

NATHAN'S STORY

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CHAPTER ONE

Recovering in London

Nathan stood in the doorway which led from the hotel lobby to the car park. He took a last puff of his cigar dropped it on the ground and stubbed it out with his foot. Picking up the stub and seeing no where else to put it, he carried it over to a planter containing an artificial olive tree and balanced it on the rim.

As he walked past the car he had rented on his arrival in London he gave the bonnet a brief stroke of the kind one might bestow on a good but very wet dog, then wiped his hand with the handkerchief he always kept in his right trouser pocket. He knew very little about cars and had chosen this one for its looks. It was black with black leather seats. He had driven it back to the hotel but had not driven it since. His anxiety about negotiating London traffic had always intervened. For reasons he had not yet explored he had felt reluctant to return it.

But he had sat in it occasionally and on warm days had found the smell of the leather comforting. He thought it probably reminded him of the car in which his father had driven him to school but he couldn't be certain. Perhaps if he hadn't drunk so much for so much of his life he would have had clearer memories. But then he would have had no control over what he remembered and it might have been all the bad things.

The evening was warm for September and Nathan was experiencing a distinct sense of optimism. It belonged with the prospect of being in a London theatre for the first time for many years. He was also feeling slightly apprehensive that he would be in a place where he might be recognized. The theatre was probably the only place now where he might meet someone he had known when he had worked in the city. It was not an apprehension based on anything he had done wrong. He was not being hunted or tracked down for some crime or misdemeanor. It was just that he had vowed to avoid being socially active until he had fully recovered from his experience with Ros.

Freddie, an old family friend and one time employer, knew he was in town but their only contact had been by telephone and it was likely to remain that way whatever the length of Nathan's stay.

Otherwise, all Nathan had done since his arrival had been to wander about the streets on his way to and from bookshops. There had been times when he had looked briefly into the eyes of a stranger and felt a yearning for some irresponsible intimacy. But the pull to stay quiet inside his own head had always taken precedence.

As Nathan stepped out into the street he was unaware that he was being watched by someone in a car parked across from the hotel. But even had he been looking in that direction he would not have known whether the person was a man or a woman. They were well hidden by the shadows from the adjacent building.

Nathan arrived at the theatre very early and it was quiet as he entered the foyer. He went straight up the stairs to the Circle Bar and was surprised by how

familiar it was. It was almost twenty years since he had last been there but almost nothing had changed. He could have been wrong but he thought that even the carpets were the same.

The bar was empty except for the staff of two young men who were talking together as if something important had just happened. When they became aware of Nathan he asked for a large scotch and took it over to a stool to his right and at the furthest end of the curved wooden bar. From there he would be able to observe everyone who came in.

Once he had his drink placed in front of him he experienced a surge of anxiety. The space ahead of him was so like he remembered it had a disconcerting effect. Part of him felt like the young man he had been while his hands on the bar in front of him reminded him how old he was.

And if earlier he had been contemplating his lack of clear memories he was now struggling to hold back a flood of them. In his mind he could see Gene Tierney in an early scene from *The Shanghai Gesture*.

Wearing expensive jewelry and strongly resembling Ros she was seated at the opposite end of the bar. She looked so stunning he wanted to hold on to the image but a pressure from elsewhere in his head was forcing him to bring down the blinds. Reaching for his glass he filled his mouth with whisky, held it there until it burned a little, then let it rush past his throat in one gulp. This was an act which shifted his attention firmly back to himself.

A further dose of anxiety was gathering momentum in concert with the build up of people arriving in the bar. He became agitated and regretful that he had not moved into the auditorium earlier. Looking at his watch he realized that nearly ten minutes had passed. He knew that the fear of being recognized was irrational but he had lived long enough not to let such facts influence his actions.

Nathan moved quickly through the bar and into the theatre and was relieved to find he was one of the first members of the audience to take their seat. He was a few rows from the back and a few seats from the aisle. The image of Gene Tierney had gone

completely and in its place he could see Ros clearly. She was standing in the aisle smiling at him before turning in to take the seat next to him. She repeated the move several times then faded out of sight as a man approached from his right and sat down next to him.

As the theatre began to fill Nathan began to feel trapped. He breathed as steadily as he could but with every breath he felt the air was being depleted of oxygen. It was being filled instead with the perfume and odour of the people around him. By the time the curtains were opening Nathan had put his head so far back, in the effort to draw down some less polluted air, he was staring at the ceiling.

Then came the sound of those last minutes of adjusting bodies, throat clearing and coughs before the play began. As Nathan slowly brought his head back down he could see that the play had begun. On the stage were two actors, facing each other from opposite ends of a very large wooden table. They were directing their voices towards the audience rather than towards each other as if they had an

important public message to communicate. Nathan was aware of the sound but was unable to hear the words.

Whatever he had envisaged it would be like at the theatre it wasn't. He had forgotten how much he had grown to prefer watching movies alone or with a few friends in the real dark. And whenever possible in a private cinema.

In spite of the disruption he knew he would cause if he chose to leave now, his discomfort propelled him towards the aisle and out into the lobby. Once there and just as determinedly he returned to the bar.

The door was slightly ajar and for several minutes he was unnoticed as he stood staring at the lights on the display of bottles.

The two young barmen were somewhere out of sight. He could hear them talking and he felt like a lump of stone in a suit. He knew something would happen. Something would move and then he would move. But there was no rush.

One of the young men appeared and looked challengingly in his direction. Nathan knew they were not allowed to serve drinks between intervals but he also knew that money can change minds and he opened his wallet and took out a twenty pound note. He stepped forward and placed it on the bar. The other young man grimaced and poured him a large scotch.

This trip to the theatre was proving to be both disturbing and a disappointment but only because he had allowed his memories to lose touch with reality.

Nathan took his drink over to his previous seat and tried to re-establish contact with Gene or Ros or both. But this time the woman in his head was facing away from him and no matter how hard he tried to turn her around she would not co-operate.

Having failed with her he drifted into a re-run of some of one of his favourite scenes from *Rogue Herries*, a book he had decided to re-read on arriving in London. He had developed an ability to lose himself in this way for periods which could last from

a few minutes to many. But he did also remain semi-alert to his surroundings. He thought it was probably more of an affliction than a blessing but he would have been very reluctant to give it up.

The first act of the play was ending as Nathan resurfaced and he quickly ordered another double. The young man filled his glass before he readied himself for the oncoming crowd.

The doors into the bar were being opened and secured and along with a stream of cold air came a throng of people of such density Nathan was quickly confined to the corner. Even if he had wanted to leave the bar now it would have required him to push his way through to the exit. More and more people were pressing forward to get served and as they adjusted their positions different faces appeared and disappeared. Nathan found it comforting that he recognized none of them.

As he observed the arm waving and shouting which accompanied the attempts to order a drink the

alcohol in his brain was again diluting his anxiety and he had to work hard to disguise an amused grin.

As he was replacing this with what he hoped was an expression of mild contentment he noticed a woman looking in his direction. He couldn't be certain that she had been looking at him but when he risked another look she had disappeared. Then he saw her again and she was staring directly at him. The opportunity to order another drink required his attention and when he sought her out again she had gone again. He thought she might never have existed and he had been hallucinating.

The interval bell had rung and Nathan began equivocating about whether to go back into the theatre and try again. But the uncertainty was short lived. He would wait until the bar emptied then leave the theatre and look for somewhere to get a coffee before heading back to the hotel. As it got quieter he noticed he had wrapped his fingers tightly into the palms of his hands and his hands were trembling slightly. This alarmed him and he wished they would

all move faster so that he could make a clean escape.

After adjusting his jacket and making sure that he had his wallet Nathan realized he was being watched from across the room. It was the woman he thought he had seen. Perhaps she knew him. Or perhaps they had known each other at some other time in his life. She looked older than he was. Maybe it was his mother. He had no idea what she would look like now. But it was unlikely. He had been told she had absconded to somewhere in South America and in his head that was where he had left her.

The woman continued to watch him and as he hesitated she kept moving towards him. Or perhaps it was he who was moving as happens sometimes with trains pulling out of a station. He wished he could have taken time out to check the expression on his face. His fingers were now even more tightly closed into the palms of his hands.

Nathan became aware that his shoulders were sinking a little further away from his neck. And then

there he was, face to face and only inches away from the woman. Everyone else had now left the bar and there was a clattering sound as if the collected glasses were being broken into a metal bucket. Then there was no noise at all and the woman spoke.

She said she had noticed him the moment she had entered the bar and the idea that they might spend some time together had arrived at exactly the same time. A man appeared at the door of the bar and looked enquiringly in her direction. She waved him away with a gesture which could have meant she would meet him later or that she never wanted to see him again.

Nathan was meanwhile concentrating on his own response. He knew he was close to being unmanageably drunk. Some of him felt he had already surrendered to her advances, if that's what they were. He was not unfamiliar with this kind of approach although it was usually he who was making it. It was a very long time since another person had made such a positive move towards him.

The man at the door had gone. The woman continued to speak. This time she was asking if he would he like to go back to her place for a drink. And before he could reply she had taken car keys from her bag and suggested it would be safer if she did the driving.

Nathan's head was spinning slightly with the effects of alcohol or the woman or both. So he had been in similar situations before and he had usually regretted giving in to them but he didn't much care about regrets just now. The ones he had about Ros were so overwhelming another smaller one would not make much difference.

They walked silently down the main stairs and out into the street. It was dark by now but the woman led the way to a private car park which was no more than a few hundred yards from the theatre. Nathan followed. As he was half heartedly trying to assess the situation the woman was getting into the car and he was making relatively hesitant moves to do the same.

From the moment the car moved out into the street he began to watch her intently. She smiled and seemed pleased that he was being so attentive. She even laughed as he expressed admiration for her driving.

Nathan had no idea of the direction in which they were traveling or to which part of the city they were heading. He felt he should have been anxious about what he was doing but he wasn't at all. It was only when she asked his name that he experienced any discomfort. He wasn't sure why but he hurriedly suggested that they remain nameless. He felt that with his name would come the need to elaborate on who he was. And even if it were only for the night, he would be glad to leave his old self behind and explore the one he might become. There was no doubt in his mind that he would be with her for that amount of time, at least.

The journey could have been five minutes or fifteen. Nathan was exiting slightly from his reverie as the car entered an underground car park and drew up beside a glass booth of the kind in which concierges

sit when they are not busy. There was a light inside shining down onto a bucket and mop. A chair with a newspaper on it was stood away from a small table. There was a smell of soap coming through the open door as Nathan and the woman passed by it on their way to the lift.

The grey lift doors slid open without a sound and as they stepped inside Nathan restrained himself from reaching out to touch her to check if she were real or not. They both turned to face the door bumping into each other slightly as they did so. They stood alongside each other not speaking until the lift arrived at the first floor.

The russet carpet was thick and Nathan, with a tendency to scuff his feet as he walked, had to bend his knees slightly to be sure of clearing the pile. He reached out to take the woman's hand and holding on just a step behind her she led him to the door of an apartment. She swiftly located the key in her bag and placed it neatly into the lock. As she turned it the door swung open as if it were on a recently oiled track.

They both hesitated then moved into the dark, like synchronized dolphins entering nose first into a warm sea.

CHAPTER TWO

The Woman from the Theatre

Once inside the hall, Nathan and the woman faced each other. She did not switch on the light but their bodies were patterned with the horizontal stripes which came from a street lamp shining through the blinds in her bedroom. He only knew where the light came from after she had kissed him on the cheek and guided him in there. Her lips felt cool but he thought this would be in contrast to the warmth of his skin. The rush of early excitement was fading a little but not enough to allow caution to make an appearance.

They sat down together on the side of the bed and this time they kissed each other on the mouth. Nathan again waited for the woman to make the first move. They were facing mirrored doors and could see each other until the woman stood up, opened them, and switched on a lamp in what looked like a small dressing room. He assumed it led to a bathroom because she disappeared into it before Nathan heard the sound of running water. When she

returned she had changed into a bathrobe and was carrying another which she placed over his knees. She asked if he would like something to drink and when he declined she said she was going to take a shower.

As he sat there alone Nathan experienced a sudden sharp pain above his right eyebrow. He waited a moment for it to subside and when it did he undressed completely. He placed his trousers and then his jacket over the back of the chair nearest the door, folded his socks and underwear and put on the robe. It was tight around the shoulders and the sleeves were too short but it had a clean smell as if it had just come out of a drier. He looked at himself in the dressing table mirror then looked quickly away thinking the last thing he needed right now was the reality of himself.

Nathan sat down again on the side of the bed and waited. He thought the woman was taking a long time in the shower. He had put his watch in his jacket pocket but did not want to be retrieving it when she re-entered the room. He remained where

he was. He was not as agitated as he could sometimes be and caution continued to keep its distance. It was not as if he had any control over it. It was usually much stronger than he was but it would be useful if it let him have his way on this occasion.

It was at this point that Nathan realized he was beginning to reflect on his situation. This was dangerous. Perhaps he should have accepted the offer of a drink. His knees had become more prominent and he put them as close together as he could before wrapping the robe over them. He had them tucked up nicely when he became aware of her standing in front of him smiling. She reached out with both hands, helped him to his feet and, walking backwards led him through the dressing room into the bathroom.

There were two large towels on the rail next to the shower and the water had been left on. She showed him the controls before leaving and closing the door behind her. Did this mean she thought he was in need of a wash? He used more soap than usual and

washed and rinsed himself three or four times. The effect of the drink from the theatre had now worn off almost completely and he tried hard to think of nothing more than getting dried.

The steam in the room was clearing and Nathan risked a glance at his hair in the mirror above the wash hand basin. He thought he needed a comb but decided not to look inside the cabinet. There might be something in there which would cause him concern. He scraped his hair into place with his fingers.

Apart from the door leading back through the dressing room there was another on the adjacent wall. He turned the handle as quietly as he could and opened it an inch at a time. It led into the hall where they had had their first kiss. It was much darker in there now and there was no light coming from elsewhere in the apartment.

As he re-entered the bedroom the woman was lying in bed with her back to the window. He took off the robe and got into bed beside her. They took hold of

each other's hands, leaned closer and kissed for the second time. Nathan reached further with his right hand and made contact with what felt like loose silk. She was wearing a nightdress and he was naked. He thought this was rather unfair but such thoughts were soon fighting for survival as, with almost no effort on his part he was inside her, erect and motionless. He was perplexed as to how he had got there so easily and it fleetingly occurred to him how pleasant it might be to fall asleep in that position.

But by now the woman was determinedly moving beneath him and in what seemed like only a few seconds they had both reached orgasm. Even more surprising she had managed it all in such a way that he had been spared any of those moments of anguish when emotional tension has drained away and meaningless physical activity is about to take over.

As they lay holding each other Nathan felt inclined to share his reflections on the subject but decided that finding the right words would be hard. Perhaps he would say to her another time.

And this was Nathan's last coherent thought before he awoke alone the following morning in her extremely comfortable bed.

CHAPTER THREE

The Morning After

As Nathan opened his eyes the woman was placing a tray on the dressing table. He could have juice but she hoped he would take coffee as she wanted to talk to him about her plans for the day and thought it would help them to be more alert. Although the blinds were closed Nathan thought it must be about seven o'clock.

She poured the coffee handed him a cup on a saucer and got back into bed beside him. The cup was rocking about slightly as he raised his body into more of a sitting position. He also resisted the urge to discard the saucer and place it on the bedside table. He kept his eyes slightly closed while he drank the coffee. He knew that whatever his impressions of the woman had been the previous evening they would have changed by now. He wanted to have a long hard look at her but did not want to look into her eyes or let her see his.

However it had been managed, their love making had been one of the least demanding sessions he could recall. And over the years he had been in dozens of similar situations when the main accompanying emotion had ranged from mild to morbid excruciation. This acknowledgement momentarily plunged him into the well of his own shyness and when he climbed back out he felt his face had gone pink.

Neither of them were looking at each other and with the coffee drunk they lay back against the pillows and looked straight ahead without touching. After a silence of only a few seconds the woman told him she had a family engagement which would require her to drive to Oxford. It was unavoidable. She would be leaving the apartment within the next hour.

The earliest she could return would be around four o'clock that afternoon. She said she would have preferred him to take the initiative about spending more time together, but circumstances were dictating that she speak now before her departure.

She was so alert Nathan was beginning to wonder if she had slept at all.

And she had a proposal. He could either stay in the apartment and be there when she returned or they could arrange a time to meet for dinner that evening. Her preference was that he stay. If he should want to go back to sleep the only disturbance would be the doorman putting her Saturday delivery of groceries into the kitchen later that morning.

As Nathan listened he had no idea whether he wanted to stay or meet her later. He did not want to appear ungracious but nor did he want to begin explaining the peculiar emotional dullness he was experiencing in response to her suggestions. It was a feeling he now had with most people. He also sensed that once she had left the apartment he would probably want to walk out and never again think about her, or the night they had spent together.

Nathan was finding this half way place between saying nothing and saying too much both familiar

and disheartening. It infected his thinking like some form of blight. And if he should attempt to bridge the gap between the two positions he would go hurtling into space with any semblance of rationality spilling out of him on the way there.

These thoughts also brought with them the urge to lie back down in the warm bed and go to sleep, at least until she had left the apartment when he would dress and get back to his hotel as soon as possible. He would have plenty of time before she returned from Oxford and if he could find some paper he would write a considerate note.

He heard his own voice saying thank you I'll stay and the woman hurriedly proceeded to get ready for her journey.

