

Before it became an ebook, film-maker Roger Graef (*The Police, Closing Ranks, The Secret Policeman's Ball*) said of this thriller: 'A compulsive read that feeds your paranoia.' Convicted murderer Jimmy Boyle (*A Sense of Freedom, Pain of Confinement: Prison Diaries*) said: 'I found myself being drawn back into that twilight world again, despite myself. I was grossly entertained and thrilled.' *New Statesman*: 'Exposes expediency and self-interest masquerading as government.' *Guardian*: Compelling for its vivid, racy narrative...chilling authenticity.

**KICKING OFF** revolves around a prison, although most of it takes place outside. Most of the worst people are outside as well, and will never be charged, or tried, or brought to any kind of justice. They're Pillars of Society – some very rich, some politicians, some high-flyers of the business world. Like so much else in modern life, they've been touched by corruption. Steeped in it. Destroyed by it. The men inside seem almost honest...

This version hurtles through the novel's action and its themes. It's pretty bleak, although some of the most sexual and unpleasant parts have been toned down in this digest to protect the innocent, and features Rosanna Nixon – the Mouse – and Andrew Forbes. It is a prelude to a new, revised, edition, which will be out on Kindle very soon. Then comes a follow-up thriller, called *The Bonus Boys*, in which Forbes and Rosanna are sucked into a vile and chilling world of brutal murder.

## KICKING OFF

seems quite a simple story, to begin with. A freelance investigator, Andrew Forbes, is working with a Customs agent on the people behind an international drugs scam. Unfortunately the government does not want them to. The CIA's involved, and another hush-hush operation, so a special op is set up to prevent them finding out too much.

Forbes lives on a very seedy London street. He is under surveillance by two very seedy agents. He is unaware that he has become a target...

IT ALL STARTS HERE:

### Fat Man and Paddy Collins

'What I can't see,' said Paddy Collins, 'is what he gets out of life. I mean, for Christ's sake, a Porsche, in a street like this, I ask you. And it's never moved, in two months to my certain knowledge. What's he *got* it for?'

The fat man and Paddy Collins had a grievance. The target had a Porsche, they had a Corsair. It was meant to be inconspicuous, but it was old, a ghastly vomit-green, and quite possibly the only Corsair left running in the south of England, perhaps the world. As inconspicuous as a sore green thumb, and they were stuck in it.

The fat man did not reply. The men had been in the street for three hours now. Three hours and seventeen minutes, to be precise. He eased his buttocks on the driver's seat. He sucked his teeth.

'I'm bored,' he said. 'News time.'

Paddy Collins turned the radio on, and they listened in silence for a while. For the third day running the main news was the jail siege, somewhere north of the Border, somewhere where the savages ran around in skirts, and that was just the men. According to the reporter, there was snow on the ground up there. Snow on the ground, and snow on the roof where sixty-seven prisoners were standing, dressed in overalls and blankets. Collins shivered.

'Mad,' he said. 'Fucking insane. They ought to bring back hanging, didn't they, as a human kindness? Or transportation, to a warmer clime. No fucking snow down here.'

**But on the roof up there, a young man's life was just about to end. And when he fell – nobody seemed to notice.**

### Rosanna

When Rosanna finally went into the back room at Eliot's, an ironic cheer arose. She was known to many of the Glasgow crew as young and inexperienced, with a degree in five eighths of fuck all. She was quiet and a trifle superior, and she had Bleeding Heart written all over her. In her granny coat and boots, her woollen hat pulled down so far it almost touched her dripping nose, she did not even look worth trying to get to bed.

Later, though, when they'd got a few big ones inside them, they were more interested. Which involved mocking her unmercifully, but in a jocular way, about her absurd belief that the Buckie Jail siege mattered, or that anybody really cared.

'Forget it, hen, God's sake!' yelled a man called Angus. 'They bastards up there are just thickarses. The government'll see them freeze or starve to death before they lift a finger. Damn right too.'

'How is it right?' yelled Rosanna. She had to yell because the bar was full, and everyone was drinking whisky in full-throated cry. 'They've been brutalised! Conditions in Buckie are appalling!'

Those near enough to hear her yelped with laughter. There were prison officers in Eliot's now, their shifts at the barricades over. Policemen, too. Many of the journalists were chatting to them, happily, hoping to pick their brains for usable quotes and bankable opinions.

