has also asked me to carry out a full audit.’

‘Excuse me?’

Betty stared into her bag of jelly babies as she spoke. ‘Off the top of your head, could you tell me whether this paper made a profit or a loss last month?’

‘Neither. It broke even.’

She nodded appreciatively. ‘Well done. Not on being correct, as you most certainly are not, but on being able to lie straight to someone’s face like that, without deviation or hesitation. It’s quite a skill. Would you like to take another guess?’

‘I’m afraid we’ve all been rather too busy to spend the requisite amount of time counting pennies. Something you would have no appreciation of, I’m sure.’

‘Let’s see – you foiled the attempts of a rogue member of the Founders to usher his son into the ranks of the immortals, and had to defeat a Were as well as a demented practitioner in the process. Then, a few months later, you thwarted the scheme of a

bothersome little cult to kidnap one of your employees while simultaneously dealing with an outbreak of vampirism – something that did not exist until a rather despicable group of internet daters and an ancient power colluded to create it. A busy week, that one. Have I left anything out?’

‘We also had the bathroom redone.’

Betty tilted her head to the side. ‘Of course you did. My apologies. Would now be a good time to give you a second chance at that jelly baby?’

‘No.’

‘Have it your way. So yes, in answer to your sort-of question, I understand what you had to deal with and, let us say, the “altered world” in which you now find yourself operating. Given the circumstances, rest assured that Mrs Harnforth doesn’t expect you to be making an obscene profit. She would, however, like to stem the bleeding enough for this place to burn money slowly instead of it going up in flames all at once.’

‘Lesson one,’ said Banecroft. ‘That is what is known as a mixed metaphor.’

‘Indeed it is. Well spotted.’

‘Although, speaking of blazing infernos, the electrics in this decrepit old church are so fried that it’s only a matter of time before we have one on our hands. In the meantime, the lights staying on is not something we can take for granted. Thus far, a stoned Rastafarian with a wrench has somehow managed to fix things, but we may need to find a more permanent solution.’

‘Ah yes, Manny – I’m looking forward to meeting him.’

‘Do so at the right time in his . . . let’s call it his “relaxation