Nathan pulled the sheet up to just under his nose. He thought he would watch and listen to her but decided that was unfair. Instead he made a determined effort to get back into thoughts about Ros.

He was almost asleep when the woman kissed him on the cheek and said she was leaving. He was relieved that she didn't ask him to repeat what his intentions were.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Intruder

The woman exited from the underground car park onto the driveway as a delivery van was drawing up to the front entrance of the apartment block. A young man opened the back door of the van and began removing a large box of groceries. The woman saw him, stopped the car, rolled down the window and called over. The box was heavy but he carried it over to her. She got out of the car looked briefly inside, checked the list and nodded her approval before driving off and out into the main road.

From the bushes bordering the driveway a small man in a brown tweed jacket was intently watching all that was happening. The doorman briefly interrupted a phone call to wedge open the door for the deliveryman who stepped in with the box of groceries and stood waiting. While both men had their backs to the door the man from the bushes snuck in and hid around the corner at the foot of the stairs. When the doorman had completed his call, he turned to take the box of groceries, kicked the wedge from under

the door and watched until the delivery van was out of sight.

The doorman entered the lift with the groceries and took them to the first floor. He approached the woman's apartment opened her door with his keys and went in. The man from the bushes had by this time run up the stairs and was watching from the end of the hallway.

He now moved closer to the apartment door. He looked in and he listened. A light had been switched on in the kitchen which was on the right of the hall. The room directly opposite was in darkness and he moved swiftly across the hall into it. It was lined with books but apart from these he could see little else. Once in there he took small steps sideways to avoid bumping into anything and was quickly out of sight behind the door. He held his breath until the doorman had switched off the light in the kitchen and closed the apartment door behind him.

The intruder was beginning to feel hot and agitated. He took off his jacket and placed it over his arm

before moving back into the hall. By this time he knew the location of the kitchen and the room with the books. There were only two other doors to explore.

One of these was partly open and through the gap between the door and the door jamb he could see the shape of Nathan lying in bed. He was able to silently confirm that the other door led to the bathroom by opening it cautiously and then leaving it ajar. He now re-approached the bedroom door and pushed it gently with the palm of his hand. Then he waited. When nothing happened he stepped inside.

Nathan was lying in the bed facing the window. The man moved towards him and stared down at the back of his head.

Only partly awake Nathan thought he had heard the sounds of the doorman placing the groceries in the kitchen as the woman had explained. He also thought he had heard the lock of the apartment door click into place as the doorman closed it behind him. And yet he was beginning to get a sense that he was

not alone in the bedroom. He lay very still feeling too tense to turn around. His jaw tightened as he tried to force his ears to open further in an attempt to hear better. At the same time he was trying not to move the sheet around his neck.

The intruder stepped further into the space between the door and the bed and leaned forward slightly as if to get a closer look at Nathan. The breathing of both men was getting louder which was preventing them from hearing each other.

The blinds had remained closed and they were allowing very little light into the room. But there was a gap in the dressing room doors which were slightly open and as the intruder moved forward the light from there was now casting an unmistakable human shadow across the bed and into the far corner of the room.

Nathan now felt so stiff he feared a piece of him might snap if he moved. He also felt he had very little control over what he did next. With his eyes tightly closed, he turned and made a frantic leap in

the direction of what, from the size of the shadow, he assumed was a very large man.

The top of Nathan's head immediately came into hard contact with the intruder's forehead and this only added to the vehemence of both men's reactions.

Nathan was naked but as they grappled with each other his flesh was pressed against the intruder's jacket which had got jammed between their bodies. The men and the jacket remained tightly locked together as they held on and fell about. The intruder was smaller than Nathan had first imagined but he was strong and very agile. They stumbled out through the bedroom door and into the hall where the intruder lost his balance completely and pulled Nathan down on top of him.

From there they rolled over several times traveling first in the direction of the kitchen and then back again until Nathan managed to struggle to his feet. His intention was to fling the intruder off him with one massive heave but he was hanging on so tightly

the movement merely propelled them both towards the main door of the apartment. They encountered this with such force they were bounced back across the hall and through the open door into the living room.

The sound when the intruder's head hit the glass coffee table caused Nathan to let go of him immediately. At the same time the man slumped on the floor and as Nathan stepped back the jacket, which had somehow remained stuck between them throughout the struggle, fell over the man's legs.

It was dark in the room but there was sufficient light for Nathan to see the man quite clearly. He was lying on the floor and looked unconscious and very pale.

Nathan was beginning to panic. Thoughts about who this man might be and whether or not he should phone for an ambulance were competing with his desire to get dressed and get out of the place as quickly as possible. But he also knew this was not an option. He switched on the main light, had a closer look at the man and decided he should move him to

a more comfortable position. The man looked very small and in his present condition was much more manageable than he had been during the attack.

Nathan was able to pull him up onto the sofa where he carefully rested his head against one of the cushions. The man began to make noises and to repeat words which Nathan thought included a woman's name. He wanted neither to wait nor to listen and as he suddenly remembered that he was naked, he began to feel very cold.

Nathan was finding it difficult to think clearly but even if it proved necessary to call an ambulance he thought his next best move was to get dressed and prepare for his escape. The word escape seemed to be the one nearest to his lips.

By the time he was dressed there were sounds coming from the other room. He was tempted to leave immediately without determining whether or not the man was recovering. But he couldn't do it. Peering around the door he could see that the intruder was now sitting up on the sofa dabbing his

head with a white handkerchief. If there was any blood it was not obvious from where Nathan was standing. And he had no wish to get closer. He assumed that the man might have cut his head against the glass table when he fell and he made a brief request to God that, if so, it would prove to be only a slight wound.

The man's brown jacket was still lying on the floor and Nathan was tempted to step back into the room to pick it up. But he didn't. Again he thought he could hear loud breathing noises but as before was unsure who was producing them.

He moved backwards to get closer to the main door of the apartment. Then with one foot outside and his hand on the handle ready to close the door behind him he muttered sorry before banging it shut and running as fast as he could to the stairs. Holding the banister he negotiated them two at a time, turned into an empty hall and walked with stiff legs towards the front door. As he reached the driveway in front of the apartment block he looked back to see the

intruder at the woman's window, with the blinds now open, staring out at him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blood on the Hand

Whoever the man was and whatever his relationship with the woman Nathan's only thought now was get back to the hotel and the safety of his room as soon as possible.

It occurred to him that the man might follow him, might accuse him of assault or report him to the police. Nathan thought he may have been seen arriving at the apartment with the woman; perhaps by whoever used that cubicle in the garage. They would be able to provide a description. He might be tracked down through his theatre ticket. No he had paid cash. But he also knew he had not technically done anything wrong. And that kind of irrational thinking would not serve him well if he were to make any sense of what had happened. But if the situation were to receive more considered attention it would have to wait until he was further from the scene. Nathan adjusted his clothes as part of trying to calm himself but as he did so he noticed there was blood on his right hand.

This was an alarming sight and he was perplexed as to how it could have got there. He had no memory of touching anything that felt wet. Perhaps it had happened as he had hauled the man on to the sofa and lowered his head onto the cushion.

Nathan continued to walk as he stared at his hand. He was holding it in front of him to keep it well clear of his clothes. But this was surely unnecessary because the blood was almost dry and the most obvious remains of it were in the crevices of the palm. With his left hand he searched his pockets for his handkerchief but was unable to find it. He had certainly put one into his jacket before leaving the hotel.

There was nothing distinctive about it but it was discomfiting to think that he might have left it in her car or in her apartment. Apart from his present need for a handkerchief he did not feel complete without one. He objected to being sneezed on and tried to make sure he kept his own sneezes to himself.

Again, using his left hand, he pulled his shirt out of his trousers and spat into his right palm. There was enough spit to enable him to wipe away the dried blood. But rather than tuck his now slightly damp shirttail back into his trousers he bundled it into his trouser pocket.

This reminded him that he'd put his watch in there when he had undressed the previous night. It was still there. He took it out and checked the time. It was just after ten o'clock. He decided to put the watch in a different pocket and wear it again after he and it had been cleaned.

As his focus moved from his hand to his watch some of his shirt had strayed out of his trouser pocket. It just hung there crumpled at the back of his trousers, several inches below the line of his jacket.

Nathan braced himself for a walk to a main road. His neck was getting sore as he kept turning his head every few seconds to check if he were being followed. He was also anxious that a taxi might pass him by. And apart from those slight discomforts he

had a crawling sensation at the back of his head as if a colony of ants was shuttling between his collar and his hair. There was only a space of about an inch but the sensation was intense.

As he breathed in the fresh air of what was a well treed part of the city Nathan experienced what he thought might be a boost of adrenalin. He assumed it was associated with having escaped relatively unharmed from a dreadful experience. But it was soon replaced by a weakening sensation which settled around the back of his knees. These effects and the aftermath of the events in the apartment combined to make him feel he would never be properly in control of his life again.

The area of London in which Nathan found himself was also totally unfamiliar. He was now passing a chemist's shop so he decided to risk delaying his escape to purchase some hand wipes. He was also tempted to look for a shop selling shirts and dump the one he was wearing but he would make that a priority later. He would dump the shirt as soon as possible and he felt good about that idea.

After another few hundred yards he suspected he was wandering deeper into alien territory. He needed to give his entire attention to the task of reaching a main road. There were people about but he chose not to ask for directions. He did not want to draw attention to himself and perhaps be remembered for having been in that area.

The desire to believe the worst was over was bolstered as he turned the next corner. A black taxi cab was depositing a passenger outside what looked like a school building. And in less than a minute he was in the back and locked into a stream of vehicles which the driver said would have them back in Central London in less than fifteen minutes.

When the taxi drew up outside his hotel Nathan handed the driver a bundle of notes then ran up the three flights of stairs to his room and threw himself on his bed.

He then threw himself off the bed. The need to wash away the memory of earlier events was much stronger than the need to rest. Also he did not want

to pollute the bed. But as he undressed the ridiculousness of what he had been involved in began to amuse him.

It had elements of the kind of movies he had liked as a young man and even reminded him of a script he had been working on and had never completed. He conjectured that if he had remained in the now soiled clothes he could have walked around the crowded streets of London trying himself out as the character he had inadvertently become.

Once he was showered he cleaned his watch strap and wiped his shoes with a damp hand towel. Not wishing to get dressed he got into bed naked and thought how helpful it would have been to his predicament had he been able to cry; and if not a full cry to have at least shed a tear. But none arrived. It was late afternoon before Nathan felt inclined to move anything other than his eyelids. These he had closed and opened numerous times. The closing of them had not however induced him to sleep. He now equivocated between getting something to eat and

having a drink. He solved that dilemma by ordering a bottle of whisky and a cheese sandwich.

As soon as they arrived Nathan ate one of the sandwiches and poured himself a full glass of whisky. He drank it neat. With the alcohol promoting a renewed sense of relief at having survived the ordeal he looked for a suitable plastic bag in which to put his discarded clothes. The only garment he intended to keep was the jacket. Everything else had been in contact with some part of his naked body as he had fought with the intruder. Nathan was referring to the man as an intruder but he accepted it was a definition that could be more accurately applied to him.

He removed the liner from the bin in the bathroom and was astounded by how much he could cram into it. He then placed the liner inside a bag from a bookshop he often visited. He tied the handles at the top as tightly as possible and placed the parcel on a chair at the window. When it got dark he would take it to some place well away from the hotel and dump it down a lane or alleyway.

Nathan was drunk when he picked up his red and black parcel from the chair and carried it with him down the back stairs of the hotel and out through the car park. He walked further than he had intended but eventually came to a lane where an office building was under reconstruction. Down the lane was a big almost empty yellow skip.

Taking up a position furthest from the lane entrance, and hidden behind the skip from the view of any passers by, Nathan lobbed the bag high into the air. He aimed for the middle. Red, black and distinctive against the backdrop of a white stone building the package rose in an arc and landed with a soft thump.

CHAPTER SIX

A Skip and a Balloon

The following morning Nathan awoke with a headache and a low opinion of himself. Having been engrossed in the emotional repercussions from the previous day's events he now had to give some thought to the kind of man he might have become as a consequence. He had also not yet allowed himself to contemplate what the relationship between the intruder and the woman from the theatre might be.

There were so many possibilities he decided there would be little benefit in contemplating any of them. And while he was undoubtedly concerned about the man's damaged head he also considered himself something of a victim. Of what exactly he didn't know.

But he did consider it a blessing that he had not mentioned his name or given the woman any information about himself. He might adopt it as his default position with strangers on all future occasions. Less comforting was the knowledge, or

lack of knowledge about where he had been or with whom he had been. It was as if he had inadvertently sleepwalked himself into someone else's life then nightmared himself out of it.

Then he remembered that the day's newspapers would be outside his door. He considered ordering his usual breakfast in his room but decided instead to go out and get some fresh air. As he lay a while longer the image of the plastic bag curving up and over into the skip came into his head. But instead of falling into the depths of the skip it shriveled up into a small balloon about the size of a peanut and disappeared over a high sloping roof.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Package

Nathan changed his mind about going out to get some fresh air. Instead he opened the window and sat beside it breathing deeply for a few minutes. He remained in his room for the rest of the day. He read the papers and looked at some of the books he had recently bought. He wore the hotel dressing gown which he had avoided until now and he ordered a light lunch from a nearby delicatessen. He also made a loose vow to stop drinking.

In the evening the hotel receptionist phoned to say that a package has been delivered for him. Nathan asked for it to be placed where the newspapers had been. An ambivalence about bringing it into the room was overcome in less than five minutes. And once retrieved he stood it on the writing table where it stayed unopened for a further five minutes until he was ready to risk looking inside. He felt he had achieved some measure of emotional equilibrium and was reticent about putting it in jeopardy.

As the package had been delivered by courier he assumed it could be important. It was small enough to be a letter of some sort and it was probably from Freddie who was the only person who knew where he was.

Nathan closed the curtains, switched on the lamps, sat at the desk and examined the package. The writing on the package and the sender's address confirmed that it had been sent by Freddie. Inside was a receipt and a request.

There had been three distinct phases to Nathan's friendship with Freddie. There had been the years when as a young man in London Nathan had supplemented his income as a writer by acting as a courier for Freddie's law firm. Mostly he had traveled to cities throughout Europe with documents which Freddie was unwilling to trust to the regular courier services.

Over more recent years, with one or two exceptions, their main contact had been by telephone and it seemed likely to remain so. Until this latest trip

Nathan was rarely in the UK and although Freddie was frequently in New York on business he had never once been out to the West Coast.

Freddie had also featured in Nathan's life long before that. As a close friend of his father's he had been aware of the problems in his marriage and how they impacted on Nathan as the only child. He had often come to Nathan's rescue by taking him on weekend and longer vacations with his own large and stable family. These had been special times for Nathan and he viewed any request from Freddie as an opportunity to repay the kindness.

The request as set out in a letter was simple. On a day of Nathan's choosing Freddie wanted Nathan to travel to Glasgow to find out all he could about the man whose name was on the enclosed garage receipt. The garage mentioned was in a location Nathan knew well from his days of working in the city. The man's name was Paul Bloch.

Freddie was on his way to New York where he would be working for the following two weeks and if Nathan

could manage the trip within that time he would be very grateful.

There was a contact telephone number. A member of staff from Freddie's London office would be available at all times to deal with anything arising from the trip. Nathan should also use this number for any funds or further assistance he required with travel arrangements.

The prospect of making the journey north, particularly if he were to go there by train, had strong appeal. It would take him through the Lake District where he had attended school for over nine years. He had many good memories of the area. They were of the kind one can return to with pleasure whatever the time of day or night.

Nathan poured himself the first drink of the day and mulled over Freddie's concluding and somewhat intriguing remarks. For his purposes the fact that Nathan was making the trip to Glasgow might be sufficient in itself; the effort made would be a

promise kept. It would also be acceptable if he found out nothing about Paul Bloch.

Funds had not, for many years, been a factor in what Nathan might choose to do and he was already gearing up for the trip North. This included deciding what book he would take to read on the train. And it would have to be a train that would take him through Oxenhome.

The journey north would also give him an excellent opportunity to clear his mind and distance himself from recent events.

He made a call to the number provided by Freddie and left a message that he would be making the trip. The search for his copy of *Rogue Herries*, a book he had first read on his first trip into Borrowdale as a schoolboy, was brief. He found it in a suitcase in the wardrobe. Placing the book alongside his glasses and the package on the writing table Nathan cleaned his teeth switched off the lamp and settled down for the night.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the Train

In one of his favorite restaurants the following morning Nathan ate a plain omelet followed by brown toast with marmalade and a cup of freshly ground coffee. He had been served by an attractive young woman with the tired eyes of a mother who, he conjectured, would have preferred to be at home serving breakfast to her children.

For a moment or two he thought he would try to be charming then decided that would be unfair to her. She might feel obliged to reciprocate and that would use up some of the energy she needed for the job. Also the idea inexplicably brought with it a flood of images from his recent escapade and propelled him out into the street without finishing his meal.

Back in the hotel Nathan packed a small travel bag and checked several times that he had a spare handkerchief. He always carried his passport and this was alongside his credit cards. It occurred to him that a mobile phone might have been a useful aid on

this kind of trip but his determination to remain hands and ears free of their intrusive potential, was undiminished.

He would wear his favorite grey woollen jacket with his brown cords. Fortunately he had never been fond of the trousers which were now in the skip. He had liked the shirt which had suffered the same fate but he had others he enjoyed wearing just as much.