'Tell that crap to the lads!' roared Angus. 'Those bastards on the roof are cavemen! You're wet behind the ears!'

Sandy Hamilton, slightly younger and less drunk, decided it was time to be nice. With four large Grouse inside him, and a pint or two of lager, he felt irresistible. His eyes were wet with lust.

'I'm on your side, darling,' he shouted. 'The way ah see it—'

He stumbled as he tried to move in on her, and much to Rosanna's astonishment, Angus then became proprietorial, taking her roughly by the upper arm.

'Hey hey there, Sandy,' he warned. 'I saw her first. Back off.'

Rosanna jerked her arm free, spilling half her whisky. Both men immediately tried to buy another for her, but the Mouse had had enough. As she pushed her way towards the door, she heard her esteemed and valued colleagues talk about her.

'Aye, Rosanna, Rosanna Nixon. She's a graduate, know what I mean?'

'I surely do. Knows fuck all and full of bullshite. She dresses something different, eh?'

'So she does. She's called the Mouse. Nice little pair of tits, though.'

'Aye. And what about the Mouse's hole? Eh? Eh? Eh?'

To her distress, Rosanna discovered she could see the roof of Buckie Jail from her hotel bedroom. She stood at the window for several hours, on and off, watching the huddled black shapes, picked out sometimes as moonlight slid behind the chimney stacks. The fringes of their kingdom were illuminated constantly, and harshly, by batteries of mobile arc lights.

One of the men she watched, although she did not know it then, was called Jimmy McGregor.

**It was Jimmy who got pushed, or fell, or was maybe targetted when the SAS went in. Targetted with a new device, a sort of super-Taser, targetted and – sadly? – killed. The man behind it was a politician, young and upward thrusting. He was aiming for the top. He'd installed himself in a small hotel.**

## **The Buckie Fox**

Donald Sinclair was in no way a left-winger, but in this dispute he was seen by some in the government as practically a bleeding heart. His own view was that the trouble could not only spread in Scotland, but might ignite an English powder keg. Sending in the troops was easy, but to split heads, he argued, teach lessons, maybe kill a man or two – would be to court a holocaust.

He also argued that something, somehow, had to change. Successive governments had watched complacently as the inmate-count had climbed inexorably, mouthing such

idiocies as 'prison works' and applauding major jail terms handed out for jokes on Twitter. It had taken riots, mass unemployment, a generation of the young without a hope in hell, before the Prime Minister (an Eton millionaire, of course) had cried enough. Christ, he might even lose the next election!

Sinclair, when first asked by the Home Secretary to have a try at tackling the problem, had demurred.

'Quite honestly,' he said, 'I'm not sure I'm ready for it, Sir Gerald. It needs a genius.' He paused, then grinned engagingly. 'I'm working on it, though!'

It was a bold joke, and they both laughed. In the event, by the time the Buckie siege blew up nine weeks later, he judged the time was ripe. He had, he told his master, found the answer. The use of force proposed was minimal, with an emphasis on solution rather than on smashing up.

'Good,' said Sir Gerald. 'No blacked up faces, then. No SAS. Wonderful.'

'I promise you,' said Donald. 'Any fool could send the Army in and end the siege in twenty minutes, corpses notwithstanding. My way we'll see them come down off that roof in good order, no hoods, no ropes, no blood. But what about the Scottish Parliament? The last thing in the world we want to see is men in kilts and bagpipes fucking up.'

They laughed together.

'I'm the Secretary of State,' Sir Gerald said. 'If you succeed, my boy, the sky's the limit for you. But if you fail...'

He laughed again.

'Well, put it this way, if you fail, it won't only be the knives at Holyrood that are going for your jugular. You know how long a PM's loyalty lasts. So make it good, Donald. Just make it bloody good.'

### **High level siege**

There was no noise, no movement. Even when three more soldiers slipped out onto the roof the prisoners did not retaliate. Major Edwards was wrong-footed. His orders were to immobilise three men in quick succession, then more if necessary. The psychiatrists had been adamant. Morale would be rock bottom. When the first men were hit, the others would be horrified. And immobile.