The hotel was a relatively short distance from the station and he could have walked there in less than ten minutes but he decided to take a taxi to avoid any risk of getting damp on the way. He would buy another umbrella in Glasgow if he needed one but he had no intention of adding to his present load by carrying the one he had bought in London.

Once he had reached the station the attraction of getting out of the city had gained in intensity and he felt for the first time for a long time that he was at least traveling in the right direction.

Nathan had chosen an early afternoon train and the carriage was empty except for a woman near the door who was reading a fashion magazine. She turned to smile as she saw Nathan and he took this as a sign that she just might try to engage with him later. He had his journey planned and talking to a stranger was not included. Nathan nodded in a way that he hoped suggested that he was more shy than rude.

The train was warm enough for Nathan to take off his jacket and he placed it on the seat beside him. His mind wanted him to revisit the image of the brown jacket worn by the man in the apartment but resisted letting it go there. It did not obey immediately and Nathan was forced into acknowledging that he and the intruder had jackets of a similar material but of a different colour.

Nathan loosened the laces of his shoes, slipped his feet out of them, put them on the seat opposite and settled down with his book. It was a copy he had purchased during his first week in London. Over the years he had acquired numerous editions from cheap

paperbacks to expensive editions and although he had lost a lot of them there had always been the consolation that they might be found and enjoyed.

The copy he had with him on this occasion was different from others he had owned and he had bought it for that reason. This one included in the introductory pages a brief biography of the author Hugh Walpole.

What he read was familiar with two exceptions. It may have been something he had known and forgotten. Walpole had worked in the USA as a scriptwriter and it did make him wonder if this had been assimilated years ago when he had first read the book. And had it been an influence on his own choice of profession.

Having read the introduction Nathan placed the book on the table in front of him. He again found himself reluctant to begin reading the actual story. This was not unusual. It had happened on other occasions. He thought he had a fear of spoiling his earliest memories of the book. He reached out for it again

and it fell open at one of the middle pages. He read a paragraph which began 'Up on the fells above Brough and Appleby it was desolate indeed'. He closed the book again. There would surely be a time to read each and every word from the beginning to the end. But that time was not now.

Nathan looked out through the window at the passing landscape and smiled at the thought that he was alone and on his way north. He was not at all tired but he closed his eyes and was only disturbed by the ticket collector and shortly after that by the woman who had smiled at him as he got on the train. She was asking for some assistance with her bag which had got jammed in the over-head rack.

Knowing that she was about to leave the train at the next stop allowed Nathan to switch from pretend shy to helpful and, after retrieving the bag, he ushered it and the woman safely onto the platform.

CHAPTER NINE

Oxenholme

The train stopped at Oxenholme for no more than a few minutes but in his imagination, Nathan had stepped out onto the platform and into a scene from a much earlier time in his life. He was seated at a long wooden table eating bread and cheese and drinking hot chocolate from a plastic mug.

He was aged about fourteen and his hair looked darker than it was now. His face and legs were brown from having spent days walking from the camp into the surrounding fells and he was fitter than usual. There were twenty other boys from school learning how to survive under canvas and how to find their way in the world with and without a compass. And all week most of them had done exactly as they were asked but with their minds elsewhere.

A group of girls, of a similar size, were camping two fields away and, in this small place at the end of the Borrowdale valley, they often came face to face,

mostly in twos or in small groups. On one occasion, on a narrow path, both groups, travelling in opposite directions, had needed to spread out into a long line to pass each other. Afterwards some of boys claimed that they had been touched by some of the girls as they passed. And that night as they were supposed to be settling down to sleep their laughter and excitement as they talked about how and what they would like to have touched kept them awake for hours.

But the only official contact was to be on the last night of their stay in the valley when arrangements had been made for them to have supper together. And this was the night. They would be using the same benches and trestle tables which the boys used every night but it would be necessary on this occasion to share them. And this meant, everyone assumed, that they would all need to be squashed up much closer than usual.

Unfortunately when the seating was arranged it was decided that the boys would be squashed together at

one side of the table with the girls squashed together at the opposite side.

Nathan could remember being incredibly shy at the age of fourteen but throughout the week he had thoroughly enjoyed lying in the dark listening to the stories being told by two of the most sexually experienced boys in the group. They declared themselves to have been having sex since the age of eight. But as they also prided themselves on being the comedians in the group no one was ever sure whether their stories were intended to make the others envious or make them laugh. And they frequently achieved both.

The evening of the shared last supper had arrived after a warm and sunny day with very little of the rain to which they had become accustomed. The food had been prepared, the tables were set and the lamps were lit. There was a slight chill in the air and they were glad of the heat in the tent as grace was said.

For over five minutes when the leaders had gone outside to make the hot chocolate the temperature in the tent rose even further. There was a tension and an expectation that someone might become hysterical or make loud inappropriate noises but instead it got extraordinarily quiet and most of them just sat staring ahead. Even the comedians were quiet.

And it was during this particularly tense time that Nathan's eyes got locked into those of the girl who was sitting directly opposite him. Either she had locked into his eyes first and he had followed or they had both got locked in together at the same time.

Whatever way it had happened he had thought about it often ever since and he had always been able to recall the sensation with unfading intensity. As it had spread through his body he had tried to swallow to prevent it exiting from his mouth in some sort of weird noise. He had feared, if he held on too long, that it might act like a propellant and lift him off the bench and up through the top of the tent.

But he had failed to dissipate the feelings and of one thing he was certain, it must be showing in some obvious way on his face.

Nathan tried to look away from the girl in an effort to calm himself, but to do so would have been like standing back from a banqueting table after days of having had no food at all. And yet it was not at all similar because in this situation he would have been standing back from something he had never tasted before.

It was hard for Nathan to believe that she was purposely choosing to look at him although each time he raised his eyes she was either looking at him or was about to look at him.

The boys had been told that after supper they would be escorting the girls along the road to their camp site and they had been warned that their behaviour was to be impeccable. A few of boys had been selected to carry the lamps and throughout the day there had been much talk about what contact might be managed along a route of not much more than a

few hundred yards. Having been chosen to carry a lamp was considered a blight.

At no time had Nathan thought of himself as a prospective candidate for the challenge of making contact. But the more he and the girl looked at each other the more he became convinced that he should be. He had kissed girls before at party games but he had never yet had one all to himself in the dark. The desire for that to change was soon taking a firm hold. He would have another half an hour or so to wait until they had washed up, sung songs around the fire and said prayers.

To his amazement as the singing began he found himself joining in with a louder voice than he thought he had and this braced him for being less shy and a lot more determined. He had also decided to do his very best to keep his intentions well away from the other boys for as long as possible. He planned to make his move as the group began to disperse and proceed towards the road.

When it happened it seemed meant and easy. With no effort at all he and the girl were just walking along together with their hands lightly touching. Nathan was leaning gently in towards her trying to manoeuvre them both away from the others. As someone who was least expected to succeed, his actions were less noticeable than they might have been.

He instinctively felt that they should hang back a little until most of the group had got through the gate and had turned right towards the girl's camp. It was then they would be able move quickly across the road and down the bank at the other side. The stream which supplied the camp with water ran under the road there and just beyond the bank there was a copse of trees which some of the boys had used as a safe place to have a cigarette.

It was there he was aiming for.

They were walking very close to each other by now but anyone who had looked in their direction would have been unlikely to see how firmly they were

holding hands. They said nothing as they let the space between themselves and the group increase. Then with several long strides they were across the road and into the dark. No one had seen them and it excited Nathan even more to think he might well be the only boy who was moving into what he described then and later – as paradise.

In the quiet of the trees they turned towards each other and kissed. It was a kiss in which only their mouths touched. Their hands were at their sides. They continued in the same position for a very long time, until the sound of voices and the sound of boots on the rough stones of the road receded slightly and the sound of the stream took over as it flowed faster and louder over the rocks and under the bridge.

Their pleasure at having been together made their reluctance to separate and join the others both unbearable and slightly more bearable. The girl ran and caught up with the group as they were all wishing each other a final goodnight. Nathan waited until the boys were on their way back to camp before

he stepped out of the dark put his arm around the shoulders of one of his friends and listened to the latest thrills the evening had bestowed on the two comedians.

The following morning, had anyone been awake very early, they would have seen Nathan and the girl meeting each other at the bridge. Nathan was carrying the book he had been reading called *Rogue Herries* and without speaking he handed it to her before they both smiled and walked away.

CHAPTER 10

Arriving in Glasgow

There were lights in the carriage as Nathan awoke. A group of business men were discussing the outcome of a successful meeting and celebrating with drinks from the buffet topped up with a bottle they had brought with them onto the train. Nathan declined the offer to join them but accepted a plastic cup of neat Scotch.

It helped to revive him but also brought with it a rush of images from dreams he could not quite recall. He had been told there was a technique for remembering dreams but he had forgotten what it was or who had told him.

Just as evasive in recent weeks had been the insights to problems which during the night had seemed so clear and obvious. He felt at times he was being cheated of important information that would have been useful but that it was always just beyond his grasp.

But there was also a fear that if he could not recall what had been happening during the night it might make an inappropriate daylight appearance; might surface like a beast out of a swamp and illuminate some scary aspect of himself. While, in more optimistic moments, he thought a remnant from the night might appear like a full moon from behind a dark cloud and bring about a significant change in how he engaged with the world.

His musings were interrupted as a loud voice better suited to calling in the cows was announcing the arrival of the train in Glasgow.

As Nathan put on his jacket he fleetingly turned his attention once more to that first kiss. Perhaps it was the mixture of innocence and excitement, and the ease with which the entire encounter had been managed, that had exerted such a pervasive influence on his subsequent and mostly unsatisfactory contacts with women. Until Ros that is.

Perhaps if he could just hold on to the conviction that it had been a rare and unusual experience he would be less likely to seek a re-enactment in casual encounters. And following on from that, the moment he was approached by the woman in the theatre bar he should have known to go home immediately.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Old Haunts

Nathan took a taxi to his hotel where he showered and put on a clean shirt. He planned to have a meal in a restaurant he had frequented often when he had lived and worked there. He was also prepared for it having been closed down or even demolished. There had been major changes to some parts of the city. But if his task for Freddie required him to stay for a few days he would certainly want to search out some of his old haunts.

Outside the rain was so heavy it was lying on the pavements like a film of water. He sat for a while in one of the large arm chairs looking out on a well lit terrace and watched the arrival of guests dressed for a wedding reception.

His decision not to bring an umbrella now seemed inept but a receptionist had provided him a black one with a wooden handle. Nathan had chosen it from several which were in the lost property room. It was smaller than the kind of umbrella hotels usually have

at hand to shepherd guests into the building. But it was large enough to keep the rain well away from his feet. He always wore good leather shoes but this was the only pair he had with him and he didn't want them to get too wet.

He walked to the main road which ran parallel to the hotel and took a bus into town. The rain had stopped as the bus turned into Renfield Street. He was pleased to have remembered the name correctly. From there he walked down the hill, took a left turn and passed by a church building with bolted doors. From the notice board outside it was obviously being used for meetings rather than a place for worship.

He was now in a street which had been closed to traffic and was exclusively for pedestrians. To his left was the large building which he recognized as having once been the Drama College. He knew now he was definitely on the right track for the restaurant. He passed a metal gate which he recalled had protected the entrance to a small theatre. Up from there should be a rather run down hotel. And it was. But sadly in the place where the restaurant had been

there was just a row of boarded up shops pasted over with torn and out of date posters.

By this time the rain had started again and as he stood there it was bouncing off the top of the umbrella and making the kind of sounds one hears when lying under canvas on a stormy night. He felt like crying which for him was an odd response. It was after all many years since he had last been there. Again he would have been really glad if a few tears had fallen from his eyes but in contrast to just about everything else around him his eyes were completely dry and they stayed dry.

Nathan turned and let his legs take him back down the slope to what looked like a busier part of the street. As he reached the first intersection he saw a group of young people get out of a taxi and rush ahead into a space between two large buildings. He continued to hear them laughing as they ran and he decided to follow the laughter to see where they were going. Perhaps this was the best decision he had made for a while because it brought him to the doorway of an Art Deco fronted restaurant.

Nathan moved in closer. Through the double doors he saw a carpeted hallway leading to another set of doors, this time of glass. And through them was a warmly lit interior.

He stepped into the hall to be greeted by a doorman who said it was unlikely there would be a table available at this time of the evening. But he did offer to take Nathan's umbrella and make enquiries. And if there wasn't a table perhaps Nathan would like to have a drink in the bar before he went back out into the rain. Taking the umbrella to the outside door he gave it a few shakes before placing it carefully in a stand.

The doorman on his return was accompanied by a waiter. There would be time for Nathan to have a meal in the downstairs area if he could finish eating before ten p.m. And he was shown to what, for Nathan, was a small perfectly situated table in the corner of the downstairs restaurant.

The group he had observed earlier must have been elsewhere in the restaurant but their laughter had

stayed with him and his mood was further improved by a piece of excellently grilled plaice with potatoes followed by a good sized portion of steamed syrup pudding.

But this time the damp of the evening had dampened his intention to have an after dinner brandy at one of the city centre pubs. And, in the few minutes he waited for the return of his umbrella he knew exactly what his next move would be. As it could not be into the arms of Ros. it would instead be into the back seat of the first black taxi he could find.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Receipt

Glad to be out the rain and safely back in his hotel room Nathan took Freddie's package, a notebook and a pen out of his bag and sat at the table beside the window. This was the first time he had chosen to have a further careful look at the contents. Perhaps he should have checked them over more carefully before embarking on the journey. But traveling north and getting out of London had become an imperative and had superceded all other considerations.

On reading Freddie's remarks again he found them just as intriguing as on the first occasion. If he had understood them correctly the mere making of the trip would fulfill Freddie's obligation to his client. This certainly reduced some of the pressure on Nathan to perform well. But as with most tasks, it would be his own need to do well which would call the shots.

The information Nathan had before him seemed quite straightforward. On the receipt was the name of the garage, the invoice number and the model of radio

which was to be fitted into the car. A stamp with a signature indicated that the cost of the radio and the installation had been paid in full by the man named on the receipt. That man was Paul Bloch.

Once the job had been completed the car was to be either collected or arrangements made for it to be delivered. Mr Bloch would be phoning to check on progress. It was also noted on the receipt that the radio was not in stock and would require to be ordered. There was no mention of how long the work would take.

Paul Bloch's signature was easy to read and Nathan was able to copy it into his notebook without much difficulty. It would not have passed scrutiny in a bank but he thought it would be adequate in a garage. When asking himself later why he had chosen to do this he assumed he was preparing for all eventualities, while choosing not to explore what these might be.

There was only one remaining item of interest but it was probably unrelated to the task in hand. From

what he had seen on the receipt he was puzzled as to why Paul Bloch would be paying for the installation of a rather expensive radio in a relatively old car. It would also be very attractive to anyone prone to removing such equipment from cars.

Strategies for obtaining the information he required did occur to him but he felt these could be left to simmer until the next day. By this time the effects of the journey, the earlier whisky, the wine at dinner and just a general tiredness were dictating that he get to bed. He was open to letting his dreams make any contribution to the challenges ahead but his expectations in that regard were low.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Stealing the Car

Understanding why he acted as he eventually did remained a mystery to Nathan, long after the escapade. He could admit to having approached the task of finding out about Bloch with a certain nonchalance. And he was also willing to accept that he had behaved more like a character in a script he'd written than in life as he usually lived it.

It happened quite simply like this.

Nathan awoke early with a sense that sleep had, surprisingly on this occasion, helped to resolve what he needed to do. But it was as vague as that. There was nothing specific and he didn't attempt to question it.

He ordered breakfast in his room, ate it without much pleasure, and phoned the garage at eight o'clock. He said he was Paul Bloch and that he was phoning to check if, by any chance, the installation of

the radio in the car had been completed. And if it had been could he collect it as soon as possible.

He had got straight through to the garage reception desk. The man who answered his call asked for the job number and said he would check to find out. Several minutes later a different voice came on the phone. It was of a younger more lively sounding man who identified himself as James. Some of the liveliness apparently came from his interest in the radio which he knew about.

It had been ordered and installed by his boss who was now on holiday but he had been given the job of making sure it was tuned in to the main BBC and commercial stations Nathan listened as the young man expressed his enthusiasm for the radio's sound quality and how eager he was for Mr Bloch to hear it. Nathan said he also could hardly wait and that he would seek James out specially when he came over to collect the car. James responded by saying he would prepare the paper work and have the car ready for him.

This was promising news. He would soon have the registration number and someone in Freddie's office would easily obtain the owner's details for him. There was also usually some sort of documentation in the various compartments of a car and if he had possession of it for even ten minutes they should serve him well.

Nathan showered put on one the two new shirts he had brought with him and decided to wear a tie. It was dark blue silk and the wife of his writing partner David Sullivan had given it to him. She thought it would cheer him up when she found out how upset he was about Ros.

He put the receipt in his pocket and checked that he had plenty of cash in his wallet He thought a twenty pound note as a tip for James would assist their negotiation. In the hotel lobby he asked one of the receptionists where he could get a good cup of espresso within five minutes walking distance. Having been directed to a café just across the street Nathan stepped out into a day of remarkably warm

sun and, more surprisingly, completely dry pavements.

Once the caffeine reached his brain he began to entertain a few doubts about what he was doing and how he was doing it. Along with the doubts came questions like what if the real Paul Bloch had also phoned the garage that morning. What if someone who had met the real Paul Bloch came out to meet him. He would need a back up story.

He decided he would say that Paul hadn't been able to make it as arranged. He was a friend and Paul had given him the receipt and asked him to collect the car. There were hundreds of what ifs to be considered. Indeed there were so many he decided to stop thinking about them.

He would deal with any problems as they arose. That would be a challenge. It might even be good fun. This was not his usual way of behaving but he sighed heavily, drank the remains of his espresso and two minutes later had flagged down a taxi.

In the taxi his apprehensions about what he had put in place with James returned. Alternative strategies rather belatedly came and went. His mode of functioning could no longer have been described as nonchalant.

His only coherent plan rested on the fact that James was primed to hand over the car. He had not thought through the consequences of that arrangement. But he did now. Knowing that James had not met Bloch was a bonus. If he could be in possession of the car for no more than it took to drive it down a side street that might be all the time he required.

As the taxi was approaching the garage Nathan felt slightly sick. It was located in a cul de sac and as he paid the fare he observed that there was definitely nowhere to go but back to where he had come from.

But before he could dwell further on the situation a young man in a pair of maroon overalls rushed over from across the street to claim him as Mr Bloch. Nathan realized he would not be able to recognize the car but fortunately James was leading the way

towards a dark blue saloon which was parked a few yards down the street. Even more fortunately it was facing out of the dead end.

On reaching the car James leapt into the driver's seat switched on the engine and the radio and watched Nathan closely as he listened.

Nathan might have been genuinely impressed in other circumstances but in this one he feigned delight and exaggerated his response. Their appreciation of the sound from various stations was followed by several minutes of technical talk about decoders and automatic switching. Nathan nodded but understood none of it. Both men smiled at each other and James smiled a bit more when Nathan repeated his thanks and handed him a twenty pound note.

For Nathan there was one last anxious moment when James picked up the board he had balanced on his knees and asked Nathan to sign the top sheet. He hurriedly did this using the pen he kept in the inside pocket of his jacket and was greatly relieved when

James, getting out of the car as energetically as he had got in, said he would need to get back to work

James stood at the pavements edge waving as Nathan clumsily put the car into gear and drove straight ahead. He had decided, if possible, not to attempt any turnings until he was well out of sight of the garage. By this time Nathan was feeling less sick and was planning how it might be possible to help James feel less so over the coming days

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Into the Country

For someone who didn't care much about cars Nathan liked this one. It was very comfortable and although he did not drive often he now began to drive much faster than usual. There was very little other traffic around and he began to feel that there was nothing to prevent him doing anything he wanted to do. He now had the registration number and would also be able to search the car.

His original intention of driving it into a side street had faded. There was a long stretch of road ahead and as it passed old buildings and warehouses he could see the river to his left. There were numerous places he would be able to stop but he was still within easy access of the garage.

He also wanted to get out of the car close to a bus stop or a taxi rank so that when he abandoned it he could mingle with other people and be as inconspicuous as possible. He wondered how long it would take before the garage realized that the car

had been given over to someone other than Paul Bloch.

He again conjectured that the real Paul Bloch might be phoning the garage right now. And James would have been able to report that he had last seen Nathan heading west. A search party might be gathering in preparation for the chase. That thought made him laugh out loud. An alternative and more believable scenario was that the missing car would not be discovered for days.

A few hundred yards further down the road it came to an abrupt end. For Nathan to continue his journey in the car he would need to take a right turn. This brought him to a set of lights which were at red. His options now were to turn right again, make a left turn into heavy traffic or go straight ahead into a residential estate. He opted to drive in amongst the houses opposite and once completely out of sight of the main road he pulled up alongside the curb and began breathing normally again.

He acknowledged that the set of circumstances which had led him to behave as he had were somewhat unusual. But whatever they were he could not deny that, without much real effort on his part, he had stolen a car.

Nathan just sat there for a few moments staring ahead of him. He was feeling nervous but not debilitated and he decided that it would be stupid to continue sitting there. He was also experiencing intermittent surges of excitement which came and went between the equally strong feelings of anxiety. His uppermost thought was how he might explain his day's actions so far to a policeman - or even to someone who knew him well. Perhaps more troubling would be explaining it to himself.

After several unconvincing attempts he fastened on to a sentence which both amused him and provided him with a strange sense of satisfaction. It began as a consequence of an unusually complex set of circumstances, and with very little effort on my part, I stole the car. And that was indeed what he had done. It did not however prompt him to get out of

the stolen vehicle and get clear of the evidence, if the car could be described so. Instead he remained where he was while turning up the volume on the car radio. The song playing was one he didn't know but he had heard it before. He sang along with the chorus of 'I shot the sheriff' wishing the words had fitted better with I stole the car. Then having waited to hear the last few notes he put the car back in gear and drove off in what he assumed was a north westerly direction.

Nathan drove and continued to listen to the radio. He felt better than he had done for months, maybe even years, and he became increasingly unconcerned about having taken the car and what the consequences might be. No one knew him or could connect him to the vehicle.

That mood remained with him for the next half hour by which time he had found himself traveling further out west along a dual carriage way. A coach with children waving out of the back window overtook him, possibly frustrated at the speed he was driving. Nathan followed behind until it took a right turn off

the highway. Now in need of some rest and recuperation he continued a few more miles before a fork in the road required him to make a swift choice. He veered left and found himself on what proved to be a steep winding hill.

On reaching the top he was able to view much of the surrounding countryside. He pulled off the road onto an area of lush grass. There were no buildings and no cars in sight and as he got out of the car he could see in the distance the end of a loch which was reflecting the morning sun. It was now a warm day but the wind was fresh and blustery which only added to the feeling of being on the loose.

After breathing in the air in a way he had probably not done for several decades Nathan opened the car doors and the boot as far as possible. He located a morning concert on the radio turned up the volume again and began searching the car.

It proved to be disappointingly easy. There was an envelope full of old M.O.T.s. But the most interesting and somewhat startling discovery came from a

service manual which he found in the glove compartment. The car owner was not Paul Bloch but a woman who lived in Glasgow called Jane Wing. Also included was her address and a telephone number.

So Paul Bloch had paid for the radio and its installation but it was not his car. This meant that the registration number alone would have been of little help. But if Paul Bloch was willing to spend three hundred pounds for a radio for Jane Wing she must be special to him in some way.

Being up there on the hill with the wind blowing around him was so exhilarating Nathan found it difficult to imagine why he had been hiding away in a hotel room in London. He used to love being out on the fells in the Lake District.

He also now doubted if being in London had been of any help in his attempt to recover from Ros. He certainly had no more understanding of why the experience had affected him so much. Nor why he had been able to deal with similar rejections on

previous occasions. Perhaps she was different from the others. But then most of the women he had ever known had been different. Well, until they weren't.

Clouds were covering the sun as Nathan leaned into the car, switched off the radio and closed the boot. He continued to feel disappointed that his search had ended so quickly. He felt tempted to lift the carpets as if hunting for minute pieces of missed evidence and he did contemplate a more thorough search of the other bags and papers which were in the boot. But further information might have confused as much as it clarified and he decided to be content with what he had.

Before getting ready to drive back into Glasgow Nathan sat in the driver's seat with the door open and lit one of the two cigars he had brought with him from London. He smoked it as if it were the first time he had ever tasted good tobacco. As to what he might do next or indeed for the rest of his life: he was feeling totally unhampered in his decision making.

That feeling stayed with him as he watched the landscape change in color with each movement of the clouds. But he also suspected that his present mood might be short lived. The fear that he had driven onto some soft ground and would now be stuck up this hill was top of the apprehension list.

More unsettling was the realization that he would have no regrets if he never again saw his hotel room in London; except for the books. At some time he would need to go back, to carefully pack up those he had purchased since arriving in London.

Thoughts about Paul Bloch were also requesting attention. For the first time since he had set off from London it occurred to him that he was on quite an interesting assignment. And discovering that a woman was a significant player had certainly added to its attraction.

He now entertained the possibility of meeting Jane Wing to find out something he didn't really need to know. Trying to make contact with her would be a natural and important next step. And anyway, he

could think of no other direction in which to take his enquiry.

The more he thought about it the more attractive it became and the more irresponsible he felt. He had often behaved stupidly and even dangerously as a young man but usually only when he was drunk. But he was now behaving in a similar way while completely sober. The desire to act without caution was becoming seriously appealing.

There was a book of street maps in the side panel of the car beside the driver's seat and he easily located the road on which Jane Wing lived. The process of considering his various options took Nathan nearly half an hour and by that time he was no longer experiencing himself as a youthful adventurer.

And he had pared his plan down to two linked moves. He would phone Jane Wing's number and if a man answered he would put down the phone. If a woman answered he would ask to speak with Paul Bloch.

He was uncertain what he might do or say after that. He unconvincingly told himself he was prepared for all eventualities. Also, to be safe from future detection – and if he could find one -he would phone from a telephone box on the way back into the city.

After taking a last look at the landscape before him Nathan turned the car around and in silence drove back the way he had come. From the map he could see that once he was on the dual carriageway which had brought him out of the city it was a straight drive back. He would eventually arrive at a well marked set of traffic lights alongside one of the city's main public parks. From there Jane's flat was only a few streets away.

But first he would phone Jane Wing.

From the main road Nathan took the first left turn he came to and arrived in a small village which, as far as he could see, did not have a name. But there was a telephone box in front of a Post Office. He bought a newspaper and matches with a ten pound note. This provided him with the change he needed for the

phone call. He was unable to get a dialing tone in the box and asked for assistance from the woman in the Post Office. She allowed him to use her phone if he promised it would be a short call. She refused any payment but suggested he make a small donation to village fund.

Trying to be as brief and as private as possible Nathan phoned Jane Wing. She answered immediately affirming her name and number. In response to Nathan's request to speak with Paul Bloch she said he was away at the moment. When Nathan asked when he would be back she replied that he had left for Europe several days ago and she was uncertain of the date of his return. Nathan hesitated.

He then heard himself say that he was phoning about the car. He felt marginally more relaxed now. If Paul Bloch was not due back in Glasgow for a few days or even longer, his exposure as a car thief would surely be less imminent.

There was a long silence before Jane asked if there was a problem. Nathan cheerily replied that the installation of the radio had been completed earlier than anticipated and that, if it were convenient, the car could be delivered to her that afternoon.

Jane was delighted at the news and Nathan, repeating the comments which James the mechanic had made to him about the excellent quality of the radio, said, if it were convenient, he would bring the car over to her within the hour.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Nathan meets Jane

The location of Jane Wing's flat was unexpectedly familiar. He was sure he had once visited someone who lived in the same terrace. It was also no more than a few hundred yards from the hotel in which he was staying. As he parked the car she was standing at a bay window looking out over the private gardens which were a feature of this part of town.

As he stepped on to the small path which led to her door she was already opening it and walking towards him. Apart from the radio Jane was pleased that her car was being returned.

Nathan had stopped on the way back into the city thinking it would be useful to know how the radio worked but he hated instruction booklets and had given up after reading the safety regulations. Rather than try to show her how to use the controls he would hand her the booklet.

Jane Wing was one of those fresh faced women who, whatever the time of the day, look as if they had she had just stepped out of a shower. She was also smiling at him in the way that both men and women do when they have been well brought up, have been taught good manners and have plenty of food and friends.

With a full mouth and light green eyes she was not much more than five feet tall and was probably older than she looked. And when she saw and heard the radio she loved it. Or that's what she said.

Nathan began to bask in her response as if he had been totally responsible for obtaining and fitting the radio himself. He felt like a fraudster but reassured himself that he would very soon revert to being an honest person. It was not that she was directing her pleasure towards him. He just happened to be in her vicinity and he now wished he had returned to the hotel and had showered and changed before meeting her.

With talk about the radio on the wane Jane commented that he was very well dressed for a

mechanic. Nathan embraced more of his fraudulent self by declaring that he was the owner of the garage helping out during a particularly busy week. Jane smiled at him but he was unable to read what was behind the smile. It could have been amusement or disbelief. But if she thought he was lying she didn't let it show.

As they proceeded to get out of the car Nathan acknowledged to himself that he was ready to tell more lies if it would advance his cause. What that cause might be was less clear.

Jane locked the car and walked towards the door. Nathan would have been interested to know what kind of person she thought he was, particularly as he had become less certain himself. But he held back. Apart from it being an inappropriate question to ask of someone he had just met she was about to disappear inside the building and he was experiencing it as a rejection.

Continuing to stand on the pavement looking in her direction and trying to contain this rather unexpected

response, he heard her ask if he would like to come in for a cup of tea or coffee. It was then he knew exactly what he had hoped for and what would happen next. It may not have been his plan but parts of his body were indicating that being invited in had been his main aim.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Matt's Photograph

The room into which Jane invited Nathan had large windows low to the floor. There was a well polished parquet floor and an imposing open fireplace with a wooden surround. Jane made coffee and brought it in on a tray with two plain white mugs. There was none of the fuss that had been a feature of the theatre woman's coffee serving and it was a bonus that there was no saucer to manipulate. But the reminder of the woman had an immediate effect on his attitude towards the present one. All desires for intimacy had gone straight out of the large windows.

During the time Jane was out of the room making the coffee Nathan again did something he would previously have considered immoral. He had noticed a letter, with several blue airmail stickers, lying on the table between his chair and the one Jane would probably use on her return. Nathan picked up the letter.

In the top left corner was the name and the Vancouver address of someone called Matt Lee. It struck him as an odd address because the number of the apartment matched two of the numbers in the post code. Interestingly as Nathan was to discover later the address stayed in his head as if he had known it all his life.

From across the table Jane was smiling again and asking what kind of car he drove. This was easier to answer than it might have been as he recalled the make of the one he had rented in London. He said it was a black Mercedes with black leather seats. She said she found his mention of the seats amusing and laughed.

As she laughed Nathan heard what he thought was probably the main door to the building being closed with a very loud bang. It was a sound that gave him a jolt.

It now occurred to him that he might have calmly lied his way in to another trap. As with the woman from the theatre he knew nothing of this one's

circumstances. She might also have an equally untoward associate lurking somewhere. He subdued an urge to get up and run but moved further forward in his chair. He also prepared himself to hear a heavy knock on Jane's door or for someone to just walk in.

Jane was politely not staring at him or commenting but he thought she had probably observed his behavior. Seconds passed and when no one did appear Nathan gradually eased himself back into the chair.

He also felt calm enough to ask Jane if she had known Paul for a long time. He had managed to speak but behind the words was a strong desire to bring their conversation to an end. He most wanted to find a way to leave without causing offence.

Another laugh, which he somehow found reassuring, preceded her reply. She said she hardly knew him at all. He was a friend and business associate of Matt Lee, someone she had known at University in Vancouver and who had remained a close friend. She

had never met Paul before she had collected him, over a week ago, from the airport.

He had borrowed her car several times and had told her she needed a new radio. He then insisted, as a gift in return for her hospitality, that he would purchase a new one. He had made the arrangements to get it installed just before he left for a trip to Europe. Until Nathan had phoned she had not known when the car would be returned.

Unsolicited, Jane continued to say more about Matt and Paul. Their fathers, as young men, had started a car dealership together and when they retired their sons had taken it over. Admitting to being uncertain of the details, she did know that Paul had received a serious head injury in an accident involving a car. Matt had been heavily involved in Paul's recovery - even to the extent of doing some of the nursing himself.

It had apparently been a difficult time for both men but throughout Paul had expressed a determination, once he was better, to fulfill a long held wish to

travel to the UK and to Europe. In Matt's opinion Paul was still very vulnerable but he had been unable to deter him from embarking on the trip. It was a reflection of his concern for Paul that he had asked Jane to provide him with a base on his arrival in the UK.

She had however found him to be fiercely independent and during the time he'd been there he had gone out early most days and had eaten by the time he arrived back each evening, which was usually very late.

With part of him Nathan was listening intently. This could be the kind of information Freddie needed. But another part of him had stayed with sound of the door downstairs and uppermost was a desire to get back to the hotel. He declined to have another cup of coffee and was relieved when Jane said she would soon need to change and get ready for work. This was at a hospital about half a mile away and she usually walked. Nathan offered to wait and accompany her there.

While Nathan waited for Jane he had another look at the letter on the table but managed not to pick it up. He also quickly stepped into the hall and looked over the banisters at the main door below. It was closed and he could hear nothing but the sound of cars in the distance.

As he retreated back into the main room he noticed, on the small telephone table, a dented silver frame in which there was a photograph of a man. Moving closer and putting on his glasses he saw a face which reminded him of an old studio portrait of Gregory Peck; except this man's dark hair was shoulder length and the eyes were more challenging.

The words 'Love Matt' were written across the bottom right corner. Once again in an act which Nathan would have previously considered himself totally incapable of making he picked up the frame and examined it closely. The need to remove Matt's photograph and take it with him was overwhelming.

The frame had a backing of thin wood and a wooden arm to support it in a standing position.

Unfortunately as Nathan hastily attempted to remove the photograph the back fell off and a pack of other photographs of various sizes scattered over the table and onto the floor.

Nathan struggled unsuccessfully to get them back into the frame. But with no way of knowing when Jane was likely to exit from her room he resorted to putting them between the pages of the telephone directory which was also on the table. He carefully put the photograph of Matt into his inside pocket and propped up the now empty frame, with the front of it facing the stairway leading down to the front door.

Safely back in the main room Nathan chose to be as far away from the hall as possible when Jane returned. This brought him back to the large windows and a view of the gardens across the street. It also gave him a clear view of the stolen car so he changed his position again. He chose a chair which was equidistant from the car and the hall. He then found himself reflecting on his actions.

They had alarmed him. But they had further bolstered his interest in this small group of people. It was even more surprising that his interest in them seemed to be happening alongside an awakening interest in himself. They were also becoming contributors to the kind of writing material he liked to have in his head. There was Paul with his damaged head, Matt with his profound concern for his friend and Jane's refreshing and uncomplicated response to him.

Jane may well have suspected that he was less than genuine but she also seemed secure enough to let that run. And what of his response to her? He sensed that she would have been willing to take things further than drinking coffee and letting him walk her along the road to work.

Fear had probably kept him from trying to move closer to her. But he also hoped there had been some degree of respect on his part. He had been impressed by her obvious warmth and intelligence and was glad that he had not, as so often before,

tried to take advantage of a potentially inviting situation.

When they arrived outside the hospital Nathan was not yet totally free of the temptation to ask for more contact. Instead he took the middle road of asking rather awkwardly for permission to use her phone number at some future time.

The awkwardness was his alone. As Nathan was speaking Jane had already reached the top of the steps leading to the main door of the hospital and was smiling down at him just as warmly as she had done when he had seen her for the first time.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On The Way

The hospital where Jane worked was only a few hundred yards from Nathan's hotel. He walked quickly there and went straight into the bar and ordered a double whisky.

He drank it and ordered another to take back to his room. He had a lot of thinking to do and when the lift did not arrive immediately he impatiently used the stairs. After a long shower he tried combing his hair in several different ways but from what he saw in the mirror he looked much like the man he had always been. It was inside he knew he was not the same.

Sitting up in bed with his notebook Nathan again read the comments which Freddie had included with the garage receipt. His plan was to make notes about what he would report back to Freddie. But he made little progress.

Only a few seconds after he had leaned back against two well arranged pillows Nathan knew he wanted to

go to Vancouver. The idea had nothing to do with the city itself although it was a place he had often thought of visiting for more than the usual day or two for meetings. During his many years in North America he had preferred to head south to Mexico whenever he had any free time. So if it was not the place, what exactly was driving him to even contemplate such a trip?

Following up the information he now had about Matt Lee would surely open up a fresh seam of facts about Bloch. But he doubted if Freddie would want anything more than Jane had provided. There was also no suggestion in Freddie's comments that an in depth search was required: or that traveling to another country for such purposes had been envisaged.

For a while Nathan tried to explore what might be at the heart of his decision but his efforts were unfocused. On one level he was not really interested in finding an answer. He was also not interested in trying to persuade Freddie that making the trip was a good or sensible idea.

He wanted to make the trip and that was it.

Nathan was now sinking lower into his bed. His body had enjoyed the whisky but he felt part of his brain had taken it as a signal to shut down for the night. At the same time something in him was struggling to remain alert enough to come up with a believable rationale. When it arrived it was unexpected and not entirely convincing.

He found Matt Lee very attractive; not in a sexual sense but as a human being who had the kind of characteristics he admired and aspired to. More convincingly, he had a strong desire to maintain the momentum of recent days for doing different things in different places with different people.

He also thought that if he ever needed confirmation of a tendency to devise flimsy rationalizations for essentially irrational decisions this was it.

In addition, a trip to Canada had in its favor the continuing avoidance of the hotel room in London, some further distancing from his disastrous evening

at the theatre and the potential to investigate his changing self more thoroughly. And it would be a welcome bonus if it brought with it any alteration in his thinking about Ros.

Nathan now experienced the kind of energy he thought would be familiar to young men on surf boards. But for him it was a mostly alien although welcome sensation. He sat up, made a few notes then picked up the phone and called the contact number in Freddie's office. He knew that someone would access what he had to say within the hour if they were working as efficiently as usual. He also knew from past experience to be concise.

So the facts he wanted to cover were that Paul Bloch was a small man of approximately forty years of age who had received a serious head injury in an accident with a car. He had recovered well enough to travel from Vancouver to the UK and Europe but was not as robust as he might be. He was in a car dealership business in B.C. with Matt Lee, a close friend and colleague. During his visit to the UK he had been staying in Glasgow with Jane Wing another

friend of Matt Lee's. She did not know Paul but had agreed to let him stay as a favor to Mr Lee.

In return for her hospitality Paul Bloch had purchased and paid for the installation of a radio in Jane Wing's car. The garage receipt was a record of that transaction. Bloch had set this up before traveling to Europe. Jane did not know when he would be returning. As for the exact nature of Paul's accident he had no information.

With that done, and deciding to leave making any further plans until the next day, Nathan got back out of bed and ordered a meal from room service. While he waited for it to arrive he took the photograph of Matt out of his jacket pocket and looked at it very carefully as if he were looking for something in Matt's face that he knew had always been missing from his own.

What Nathan did discover was something he had not noticed earlier. There was writing on the back of the photograph. It was Matt Lee's Vancouver address but as this had already lodged itself in Nathan's head

after seeing it on Matt's letter to Jane it was
superfluous to his, not yet definable intentions.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Night Before

The night was one of the longest and most disturbed Nathan had experienced since his arrival in the UK. He again awoke with a sense that his dreams had been important but made no attempt to remember them.

He also had no wish to go back out onto the streets of Glasgow whether they were wet or dry and he ordered breakfast in his room. Before eating he would phone his contact in Freddie's office again.

This time he would ask them to book him on the first available flight from Glasgow to Vancouver with a return ticket to London for the following week. Five minutes later he received a call to let him know that the earliest he would be able to leave Glasgow would be the next morning and that his ticket would be e-mailed to the hotel as soon as it had been confirmed.

Once Nathan knew from reception that a further night in the same room could be arranged Nathan

asked that his laundry be collected and that a fresh pot of coffee be sent up to his room.

After breakfast Nathan showered, wrapped himself in a bath towel and got back into bed. He felt torn between trying to make up for the lack of sleep and letting loose any reservations he now had about going to Vancouver. Hoping to achieve some respite from himself Nathan took another run at the opening paragraphs of *Rogue Herries*.

It was getting dark when he awakened and he was astonished that he could have slept for so many daylight hours. As far back as he could recall this had never happened to him before. But he was feeling rested and with a long flight the following day he would just accept and be glad of it. The only downside of the extra night in the hotel was the extra time it would give him to think about what he was doing.

But on the calming side was the knowledge that he was safe in his room. And while there, the prospect

of an inadvertent meeting with Jane Wing or James or even the police was nil.

There was also a deep sense of satisfaction that a decision had been made and that in just a few hours time he would be in a taxi on the way to the airport.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Stopover in Calgary

With no luggage for the hold Nathan checked in, bought a bottle of water and a book and wandered around in search of a good coffee. The first one which he abandoned had tasted like hot chocolate and the milk in the second had been overheated. The third, only half drunk, provided just enough caffeine to soothe his brain. He anticipated it would soon be clamoring for a further dose but he would wait now until he was in Vancouver.

Compared to London airports this was a relatively civilized place. There was space to walk around and places to sit and read without constant interruptions from other passengers. He settled down on a seat near to the departure gate but as far removed as possible from a bar. He would not be having a drink at the airport or on the plane as alcohol before or during a flight usually made him feel physically sick.

The area he was sitting in was remarkably quiet until a group of men in cowboy boots sat down with

coffees and sandwiches in the seats opposite him. They weren't noisy they were just big and while they had intruded upon the quietness of the scene it was not in an unpleasant way. In fact after Nathan had been sitting in their presence for about ten minutes his main emotion became one of envy. Being that size had to be emboldening.

Then something happened for which he had not been at all prepared. He heard the word Calgary. Keeping his book open but seeing nothing of the text in front of him he listened. Then he took out the copy of the flight details which the hotel had given him and saw that on this particular flight to Vancouver there would be a stopover in Calgary.

His eyes returned to the book but the only word he could see was Calgary. He closed the book put it back into his bag and stared out of the window with as much concentration as he could muster. He watched the various supply vehicles maneuvering around a plane. He could see himself reflected in the glass and he remembered how silly he had looked sitting side by side with the woman from the theatre.

He wondered if she were sitting alongside her little man right now and what kind of story she would tell him about the man in her bed.

He imagined her saying she knew nothing about him, which fortunately would be true. She might even have said she had no idea how he had got there. Or perhaps he had got into the apartment when she was at the theatre and had been hiding overnight in a cupboard until she left in the morning. Then needing a rest he had got into bed when it was empty of her. Nathan stopped and acknowledging the foolishness of his thinking he returned to the word Calgary.

The airline staff were now in place at the boarding desk and a queue of passengers was forming. He had the option of getting on to the plane with the premium ticket holders but decided to wait for the last call.

When the rush was nearly over Nathan went to the toilet before joining the last few passengers to board. He was seated in the front section on the right of the plane and his bag was small enough to place under

the seat in front of him. He kept his jacket beside him and settled down to read hoping that the seat next to him would remain vacant, which it did. But if anyone had moved into it they would have got the message that he was heavily engrossed in his book and unavailable for conversation.

Over the course of the first few hours of the flight Nathan's mood began to change from one of relative ease to one of mild agitation. He managed to sleep again although he felt he must have very little sleep left in him. He did eat read and watch part of a movie but there was a dissociated feeling about his actions.

Rather like a fly that refuses to exit through a specially opened window, the recollection that Ros had once lived somewhere near Calgary stayed with him. The more he thought of this the more unsettled he felt. It was as if the plane was now in charge of him. It could be taking him closer to her than he had been since the morning they had said goodbye. It even occurred to him that he had known this would

happen when he had decided to make the trip to Vancouver.

Then it was not the memories of Ros which were being evoked but images from a Dirk Bogarde movie about a dam in the Canadian Rockies. When it eventually bursts it sends torrents of water and rocks streaming down a valley, taking everyone, except perhaps Mr Bogarde and a good looking woman, with it. But why was he thinking about this particular movie and what was the association with Ros. The only connection he could make was that it had been filmed somewhere in the region of Calgary.

After more sleep, but of an intermittent kind, Nathan saw that the plane was no longer moving and assumed they were now actually in Calgary airport. He also suspected that he may have been talking out loud in his sleep. Easing himself into a standing position he wanted to check if any of the other passengers were staring in his direction. The surprising sight was that many of the seats were empty. The passengers for Calgary had already left the plane.

Nathan sat back down and closed his eyes but he was struggling with the idea that Ros might be only a few miles away. And he was doing nothing. The fact that he had previously made every enquiry possible to find her provided no solace. Nor did it dissipate a powerful urge to do something; to do anything to reduce what he now experienced as an ache. It was of the kind he associated with being acutely jealous or waking in the night with toothache. But this was a whole body sensation and it was accompanied by a wave of intense agitation.

Questions occurred to him in ones and twos. They included why was he going to Vancouver when Ros might still be living somewhere near Calgary? Why was he finding out about Paul Bloch when he really wanted to know more about Ros? Was he following the lead on Bloch as a substitute for going in search of Ros? Why was he sitting there instead of going to find Ros? And as he had no answer he was shaking his head from side to side in a movement which had now brought him to the attention of a stewardess who was standing in the aisle observing him with some concern.

Nathan was aware of her but he was also too caught up in what he later described as an excellent example of blind action. It was the kind of action that fails to register in a part of the brain which is capable of intervening in any way.

Nathan had seen nothing of the plane doors being closed and secured ready for take off as he grabbed his bag from under the seat in front, picked up his jacket and stepped into the aisle.

This brought him into immediate and direct contact with the stewardess who had already reported her concerns and been advised to keep a watchful eye on him. If he had been able to see her at all, he would have noticed that her face and eyes were now registering more alarm than puzzlement.

Nathan was almost totally out of control as he began pushing hard to get past her. She was, as he experienced it, being very unhelpful. She was also speaking to him although he was unable to hear her above his own words. She could however hear that Nathan needed to get off the plane.

He was completely deaf to her request that he return to his seat immediately. The command from his own inner self was to get off the plane and look for Ros.

Nathan then felt her hands on each of his arms just above the wrists. Because of the way in which he had been pushing forward this brought his nose up against hers. But she did not give way and from the other aisle a steward had made his way around the galley area and was approaching Nathan from behind.

Together they forced him firmly back into his seat and the one with the nose sat down beside him. She fastened his safety belt and tended to her own as the plane soared into the sky above Calgary.

Nathan continued to explain that he needed to get off the plane to begin his search. The stewardess listened patiently until his words got weaker, and he was able to calmly say thank you, as he was offered a drink of water.

When Nathan spoke again his voice was so quiet the stewardess asked if he could repeat what he had said. She added that she really did want to hear about Ros. But by that time Nathan was both too upset and too exhausted to say anything more and as he turned to look at the woman beside him his eyes silently met hers and began to fill with tears.

CHAPTER TWENTY

In Vancouver

The man in Freddie's office had booked him into a hotel which, on Nathan's instructions, began with a letter S and was located on or near English Bay. His colleague David Sullivan, a frequent visitor to the city, had recommended it recently.

This was the only information he could recall as he got into a taxi at the airport. And after a twenty minute drive into the West End of the city he was standing at the hotel door. It was a relatively modest building compared to most modern hotels but was of a comfortable size for human beings. Nathan immediately took to its style and atmosphere. He also felt more at home when he heard that the people checking in alongside him were visitors from Bradford.

His room was on the first floor and it looked out onto a garage wall. It was a view to which, in his present mood, he did not object. Indeed he thought such an outlook was perfect. He was interested in receiving

as few stimuli as possible and was amazed that he had been through such a disruptive and unsettling time on the plane and had survived.

Some of him felt he should be making his way home to his apartment down the coast. And later that day he did wonder why he had not headed in that direction immediately he got off the plane from Glasgow. Perhaps he would understand at a later time.

Nathan's immediate needs were for a light meal and an early night, although due to the time difference it was afternoon and light outside. The easiest option would be to eat in the hotel and without washing or changing he went down to the restaurant which overlooked the bay and had some grilled fish and a salad

The room was just what he needed. There was a television set, a small writing table and a large double bed. Had he been photographed at the table, the color of the furnishings and the setting would

have been reminiscent of a room in a painting by Edward Hopper

Nathan was too tired to sleep but not sufficiently awake to contemplate doing anything other than take a walk down to the shore. To get there he would need to cross the road, which ran parallel to the front of the hotel.

There was a breeze coming directly off the sea and the people who were out there were mainly of two types. There were those taking exercise with bare arms and legs and those who were attempting to keep age from the door with regular out of door activities. As he stood just a few feet away from the edge of the water it felt odd to think he had lived down the coast for over two decades but had previously made only brief visits to what was obviously a lovely place.

Back in the hotel there were two routes he could take to his room, the lift or a short flight of brown carpeted stairs. He took the latter to avoid having to talk to a stranger whilst trapped in a small space.

Jet lag was having its usual dull effect on his brain and he was in that place between wanting to sleep and trying to stay awake. Drink might have tipped him one way or the other and he contemplated going down to the bar or ordering one to be brought to his room. That having a drink had no appeal whatsoever came as something of a shock.

Interested as to whether this heralded another change in how he was functioning, Nathan had a long shower and wrapped himself in two of the biggest towels. He put one around his waist and the other over his shoulders. Now he was wondering if dressing in towels was becoming a new habit.

There was no doubt he was a different man from the one he had been before he had left Seattle. Or was he? And he wondered if the erratic behavior he had been exhibiting on the plane, and in the days preceding the flight, would just fade away without further repercussions? Such thoughts had disappeared completely as he got into bed. This was surely the most sensible thing to do whatever time it was.

Nathan had a last look at the photograph of Matt before inserting it carefully in his book. He then placed the book on the bedside table and lay back for a while. A fast run through of all the available television channels produced nothing of interest and Nathan turned out the lights and fell asleep still wrapped up in the towels.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Matt

The following morning Nathan awoke with a headache. His first thought was that he had alcohol withdrawal symptoms but he was soon more interested in getting something to eat. It took just fifteen minutes for his order of an omelet and brown toast to arrive at his door. He chose not to have coffee deciding instead to look for a local café.

Downstairs in the lobby he picked up a brochure for the hotel and noticed that the post code was similar to that of Matt's apartment. It would certainly be a bonus if he could just wander past on his way to or from the hotel.

As he exited from the hotel his sluggishness was given the equivalent of a cold bath. The wind had changed. The receptionist had warned him it was coming from the direction of the mountains and that he should wrap up well. This reminded him of the towels which he had meant to take out of the bed, where they had landed during the night. He would

prefer not to be viewed as a messy occupant by the person who cleaned his room.

He could see from the traffic outside the hotel that the busiest part of the area was to his left and he set out in that direction. His interest in Matt, and to a lesser degree his friend Bloch, had not lessened and if he could find a good coffee and a comfortable place to sit he would plan what he intended to do next. It was as vague as that. Equally surprising was the disappearance, temporarily he assumed, of thoughts of Ros. Perhaps his determination to begin a new search for her had settled her down in his mind in preparation for that eventuality.

Taking the first turn to his right, and two blocks further on, he came to a café with some comfortable armchairs and the added attraction of a pretend open fire. With a coffee in a cardboard cup and a seat in the corner Nathan watched a constant stream of customers coming in to buy coffee and take it away with them. The chair and the general atmosphere made up for what the coffee lacked.

The people who came and went were a mix of early morning walkers and runners and an assortment of workers from offices and businesses. They were dressed in clothes which ranged from jeans to expensive suits. An occasional car parked outside for no more than the time it took to buy a coffee and the vehicles also varied in range and style from trucks to high end convertibles.

Nathan had forgotten to change the time on his watch but worked out that it was seven thirty. After coffee, and with no knowledge of whether or not Matt was in Vancouver at the present time, he decided to return to the hotel and freshen up for the day. If he could get some directions and if it were not too far away, he would return via the street where Matt lived.

On leaving the café he spontaneously approached a woman with a zimmer who said that the street he was looking for was no more than a five minute walk away. She gave him the directions he needed, twice, and he set out feeling almost as cheerful as the day he had stolen the car.

The street he was now on was taking him towards a more closed in area of residential blocks. Matt's apartment, if the address was correct, was in a secluded red brick building sheltered from the road by a raised bed of well manicured plants and small trees. Nathan also noticed that there was a CTV camera directed downwards to the main entrance. This, and the quality of the stout wooden door, gave it the appearance of being well secured.

A few yards further along from the entrance was a low wall which provided Nathan with a place to sit. It was out of view of the camera and if required he could continue his surveillance while pretending to be fastening a loose shoe lace. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the main door of the apartment block closing.

Nathan quickly dismissed the idea that his behavior was indicative of a continuing instability and tried to observe the path leading from Matt's door without raising his head. The man who appeared had close cropped graying hair and was wearing a dark suit. Nathan could not see his face. He thought it was

highly unlikely to be Matt but he had to be alert to the possibility. He also did not want to openly reveal himself to who ever the man happened to be.

During the time it took for Nathan to re-tie his shoe lace the man had not moved. Nathan decided the most normal thing for him to do now was to casually look up before he tied his other lace. But when he did lift his head, the man appeared to be smiling and staring in his direction. But it had all happened so quickly and by the time Nathan stood up the man was disappearing around the corner.

Nathan hesitated for a few seconds then headed off in the same direction. This brought him back to the street he had been on earlier. The man was now exiting from a Seven Eleven carrying a newspaper. Nathan watched from the doorway of a bank as he entered the café Nathan had left only minutes before. He did not have long to wait. The man came back out with a coffee crossed the street at the lights and was looking at his watch as a car drew up alongside him. He got into the back seat.

As the car joined the traffic heading north Nathan wanted to move in three directions at once but chose first have to another look at the lay out of the café. He was also more convinced than before that his actions belonged less with him and more with a character he was making up as he went along.

He then quickly dismissed that notion as fanciful and walked into the café through the main door. It took only a few seconds to size up the lay out before he walked back out using the side door.

It was a spacious room with a central partition. On one side of it was shelving for the display of coffee cups and containers and on the other side was the imitation log fire place. And apart from the kind of armchair in which he had sat earlier there were others of an upright kind positioned around small round tables.

The second task was to go back to the hotel to have another look at the photograph of Matt. Nathan was cautioning himself against jumping to conclusions. The cropped hair of the man he had just seen was

entirely different from Matt's hair in the photograph which was shoulder length. Also the man he'd just seen looked much older and thinner. But these were features which could easily have changed over the years since the photograph was taken. Nevertheless although Nathan was determined to be cautious about jumping to conclusions he was strongly inclined towards the unlikely possibility that he had encountered Matt on his very first day in the city.

Before Nathan headed back to the hotel he also wanted to return to Matt's apartment block to check the names on the door entry system. There was no one around as he approached and he could clearly see that Matt Lee was listed as an occupant on the first floor. There was no one called Bloch in the building.

As he was making a mental note of the other names Nathan became aware that he was being observed by a woman at the window of a ground floor apartment. A false smile preceded a swift retreat down the short path and around the first corner he came to. He stayed there for several minutes, long

enough, he estimated, for her interest in him to have waned, before he walked directly back to the hotel to mull over his morning encounter.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

What Next

Back in the hotel Nathan immediately took the photograph of Matt out of his book and looked at it again. If the man he had seen earlier was Matt he was not only much thinner and much older; he was also much paler. Jane's Matt had the rugged appearance of a man who spent most of his waking hours on a sailing boat.

He put the photograph back in the book and lay back on his bed glad to be in a horizontal position.

The feelings of optimism which had accompanied his morning exploits were now beginning to drain away and with them, and again somewhat surprisingly, was some of his interest in Matt and Bloch. Whatever had been fuelling it might become apparent in a few months time but right now it was beyond his comprehension and it might as well stay there.

Although he would not want to kill it off completely, he would be inclined to calmly let it go until it was no

longer in sight. He would certainly not be grabbing to hold on as one might with a treasured possession. That would be his attitude.

There was, he surmised, much in his situation to be pleased about but perhaps only in that superficial way that comes from being too busy to think about anything too much. The emotional after effects from the experience on the plane had also receded somewhat and Nathan could almost reframe it as having been a rather amusing if somewhat shaming episode.

Other observations came and went as he allowed himself to drift in and out of sleep.

He would continue to draw on the experience with the stolen car as a template for jaunts in the future. From now on he wanted to be less burdened about doing the right thing and be freer to behave irresponsibly – but in a predominantly benign sort of way; if that was possible.

On the subject of drink he was intrigued that it had lost all appeal. And how might that play out in his work? He had certainly used it at the beginning of a project and sometimes towards the end. Perhaps his writing would change significantly in both style and subject.

As to what he might do next he was confident something would occur to him. One last thought found its way into his conscious thinking before sleep overtook him completely. It was that whatever else he needed to do could wait until the next time he felt fully awake.

Nathan had forgotten to put the Do Not Disturb notice on his door and he was awakened later that morning by a woman who, at the very least, wanted to change the towels.

When the room was his alone again he showered, put on a clean shirt and went down to the dining room. Finding it to be crowded with only one available table in the middle of the floor he walked

back out and made for a restaurant he had seen on the corner during his morning reconnoitering.

On leaving the restaurant he crossed to the shore side of the road and joined in the throng of people who were proceeding at varying speeds along the path which bordered the sea. On this occasion he chose to travel west.

Nathan went as far as a seat overlooking a small bay. Until the wind changed suddenly from mild to cold, he sat contentedly watching the tankers anchored out in the bay while in the foreground large black birds, crows or raven, he didn't know the difference, picked at the mussels on the rocks .

The coldness of the wind was all he needed to send him eagerly back to the hotel. He was in need of a warm book, in a warm bed, in a warm room. By this time he had also had enough of this particular day and what was on offer in the outside world. Striding out as Matt had done that morning when he had disappeared around the corner. Nathan took less than fifteen minutes to be exactly where he had

wanted to be: sitting up in bed with his pillows carefully arranged and a book in front of him.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Getting Closer

Another early morning, another breakfast and a good night's sleep were spoiled only by the prospect of another merely adequate coffee. He would look for a better place later but just now he wanted to return to the local café where Matt – if Matt it was – had briefly visited yesterday.

On leaving the hotel he took a back route to the shops. By doing this he was able to evade the same cold wind which was continuing to blow off a very rough sea. He purchased the previous day's copy of the London Times and entered the café from the side door. The armchair in the corner was occupied as he entered but he moved into it only minutes later when it became vacant. He was now comfortably seated in a position that allowed him to see who came in through either door and to do so in a relatively relaxed way.

If he had been writing the script he could have devised all sorts of scenarios for how he would meet

up with Matt. And he thought each one would probably feature some comic element.

But this also brought him back to the purpose of his trip to Vancouver. He had undoubtedly entertained the idea of meeting Matt and engaging with him on some level, not necessarily to find out more about Bloch but to find out more about Matt Lee himself.

And if he were to meet up with Matt would he be himself or pretend to be someone else. Nathan sat back in his chair and decided he would devise a new identity. It was an exercise he would enjoy.

Of various possibilities he thought he could comfortably present himself as a travel representative. More specifically his remit would be to travel around the world locating hotels which could be confidently recommended to a select group of clients with very particular needs. And if the client group were wealthy that would make the position more appealing.

The newspaper which Nathan was also using as a prop and as a screen to hide behind if required, had failed to engage his attention. He began folding it back to its original condition when he became aware of a man placing a mug of coffee on the table in front of him and sitting down in the armchair to Nathan's right.

Without turning his head Nathan knew the man was Matt.

How he knew and how Matt had got into that position unnoticed confounded him. He was sure he had been closely observing everyone who had entered the café through either the side or the front door.

Nathan tried to disguise his alarm by taking his handkerchief out of his jacket pocket and giving his nose a wipe. To put it back he turned his body away from the man and lifted himself up slightly to free his right trouser pocket. Now he was conflicted about whether to ignore the man, re-open the paper and begin reading it or risk some sort of engagement.

The decision was not his to make because the man now spoke as leaned forward to pick up his coffee. Whatever he had said was in the form of a question. Having perhaps taken the newspaper as a clue to Nathan's nationality, he was asking if Nathan were English.

Nathan moved himself closer to the edge of his chair. In only a few seconds he had moved from enjoyable conjecturing to feeling completely lost.

Matt, if that's who he really was, had drawn him into an interchange for which he was totally unprepared. He could of course pretend not to have heard the question and walked out of the café. But having hesitated and stayed he needed now to put on some kind of show. He responded with the information that he was no longer English; that he had once been but that he was now an American citizen based in London.

London was apparently a place Matt had wanted to visit for several years. And he added with disarming openness, that a close friend, recently recovered

from a serious accident, was presently traveling in Europe. It was only because of his friend's preference to travel alone on this occasion that he was not in the old country himself at this very moment in time.

Matt followed this with questions about the purpose of Nathan's visit to Vancouver, about where Nathan was staying and how long he expected to be there.

That he was traveling alone and was staying at a hotel on English Bay were the easy replies. Why he was in the city presented him with more of a challenge and he fell upon his, as yet, incomplete plan to present himself as a seeker of good hotels for special clients.

Nathan was stumbling more than falling as he struggled to sound convincing. He heard himself offering to send Matt some recommendations on where to stay in London when he returned there later that week.

Matt said he would really appreciate that and on the back of a business card he wrote down his address and handed it to Nathan.

As Nathan struggled with what he might say next Matt again took control. He suggested, as Nathan was alone in the city, that he might like to drop in to Matt's apartment that evening, for an after dinner brandy around nine o'clock.

Nathan was further discomfited by the suggestion but could think of no other response than to say thank you. And after accepting the invitation he found himself following up with comments that surprised them both.

Nathan launched into a brief account of his distressing experience on the plane. He spoke of his desire to get off and look for a woman he had once known. And he concluded by saying he had behaved like one of those drunk out of control passengers one reads about and hopes never to meet. This caused Matt to lean forward in his chair and, without speaking, put his hand firmly on Nathan's arm.

A stranger looking on might have surmised that these two men had that kind of easy familiarity with each other that is established after a friendship of many years. They both stood up at exactly the same time but only Nathan spoke to say that he looked forward to meeting again at nine.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

In Matt's Apartment

Matt's apartment was expensively but sparsely furnished. An old hand woven carpet covered the centre area of a maple wood floor. There was a three seater couch and two large arm chairs with a small wooden table alongside each of them. On the tables and on two long wooden cabinets, one at either end of the room, were lamps with white shades. There was a real wood fire and on either side of it logs were piled up, more like one would find outside a cabin than inside a house. In contrast to the well polished wood and orderliness of the room, a hearth of dark blue slate was littered with ash and pieces of bark.

Covering most of the wall space was an extensive collection of black and white photographs of cars in narrow teak frames.

The windows were wide open and as Nathan entered the room he could see, through one of them, the road leading down to his hotel. The view was only

partly obscured by the leaves of a silver birch tree. This was so close to the building the leaves from the lower branches could have been touched from within the room.

By the time Nathan arrived at Matt's apartment he had slept most of the afternoon and had eaten supper at a restaurant recommended by the hotel receptionist. This had been no more than half a mile from the hotel and to get there he had walked through pine trees and over grass which felt like a cushion underfoot. The restaurant had been quiet and the service had been discreet and efficient.

He had been approaching Matt's with apprehension but this was tempered by the prospect of the promised brandy. That he was looking forward to a drink after deciding not to drink he read as being just another symptom of his new ill defined self.

There were several bottles of alcohol on the cabinet nearest to the door and after checking that Nathan would like a coffee Matt withdrew to the kitchen to make it. Included in the selection of drinks were

several kinds of brandy. Nathan could see an unfamiliar label lettered in gold and hoped he would not be given a choice. After a further surreptitious look around the room and down the street towards his hotel Nathan chose to sit in the arm chair at the right side of the fire. The air from the open window was already turning cold and he was glad of the warmth coming from the burning wood.

From a seated position and before the coffee arrived Nathan continued his appraisal of the room. The amount of light would have restricted a careful scrutiny of the photographs but then he was not very interested in cars anyway. But the glass in each frame was reflecting the light from the lamps and the fire and the overall effect was impressive.

Nathan's gaze did eventually settle on the photographs on the wall close to where he was sitting. These were well illuminated by the lamp on the table beside his chair. As Matt was pouring the coffee Nathan had become transfixed on one of the images. It was of a car which, to Nathan's

undiscriminating eye, looked exactly like the one Ros had been driving when he had met her.

He eased forward to get a closer look. The car was parked on a grey stretch of road beside what might have been a main highway. Just behind was a low white wall and beyond that a background of forested hills. There was someone in the car but it was impossible to see whether it was a man or a woman.

Matt handed Nathan his coffee and a brandy. There was to be no choice. Matt said he had decided on a vintage Cognac. But that wasn't all. From a drawer in the cabinet he took out a newly opened box of what proved to be Nathan's favorite cigars and asked if he would like one.

Nathan still had one remaining cigar of the same brand in the case in his pocket but he kept quiet about it. He had no reason to suppose that Matt's choice of cigars was anything other than a coincidence.

Matt was lighting his cigar with a ritual which far exceeded Nathan's usual practices and he responded by modifying his own. Why he did that he didn't know.

Seated at either side of the fire and with their cigars lit the two men made no effort to converse. Nathan's coffee and brandy were on the table at his side and each time he reached out to the table he had a further furtive look at the photograph. The desire to get off his seat and crouch down in front of it was intense.

Along with his response to the photograph came more observations about his behavior. Here he was again face to face with another person of apparently good character, while he blatantly deceived them about who he was and why he was there. This was surely becoming more a pattern of behavior than a series of similar events. But the impact of such thoughts on his equilibrium was only slight compared to the way in which the photograph had affected him.

It was as if Ros had changed her mind again and was no longer willing to bide her time. She had returned to centre stage and was demanding that, without further delay, he should renew his search for her, and address the situation with the attention it deserved.

It might not have been the ideal time for Nathan to begin a dialogue with himself about his changing persona. But it was happening anyway. He thought it had probably started with the woman from the theatre when he suggested that they withheld their names. Or it could have started when Ros had failed to contact him.

Surely there was nothing odd about not wanting to be the man she did not want. That was probably it. It was that simple. He said it again. He did not want to be the man she did not want. And, as a consequence he was developing a liking for being someone else. To date he had been a nameless man, Paul Bloch, a garage owner and now a travel representative. But it could have been worse.

As Nathan's attention returned to the reality of being in Matt's apartment he wondered, as he had done on the plane, if he had been talking out loud. But Matt appeared to be so focused on smoking his cigar it was unlikely that he had been interested in Nathan's demeanor. And even if he had been he was politely pretending not to be.

Matt disturbed the scene by getting up from his chair closing the window and pouring them both another brandy. He then calmly and silently returned to his cigar.

With the night air excluded from the room it became much warmer and Nathan's jet lag made further inroads into his concentration. As he struggled to keep his own preoccupations at bay Nathan realized that Matt had embarked on a story about his friend Paul Bloch.

And it was as if Nathan's presence was an irrelevance. He was talking as though he had a story to tell and it would be told.

Paul had not been driving when the accident occurred. A car had come loose from a transporter at their Vancouver depot and had crushed him against a wall. Both his left arm and leg had been badly broken and his head had been split open above his left ear.

Paul's recovery had been slow but he had been fortunate to survive. Once the most worrying days were over Matt and Paul had relocated temporarily to a small ranch in Alberta. There they would both take some well deserved time out from their business concerns. The move would be primarily to assist with Paul's recovery but the prospect of a change of life style and scenery appealed to both of them. There were beautiful places in the foothills of the Rockies and Matt knew the area well from holidays there as a boy.

As he listened Nathan continued to feel uncertain about what response Matt might like him to have. But he felt no pressure to say anything. Nor was Matt looking at him as if he were expecting or waiting for one.

It was enthralling to be hearing all about Paul Bloch in this kind of detail. It was also a very moving story which illustrated the deep affection that existed between Matt and Paul. But it did also make Nathan feel uncomfortable and ashamed to be such an imposter. He hoped the story would end quite soon so that he could take his discomfort away with him.

Matt continued.

There was also a woman in the story. She had played a role in Paul's recovery but Matt did not want to talk about her in any detail. To be brief he had met her locally and become involved. She had moved in with them for a while and had then suddenly disappeared. This had probably resulted in Paul having a relapse. Matt blamed himself for getting involved with her. And that was it. They never saw her again.

At this point in Matt's story Nathan wanted to introduce his experience about Ros but Matt was in full flow and it would have been insensitive to intervene.

During the weeks that followed Matt realized that Paul had been just as intrigued by her as he had been but, perhaps as a consequence of the accident, Paul had been more vulnerable to that kind of softening attention that only a woman can give.

Of course they did try to find out where she had gone and for a while were worried she had also been involved in an accident. The only person who admitted to having seen her was the woman who owned the drug store in a nearby small town. On the day she had left them she had apparently gone in there to make a phone call before driving off in the direction of the main highway out east.

It was soon after her disappearance that they decided to move back to Vancouver. During the months that followed Paul was able to return to work but his interest in the business had lessened and he began to be away for two or three days at a time. He refused to say where he was going but Matt suspected it was to the States and that the absences were in some way related to the woman.

To Matt's relief this phase in Paul's life ended and did so abruptly. After returning to Vancouver from a long weekend away Paul declared that he was feeling much better and that he had decided to take a trip to the UK. And depending on how he felt then he might even travel on from there into Europe.

Matt had not been convinced of Paul's fitness to make such a journey but his offer to go with him had been declined. Paul wanted to make the trip alone and as far as he knew it was all going well.

And there you have it Matt said

There had been surely more to say and do than just nod but that is exactly what Nathan had done. And he nodded several times more while holding back his own story about Ros. He had been longing to ask Matt about the photograph of the car and where it had been taken but the time for asking had long since passed. He was also astonished at how easy it had been to hold on to his own thoughts while listening to Matt talking about Bloch.

Several times Matt had paused to wonder why he was choosing to talk so openly to Nathan. But then he had continued. It was as if both men, with their different preoccupations were merely fulfilling what they needed or wanted to do, perhaps spurred on although certainly not overtly, by each others company.

Nathan was now making apologies for his tiredness and Matt was expressing regret that he had dominated so much of the evening's conversation.

This provided some comfort for Nathan. Perhaps he had inadvertently been of some use to Matt. That would be a blessing. Nathan reassured Matt that he had thoroughly enjoyed the evening and that he hoped he would be able to reciprocate when Matt made his visit to London.

With Matt's very secure door closed behind him Nathan breathed in the fresh air of a moonlit night and savored the idea of getting into his bed for what he hoped would be a good night's sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

After Matt and Into Ros

As Nathan approached his hotel he became aware of a young blonde man across the road from him but walking in the same direction. The door to the hotel was now about a hundred yards away and, without understanding why, he increased his pace as much as he could without beginning to run. Once at the door Nathan's feet refused to turn left and go inside. Instead they turned him to his right and he stared at the blonde who had stopped directly opposite.

He was wearing a dark track suit and his skin was so pale in the moonlight it blended in with his hair. This made everything above the suit look like one complete object. Nathan wondered if he stared long enough the man's features would emerge but when, after a few moments they didn't, Nathan looked away entered the hotel and ran up the back stairs to his room.

Out of breath he unlocked his door stepped inside the room and leaned against the wall for a few

minutes before switching on the light. As Nathan sat down on the bed he noticed that the back cover of his book was uppermost and he always put his book down with the front cover showing. He picked up the book and saw that the photograph of Matt was now between the pages of the last chapter.

Perhaps someone had moved it when turning down his bed. He supposed it could have fallen out if the book had been moved but he was certain about the photograph's position. He had not left it there.

His attention moved to the window which was open. Nathan put his head out to have a look around. Someone could have easily climbed up over the hotel garage roof into his room. But why was he being so suspicious? And why would anyone do such a thing?

He had no answers to his questions but they prompted him to close and lock the window and to draw the curtains. He also checked again that he had locked the door before he got into bed.

By this time Nathan's suspicions were being overtaken by his tiredness and a different agenda.

Assisted by the brandy, the jet lag and perhaps more importantly his readiness to do so, Nathan was being drawn into reminiscing in detail about his experience with Ros.

His previous resistance to take part in such a process had gone. However the fear of discovering who and what he really was had not. He was reminded again of the scene on the plane. In some respects he felt like a bit of the rock which had been torn loose from the wall of the dam he had envisaged. And some of him was feeling vulnerable to being swept away and deposited in some desolate landscape

The acknowledgement of the fear weakened it somewhat. It also provided him with the connection he had failed to make during the stopover in Calgary. The images of the damn had nothing whatsoever to do with the location of the movie. They were about the emotional build up in him. And he was the dam that was about to burst.

Nathan was now moving between giving in to sleep and holding to what he thought he now needed to

do. He had worked assiduously for many weeks to keep this moment at bay but looking back it was a mystery how he had managed it and why he had even bothered.

He adjusted his pillow and prepared himself for what was to come. There was no where else to go now. He needed to understand what had happened with Ros and why it had influenced almost every moment of every day since.

If he could just hold on fast, while the dam was bursting, perhaps it would be he, not Mr Bogarde, with Ros playing the part of the good looking woman, who would come sweeping down the valley to land, safely, hand in hand, in a mudless meadow.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Nathan Meets Ros

Nathan's relationship with his colleague David Sullivan had been developed over a period of twenty years. In many respects they were men of entirely different interests talents and approaches to life. But for the purpose of writing scripts they worked very well and effectively. They were also comfortable enough in each others company to take the occasional trip together, usually after completing a heavy work load, and as a means of readjusting to their everyday lives.

They were rarely away for more than a week and they had two favorite locations. One was a hotel on the pacific coast of Mexico. This accommodated Nathan's relatively simple pursuits of swimming and reading and David's more energetic activities of being on the water, in a boat or under it in diving gear. Their other favored destination was not a particular place. It was anywhere miles away from the city in what David referred to as the bush. Bush for Nathan still meant mulberry.

Their base on these occasions ranged from the primitive to the luxurious and was usually in properties belonging to one of David's many contacts. It was during one of these inland trips that Nathan had met Ros.

Nathan and David were both extremely tired after two months of uninterrupted work on a perpetually changing script. But it was now finished. The only redeeming feature had been the fee. Coinciding with its completion David had been offered the use of a cabin in north western Montana. Included was a three day wilderness trip with an experienced guide.

David loved long journeys and driving long distances especially when he had purchased, as he did often, a new car. His latest vehicle had not yet been out on a highway for any distance and he was keen to give it a thorough test drive.

Nathan's initial response to traveling hundreds of miles for a relatively short stay of a week had been less than enthusiastic.

Nathan's reluctance had however given way when David had shown him a photograph of the cedar wood cabin, surrounded on three sides by pine trees, and with a deck overlooking a lake. It was also only accessible down a dirt road and there were no other properties within a mile radius.

An added attraction for Nathan was that it had nothing much inside except a propane stove for cooking, two beds, a table, a few chairs and a large open fire. There was a well stacked wood shed at the back and the water supply came from a stream and a water barrel.

They both had meetings on the day they were planning to set out and their aim to head out east in the early evening when the roads were clearing of the local business traffic wasn't achieved. It was almost eight o'clock when they joined the main flow of traffic on Interstate 90.

It was a straight drive to Spokane. They had calculated their journey time would be about four

and a half hours and that they should arrive there sometime before 1 a.m. And they did.

After a surprisingly good coffee in a small Italian restaurant David had been keen to continue their journey but had given in to Nathan's preference. This was to stay somewhere for the night and arrive at their destination rested and ready for the day ahead. On the recommendation of the café owner they drove to a downtown hotel and booked in for the night.

It was just after seven the following morning when Nathan was awakened by an impatient David. They had a four hours drive ahead of them and he was eager to get on the road lest the journey took longer than he had calculated. They had the address of a ranch and outfitters outside Columbia Falls and they were expected as soon as possible after mid day.

From there David would be setting out on his wilderness trip while Nathan would collect a map, the key for the cabin and a truck capable of negotiating

the track that would take him there. David would get taken there by his guide later in the week.

They arrived at the ranch just before noon and after a light lunch together the two men went their separate ways. Nathan had agreed to get the supplies they needed for the cabin and with directions from the cook he drove into town and parked along the main avenue outside the biggest local store.

With the supplies on board Nathan sat for a while checking the map and the route to the cabin. The sun, which had been heating up the streets for several hours by then, was shining directly onto him through the windscreen. The warmth was both welcome and relaxing and he was glad to be alone for a while.

And this is when it happened.

With half closed eyes he saw ahead of him a woman placing a bag in the trunk of a white car. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a shirt that, even

through the glass of the truck window, looked exceedingly crumpled as if she might have slept in it.

There was something about her which reminded him of a signed black and white photograph he'd once had of Gene Tierney. He had sent to Hollywood for it when he was about twelve years old. But he could not see her face and, as he had noticed with so many human beings, the front only occasionally matched the back. However, expecting that at any moment now she would turn and reveal herself to him he did not let his gaze falter.

And the woman did turn around after she had closed the trunk. She then leaned against it and looked in the direction of Nathan. Nathan could now see her face clearly and she was not at all like the photograph he had. Her eyes were too dark to be blue. And, having given up on her likeness to the photograph, he saw that she had dark brown shoulder length hair. This had either not been brushed or combed that morning or else it had been arranged carefully to appear disheveled. It went well

with the shirt and a pair of slip on shoes which looked dusty and scuffed.

From her movements, or lack of them, she appeared to be doing nothing much more than breathing in the afternoon air. It was the sort of air that signals a hot day ahead. And either it gets you in the mood for an afternoon in a cool room with a good book, or if you are meant to be going somewhere, gets you on the road and heading for your destination before the temperature hits mid afternoon peak.

She remained where she was leaning on the trunk of her car as she took a small notebook out of her jeans pocket. She opened it, looked at it and then put it back in the same place.

The trigger for Nathan could have been the notebook

His half closed eyes had undoubtedly blunted his view of her but for her the sunlight on his windscreen was probably functioning like a mirror.

He observed her some more.

He guessed she had forgotten to buy something because she went back into the store. Nathan hurriedly looked at himself in the driving mirror. Not usually the most flattering image he also combed his hair and knew that by the time she returned to her car he would be out of the truck and waiting for her. Accepting his own prediction he put on his sunglasses got out of the truck and was standing in front of it when she returned to her car with a pack of water.

What he was now feeling was in many ways unrelated to his observations of her. It was just like other times. It didn't really matter who she was or of whom she reminded him, his head had gone into a soft burn mode. Uncertain of what words he might use he just stepped forward and into the fray.

With the trunk open, the water in there and the trunk closed she raised her eyes to meet his. As he remembered it she neither smiled nor didn't smile. From the expression on her face she might have been waiting for Nathan to speak. Later she told him

she had been expecting a question and when none came she asked if there was something he wanted.

Everything she could give him would have been the honest answer. But he had no doubt she was aware of what his hopes were likely to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The Kiss

The words which Nathan did eventually find were not really his own. He thought later that they were probably a mixture of some that he had written and others that he had heard spoken in old films. But he feared that they might have come out of him like a demand for an ice cream cone.

And yet his response to her was very much about grown up needs.

He wanted her to come with him in the truck to the cabin. He wanted to say they could sit on the deck looking out over the water and talk. He would put on a fire and cook her a meal. And they could talk some more.

Afterwards he would drive her back into town. But if she wanted to be with him for longer they could spend the night in the cabin together and he would drive her into town early the following morning. However it might be managed, he wanted them to

spend some time together and for her not to go anywhere until they had.

These were the kind of words which were waiting to be spoken. He had no good reason not to speak them. It was only the fear of her response that was preventing him. But he felt, if he failed to speak, he would have lost the chance to be more than he had ever been before.

When she spoke it was to explain that her name was Ros and that she was in Columbia Falls after giving a lift to a former teaching colleague. They had been at a reunion in Kalispell. She had drunk too much the previous night but had now recovered and was about to set out on a journey of several hundred miles north across the Canadian border. She hoped to be safely home by midnight at the latest.

Nathan was glad of the information. He needed time to modify his response but his words didn't wait. They came out just as he had first heard them in his head. They also came out of him so softly Ros asked him to repeat what he had said.

When he did repeat them she took hold of his left hand with hers and walked him away from the car park to the side of the store where she kissed him full on the mouth.

Ros and Nathan were now standing a few inches apart while they looked at each other's faces and hands and into each other's eyes. Ros told him later that she had been thinking she must be mad to have kissed this total stranger. Nathan told her the kiss was the wildest most exciting kiss he had ever had.

TWENTY EIGHT

At The Cabin

They both knew now that they would be spending the night together. Nathan waited in the truck while Ros parked her car outside her colleague's house. She then got in beside him and without speaking he handed her the map and a note of the directions they would need to get to the cabin.

After a drive of about ten minutes they had reached the track they were looking for. It was bordered on each side by trees and the lower branches were hitting off the windscreen and side windows as they drove the first few hundred yards. From then on the track opened up with the kind of light one associates with an approach to the sea, although in this instance they were approaching a lake.

A left turn at the end of the track took them back into an overgrown area of low scrub and bushes and then out again onto a stretch of grass as green as a well kept bowling green. And there by the edge of the lake, set back amongst trees with a large deck

leading down to a small beach of pebbles, was the cabin.

Shutters on the door were easily loosened and behind them two locks responded well to the keys Nathan had been given.

The door opened onto a large room which extended from one side of the cabin to the other. The kitchen units were beneath a window that looked out onto the surrounding trees. At the back of the cabin were three doors. These opened onto the two bedrooms and the bathroom. Everything was unpretentious in style and of good quality. The cabin was warm as if someone had recently been there and the list of instructions on the table was comprehensive.

Ros had retrieved a weekend bag from her car before they had left town and she carried this in to the larger bedroom and began making up a bed with the sheets which she had located in a wooden trunk. The fire had been left ready to light and Nathan tended to that before carrying in his own bag and the supplies from the truck. Filling the kettle with bottled water

he made a pot of tea poured two mugs and took them outside where he sat on the steps alongside Ros looking out over the lake.

While they drank the tea they didn't speak. Nathan moved only to go back inside the cabin and attend to the fire which was now burning well.

The sense he had of the situation was that they were both rather unsure about what they were doing but intent on doing it. And before the tea had cooled, sufficiently for them to drink it, Nathan had begun to tell Ros about his life. But this was not his usual script. This could have been someone else's story he was telling. And perhaps it was so ready to be told the listener could have been anyone he had met on that particular day.

However, he was also finding Ros incredibly attractive and that would probably not have been a feature of any other encounters he may have had. There was also a feeling that what they did and said had been meant to happen. Perhaps this was at the

heart of his unwillingness to accept that he might never see her again.

Usually when describing himself and his life Nathan had begun with the information that he had been brought up in England, followed by details about his work and why he now lived in Seattle. But this time he had gone directly to the day he had arrived home to find that something involving his mother had occurred. And he was guessing that it had happened when he was about five or six.

On his arrival home from school the woman who came in to prepare an evening meal had, unusually, sat with him while he did his homework. Although his mother was not usually around at this hour he remembered he had run upstairs to check her bedroom. When he did not find her there he had gone out into the garden to her favorite chair. She always liked to sit there to read.

He then asked the woman who was looking after him where his mother was. When she had replied that his father would be home soon he knew something was

wrong. And he had felt frightened. He thought it was a feeling he had tried very hard never to feel again.

He also thought to achieve this he may have opted for the global solution of shutting down a large proportion of his emotional responses - from then on.

His father eventually told him that his mother had decided to live elsewhere. The assurance that it was not because of anything Nathan had done had been unconvincing. Nor did he believe that once she was settled she would probably want Nathan to join her. He had no memory of arguments or shouting. She had been there one evening, had tucked him up in bed, read him a story, and then she was just not there anymore.

He had wondered if his mother had been unwell or had died but when he asked where exactly she was his father had said they could discuss it when he was older. After that he refused to talk about her again. A year later they had moved out of the family house in London and gone to live in the North East of England.

From an important position in banking in the city his father chose to work as the branch manager of a different and very small bank. Thinking about it all years later Nathan understood that his father had found the whole experience just as upsetting as he had. He could also clearly recall hearing him crying late at night.

In their new and unfamiliar home Nathan's father had hired various women to look after him but it didn't work and, after several months of trying his best, it was decided that Nathan should go to boarding school. The one his father chose was at the other side of the country and it was there that Nathan had spent the rest of his school days

Ros listened attentively and each time Nathan paused she reassured him that she wanted to hear all of Nathan's story. At no time did she appear inattentive or bored by what he had to say. It could have been that the way she had listened to him had made the losing of her even more painful.

They talked some more over supper then tidied up and got into the large bed together.

There was no doubt that the memories he had spoken of had been easily accessible. Of more interest was where he had been keeping them for so many years. He also wondered how significant it was that in amongst all that he had said he had held back on one detail.

He had remembered vividly being alone in the back of his father's car being driven to school. He was holding on to a small blue rabbit his mother had given him and which he had wrapped up in one of his father's best handkerchiefs to keep it safe.

He still had them. Several months before his encounter with Ros he had found them in an old storage box and put them in the rubbish bin. Two minutes later he had taken them back out, carefully re-wrapped the rabbit in the hanky and replaced them in the box.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Saying Goodbye

After first agreeing that they would not make love they kissed as they had done when they met and that led them into making love throughout the night. There was no more talking then or the following morning. They ate breakfast in silence but as they got ready to drive into town Nathan sensed an urgency about Ros. He thought she was preparing herself for her much delayed journey north.

But at no time, at any time, did Nathan feel that she was not as attracted to him as he was to her. He was as certain as he had ever been that they had found in each other something that they had both been looking for.

It was only during their last few moments together that they began to talk as if they had a lot to say and no time to say it. Nathan was again apologetic for having spent so much of the time talking about his life. Ros again reassured him that next time they met

it would be her turn and that she would make full use of it.

Nathan gave Ros his telephone number but Ros was apologetic about not giving hers. She asked that he trust her and be patient. Her life was complicated at present but she would be working hard to simplify it. And she promised to phone as soon as she could while Nathan promised to travel to wherever she needed him to be.

As Nathan watched Ros place her bag in the trunk of her car he knew only that she was originally from Pennsylvania.

Her friend was now watching them both from an upstairs window of her house as they kissed goodbye. Ros turned to look at Nathan one last time as she put the car into gear and drove off in the direction of the Canadian border

CHAPTER THIRTY

Three Men

Nathan awoke early. The night had passed remarkably quickly. He was unable to recall whether his reminiscing about Ros had occurred mostly while he was asleep or while he was awake. Throughout the process he felt like he had been slipping and sliding around between the real and the unreal.

Once or twice he had been convinced that he had reached some significant understanding of Ros' impact on him but if there had been moments of clarity he had no idea now what they were. He assumed that if anything had changed in him it would reveal itself in how he behaved.

He also accepted that he would now begin a new search for Ros. But there again it was she who had driven off. Perhaps he should just let her go and make a fresh start on his own life. If she had wanted to be found he assumed she would have done something about it. Perhaps, instead, he should try

to find his mother. She had certainly made an appearance during the night.

Nathan was however also experiencing some satisfaction at having gone nose to nose with Ros' rejection of him. He could even claim to be feeling better for having been there. And would facing up to his vulnerabilities also bring about a change in him. Even if he was still unsure what they were he was more aware of where he had got them. And did any of it really matter.

As the water of the shower ran over his head what he didn't understand was how the insights of the night could become so vague by the morning.

Getting dressed for breakfast became less of a pleasure when Nathan realized he did not have a completely clean shirt. He decided he would begin his day with a trip downtown to buy a new one. Matt had mentioned a place across from the side entrance to the Art Gallery where he would get an excellent coffee.

It was much warmer than it had been. The air coming in the window was fresh, his mood was optimistic and before he had located his pen to make notes he had reached several decisions.

The first one was the easiest. He needed and wanted to get back to work. The Paul Bloch assignment had been successfully concluded. He assumed the amount of information he had now was far more than Freddie would want. And even, in the unlikely event that he should want more, Nathan wanted no further involvement.

The thought that his next journey could be just down the coast to Seattle had to be dismissed. He could arrange for the hotel in London to return the rented car but only he could attend to the books he had collected. A few of them were first editions and he would prefer to travel with them than risk sending them by whatever means. Apart from the books London could probably have been avoided.

His position about Matt had changed. The evening had been pleasant and the photograph of the car had

probably given him a needed push in Ros' direction. It might even have been the ideal prelude to his overnight sojourn with her. Mostly however his interest in Matt and his friends Paul Bloch and Jane Wing had gone, just flown away. And he was grateful it had.

So it was back to London and then back to work and he would waste no further time in bringing that about. He would book a flight to London before he left the hotel and before he took the bus into town for the coffee and a new shirt.

With a late afternoon flight booked, the good café located and the new shirt bought Nathan decided to walk back to the hotel. Based on the time it had taken the bus to get him down town he assumed the return journey on foot would take no more than half an hour. And it was downhill most of the way.

It was only as he approached the café where he had first met and talked with Matt that he had two conflicting thoughts. One was to take the back route to the hotel and avoid it completely. The other was

to return along the sea front. This would require him to pass by the café on the way. Nathan chose the latter and was unable to refrain from taking a quick look in the window as he did so.

What he saw gave him an immediate and profound shock. Sitting at one of the small tables he saw three men. With his left side to the window was Matt. Opposite him was the young blonde man Nathan had seen on his way back to his hotel the previous night. But much more unsettling was the third man who had his back to Nathan. There was something about him, not least the brown jacket he was wearing, which reminded him of the man he had fought with in the theatre woman's apartment.

Moving out of their line of sight as fast as he could Nathan rushed back to the hotel. Once in his room, he walked up and down the available floor space, in an attempt to calm himself. It was not going to work. He thought he probably needed a tranquilizer of some sort but he didn't take such things and anyway he didn't have any.

Having a drink also had no appeal. So without further delay he changed, packed, paid his bill and within minutes of seeing the three men in the café he was on his way in a taxi to the airport.

It was highly unlikely that he was being followed but he feared he might be. He was now feeling both out of control and unable to make any sense of what he had just seen. It was too early to check in for his flight and he went in search of a quiet area where he could just sit and think. He found one between the domestic and international flight terminals but the moment he sat down he began to sob uncontrollably.

He was experiencing a strange mix of the alarm and bewilderment he had felt on seeing the three men in the café along with the newly evoked emotions he associated with Ros and his mother.

There were images in his head of a woman walking away from him. He was swallowing as if he were taking some awful tasting medicine but it was no more than a full blown dose of reality; a reality he had probably been defending against for much of his

life. He was in need of some of the tenderness which had gone from his life when his mother had left. He needed someone to step forward and say they would take care of him. When Matt had spoken of the softening attention that only a woman can give he had thought of Ros. That was just the sort of attention he needed right now.

It had been the way Ros had listened and the way she had allowed him to talk about his mother that had begun this softening up in him. And the losing of Ros had brought with it the feelings which belonged all those years ago when his mother had left. And for a few moments Nathan wanted them back, wanted both of them back and there beside him to at least wipe away some of his ridiculous tears .

Then, after the indignity of crying in a public place and being stared at, he realized that he was very quickly regaining his composure. He had stopped weeping and sobbing out loud, but he did continue to be confounded, about the three men in the café.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Back in London

Back in his hotel in London Nathan wasted no time in making arrangements for his return to Seattle. For the first time since his departure from there he phoned David to let him know that he intended to return to work. And that the few tasks he needed to attend to would take no more than a couple of days.

He was tempted to describe for David some of his recent escapades. But as he was already using some of them for a script he had begun writing on the plane from Vancouver to London he held back. He did mention that he was keen to talk to someone about his improved understanding of Ros but conceded that David was probably not that person.

David said that he had some news which might or might not be relevant to that relationship. During Nathan's absence there had been several odd phone calls to the office followed by a more

coherent but rather demanding one from a man who had claimed to be a friend of Nathan. He was eager to obtain his present address. He was on an errand for a woman from Pennsylvania and needed to make contact as soon as possible. He refused to provide details about himself.

Then a few days after the calls David had found a stranger searching through papers in their office. When confronted and asked what he was doing he had grabbed a laptop and run out of the building with David unsuccessfully chasing after him. They had increased security since then. He hoped there had been nothing too important on the computer as the one which had been stolen belonged to Nathan.

With Nathan's encouragement David provided him with a detailed description of the man. This and the reference to a woman from Pennsylvania was intriguing but in no way did it alter Nathan's preparations. Indeed it added further fuel to his determination to get back to the West Coast as soon as possible.

Nathan also phoned Freddie's office to bring them up to date about Bloch. This he assumed would be the final and concluding call on the subject. Speaking more slowly than usual he affirmed that if anything further information on Bloch should be required he would not be available to provide it.

Later that afternoon, while sorting out his books and contemplating a trip into town for some specialist packing materials, he received a return phone call.

The call was from Freddie's office and it was a special request from the boss himself for just one more favor. And it was received by Nathan with a groan.

The client with an interest in Bloch was also an old and close friend of Freddie's. Nathan was being asked to meet her and to personally pass on all he knew about the man. Freddie, still in New York, would be in meetings all day but if Nathan should require further information he could manage a brief call in the early evening

London Time. Freddie was also requesting that Nathan be blunt and not to water down his report in any way. Also could Nathan please make sure he spoke of the accident with the car and the damage which Mr Bloch had incurred as a consequence.

The groaning continued but Nathan accepted that he was probably best suited to perform the task. There was also no way he would want to disappoint Freddie but he also had a request. Could everything possible be done to arrange for the meeting to take place later that afternoon.

A return call let Nathan know that Freddie's client would be expecting him at her apartment at 4 p.m. He was informed that the journey time by taxi should be no more than half an hour. The taxi had been ordered and it would collect him at his hotel at 3.30 p.m. The taxi would then wait until the meeting was concluded and return him immediately back to his hotel. The name of the client was Charlotte Holmes.

Before Nathan could contemplate getting some sleep he took the keys of his rented car down to reception and asked that the rental company be asked to collect it. They had his credit card details and any charges should be applied to that.

At the same time he asked for an alarm call for 3 p.m and asked for his laundry to be collected from his room immediately. The careful packing of his books could wait until later that day or the following morning. He would not book his flight until he had attended to the books. As for how long it would now take him to get into bed for a few hours sleep his estimate was approximately ten seconds.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

At Charlotte's

On the way to Charlotte's apartment Nathan was pre-occupied making a list of what he wanted to do and the items he might purchase before his departure from London. The taxi arrived at a block of apartments where the doorman was expecting him. He immediately informed Mrs Holmes by internal phone that her visitor had arrived.

The lift and the hallway seemed strangely familiar to Nathan. As he peered closely at the nameplate the door suddenly opened and standing facing him was the woman from the theatre; the one with whom he had spent the night.

She greeted him effusively as Paul and ushered him into the room in which, only days before, he had fought with the stranger. Nathan was both stunned by the warmth of the greeting and being addressed as Paul. He tried to remain calm as she expressed relief that he had not been seriously

hurt. Perplexed that Freddie had chosen not to say who her visitor would be, she assumed Freddie had meant it as a surprise.

Images of the events leading up to this moment were racing through Nathan's head. She adjusted the cushions on the sofa onto which Nathan had hauled his attacker and gestured to him to sit down.

The woman continued to comment on her delight at seeing him again. Without asking if he would like a drink she withdrew to the kitchen to get ice for the two large whiskeys which she had now poured. Nathan was grappling with the realization that the she and Freddie's client were the same person. There were questions Nathan wanted to ask but knew that in doing so he would open himself up to hers.

Charlotte handed Nathan the drink which he placed on the glass table in front of him. The move set off more alarms in his head and he felt impelled to excuse himself and make a retreat to

the bathroom. He desperately needed to get out of her presence long enough to get his thoughts into some sort of order. He also wanted to work out what his next move should be.

From the bathroom he opened the door leading to the dressing room and listened at the door of the bedroom. As there had been on the morning of the attack there was a space between the mirrored doors and, without touching them further, he could see most of what was in there. As far as he could tell the bedroom was empty.

He had now been in the bathroom for longer than most normal visits but his mind had remained blank about what he should do. Washing his hands for a third time he decided he had to be as brave as possible and to go back and drink the whisky. But he would not sit back down on the sofa. There was an upright chair at the window. He would sit with his back to the wall. From there he would at least be able to see the whole room and the door leading into the kitchen. He would also try very hard not to do or say anything. He

would listen to what she had to say.

Checking his face in the mirror Nathan saw a man who looked like him but who had a pale face and staring eyes. He could do something about the eyes but the pallor would remain. He was tempted to pinch his cheeks to try to add some color but he was not in the mood.

After one last look he took a really deep breath walked into the hall and unexpectedly coughed quietly. He thought it was probably to let her, and anyone else in the apartment, know he was there rather than having any need to cough.

His legs felt stiffer than usual and he was taking the quite small steps of a man who does not really want to get to his destination. It was then that his eyes came to rest on the front door. It was a moment which he later recalled and described as sublime. Because in that special moment he knew that he had just come face to face with the answer to his plight.

Nathan very gently opened the main door of the apartment and stepped out into the hallway. Once there he froze for a few seconds. No part of him moved or even twitched. Then he thought he could hear the woman's voice calling Paul and that set him off again.

The fact that he was running away for a second time from the same apartment, albeit for slightly different reasons, was flooding his brain. Then, with an energy he thought belonged more with a three year old than a man of his maturity he ran down the stairs. At the bottom he held back the panting until, smiling maniacally at the doorman, he had exited from the building and got into the taxi.

His command to the driver was to do anything he needed to do to get out of the area as fast as possible. Appalled by the self preserving meanness of his departure he consoled himself with a pledge to contact Charlotte and explain everything on his return to Seattle.

He also found comfort in the knowledge that only Freddie knew where he was staying in London. But that thought provoked another. What would he now say to Freddie that would make any sense at all?

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Freddie's Explanation

In the seclusion and safety of his hotel room Nathan wanted, more than anything else, to talk with Freddie. He called the office number and left a message saying it was urgent and if the offer of an early evening call still stood he would like it to take place.

Nathan had two aims. The first was to plead with Freddie not to accept calls or talk things over with Charlotte until he had got back to Seattle. And the plea came with a promise. He would explain everything in detail as soon as possible after that. The second was for Freddie to tell him everything he knew about the Paul Bloch receipt. And could he please throw in an explanation of his relationship with Charlotte.

The call between the two men was, as was usual with Freddie, relatively brief and to the point. If bullet points could have been applied to a telephone conversation Freddie would have used

them.

Freddie agreed not to speak with Charlotte until Nathan had given the all clear. As to Freddie's knowledge of Paul Bloch and garage receipt and his relationship with Charlotte this was his story.

Charlotte, a client but also an old friend and former lover, had telephoned him in a very distressed state. The man she had slept with the previous evening had disappeared leaving blood on a cushion and her apartment in some disarray. She had been concerned that he might have been badly hurt but was also genuinely upset and disappointed that he hadn't stayed on after a very enjoyable night. Freddie's first response had been to remark on how foolish she had been to leave a stranger in her apartment.

Charlotte ignored the reprimand and pleaded with Freddie to come over immediately to help her deal with what had happened. This was not the first time she had asked him for this kind of assistance. But for Freddie this occasion had been

somewhat different. When Charlotte had said there was blood on a cushion he had been apprehensive about what he would find but it took him only ten minutes to get over there.

The amount of blood was however reassuringly limited to two medium sized blotches, one on a cushion and one on the glass coffee table. Nothing was missing from the apartment and the doorman had seen nothing untoward.

It was only as they were tidying up before sitting down for a companionable drink that they had found the Paul Bloch receipt. It was on the floor just in front of the sofa but slightly out of view because of the skirt of the sofa cover. They had both assumed that the name on the receipt was the name of the man Charlotte had met.

Nathan received with amusement the information that Charlotte and the man she had met at the theatre had chosen not to share their names with each other. Freddie had however pointed out to Charlotte that her name was on her door. And

that he may well have seen it as they went into the apartment. Or when he left. Nathan refrained from saying that the man may not have lingered when exiting from the apartment.

Freddie had advised that involving the police could be very exposing of her and not very helpful. He had also tried very hard to persuade her to forget it had ever happened.

Charlotte vehemently declined his advice. In her opinion their contact had been of a very special kind and she needed to know he was alright. Freddie knew from past experience that once Charlotte had set her mind on anything she would pursue it relentlessly and he relented.

When Freddie remembered that Nathan was in town he felt this could be just the solution he needed. Charlotte would be satisfied if she knew that a serious search for Bloch was being conducted. And if Nathan's enquiries were both discreet and lackadaisical Freddie hoped to save her from a potentially embarrassing pursuit.

Freddie concluded by saying he had been perturbed by some of the information that Nathan provided about Bloch. But he had also been relieved by it. He hoped that once Charlotte knew all the facts she would accept this was not the kind of man to remain interested in.

Indeed based on how she had described Bloch Freddie thought she must have been hallucinating during the night they had spent together. The Paul Bloch Charlotte had met and Nathan's Bloch were like two entirely different men.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Ros and the White Car

Back home in Seattle and after only a few days of solid work Nathan had returned to being the man he thought he really was. Thinking over recent events it felt as if he had been writing a story in which he was the main protagonist. But he was back now in his real life and the role and the location suited him fine.

These were his thoughts as he stood at the window of his office on one of those Pacific west coast days when the quality of the sun and the light make it difficult to stay indoors. As he was considering whether to go out for a walk or settle down to do some work he became aware of a small man in a brown jacket crossing the street towards the building. In his right hand he was carrying what looked like a white envelope. He was wearing a white open necked shirt and he was walking very quickly.

Nathan knew immediately that it was Paul Bloch,

Matt Lee's close friend, the man he had fought with in London and the man who had been sitting in the café with Matt and the blonde the day he had left Vancouver. These thoughts were racing through his head as he rushed down the two flights of stairs to the main lobby.

There was no one there except the receptionist who said that a man has just delivered a letter for him. The doors were not swinging shut and the only sound was the click of a computer keyboard.

Out in the street Nathan could see no one resembling Bloch on the sidewalk or in any of the parked cars. He walked several hundred yards in both directions. He looked in each vehicle before crossing the street and doing the same at the other side. As the building was in a cul de sac there was very little through traffic. Nathan returned to the door of his building and just stood there wondering if he might be being observed. But from where?

Re-entering the building and feeling immensely

disappointed Nathan took the envelope upstairs to his office and sat down at his desk. The handwriting was not Paul Bloch's. He could remember the signature on the garage receipt. This produced in him an unusual and never before experienced sensation. It came from acknowledging that, he now felt incredibly close to someone who was essentially a total stranger.

That brown jacket Paul had been wearing, unless he had bought a replacement, was the one which had been jammed up against his naked body for at least five minutes. That was certainly a fact worth noting. But there was so much more. And perhaps it would provide some material for the kind of story he had wanted to write for a very long time.

Nathan picked up the envelope which had now been warmed by the sun coming in the window. On front was a red sticker saying Do Not Bend. The flap lifted up easily and from inside he took out a hand written note. This was signed by Matt Lee. It read: it seems that we have all been

searching, with limited success, for something that had gone missing. You should know that Paul returned home safely to friends who will be taking good care of him. He has sent a letter of apology to a woman in London. He apparently spent some uninvited time in her apartment.

Ros, who had returned home to Pennsylvania, has been in touch to explain what happened to her on the weekend that she met you. Enclosed is what Paul tells me is a recent photograph of our mutual, incredibly attractive and rather unreliable friend.

Nathan eased it carefully out of the package and placed it on the desk in front of him. He looked at it with a feeling of immense pleasure. It was a photograph of Ros, standing, smiling beside a white car.