But they seemed horrified already, already they were motionless. For several seconds he stared at James McGregor, for several seconds there was utter silence.

And then McGregor jumped. But not at Major Edwards, as predicted. With a strangled roar he sprinted to the parapet, tearing at the makeshift balaclava covering his mouth. He screamed, a violent, tearing bellow, first at the other prisoners, then, leaping onto the low surrounding wall, into the blinding lights below, to the hoped-for TV cameras hidden in the glare, to the outside world.

'Look out down there! Attack! Attack!' he screamed. 'It's the SAS! They've—'

But suddenly he crumpled. His knees sagged, and he staggered, one hand reaching for a chimney for support. The jumble of noises on the roof, the beginning of a hubbub from the other prisoners, stopped. A sob of wind buffeted them. McGregor swayed, and almost fell.

'Lights!' hissed Major Edwards, to the operator beside him. 'For God's sake kill the lights!'

As the operator snapped the instruction into his hand-held set, McGregor did fall. He

twisted back around to face the roof again, he opened his mouth and slurred the one word, 'Bastards.'

Then he pitched backwards off the parapet without another sound. The silent men heard his body hit the ground, quite clearly.

The world's press did not see it. The TV men and women were all in bed, or bars, in various hotels. Except Rosanna Nixon, who was standing at her window in her dressing gown, and she could not believe her eyes. She watched the man jump high onto the parapet, and wave his arms, and stagger. She saw him reach out sideways, then turn his back to her in silhouette, and topple backwards, not at all dramatically.

Before it truly registered, before she could make sense of it, the scene went black. But the image of the falling man seemed to pulsate, flashing black and white on her retina.

Rosanna blinked, and shook her head, and stared. Then she ran for her shoes and coat.

**There is a cover up, of course. The government's first move is to shift the worst troublemakers out of Buckie, to disperse them across the border, to tip them into English jails. But some of them, who know the truth, go to Bowscar. And there lives Jimmy's elder brother, a truly violent, horrific man. So much so, that he is known as The Animal. Not fondly.**

**Rosanna suffers from the cover up as well. A news blackout clamps down over Scotland, and her paper is not prepared to break it. In fury and frustration, she follows a lead to London. The only name she knows is Andrew Forbes. She has been warned – he will try to fuck her. But one must suffer for one's art...**

**Before she meets him, though, Andrew has troubles of his own. He is visited by a beautiful black American he used to sleep with. But she also goes with violent, ruthless criminals.**

### **London. Forbes and Alice**

Inside the scruffy basement kitchen, she looked completely out of place. Her handmade grey kid boots alone were worth more than all the furniture, and the bright colours of her skirt were startling against the backdrop of brown linoleum and sagging yellow paper on the walls. Opposite her, across a table festooned with dirty crockery and a coffee-stained *Observer* three weeks out of date, Andrew Forbes was more at home. He wore an off-white shirt over crumpled trousers and he had not shaved. He also had a hangover.

'So that's it, then?' he said. 'You're going in two minutes, and I still don't have the foggiest why you came.'

Alice Grogan gazed levelly at him for a few moments before replying.

'Don't play stupid, Andrew, it doesn't suit you. I came because you're straight. You're clean. I came back because nobody followed me when I was here last time.'

Forbes laughed.

'I'm flattered, Alice, but I'm very disappointed, naturally. I thought maybe you'd come back because you couldn't stay away. You wanted my body. You wanted to share my miserable and lonely life.'

Alice almost smiled.

'Andrew,' she said, 'Yesterday I gave you times and places. I came back with the name. That's important. You better pass it on.'

‘Charles Lister,’ said Forbes, deliberately. ‘You must hate him, Alice. I wonder what he did to you.’

The chair creaked as Alice Grogan leaned forward. She blew smoke out in a level stream. She looked at him unblinkingly.

‘Pass,’ she said.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘We’ll try the English way. What- ever you think of Charles Lister, what about me? All jokes apart.’

‘All jokes apart,’ she said, ‘you’ve got good contacts. I needed that. I need it.’

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘So it’s as good as done. And what about the... Look, what I’m trying to say is...’

‘Will I screw you?’

‘Yes.’

Slowly, Alice Grogan reached across and stubbed her cigarette out on a dirty plate. She reached her bag up from the floor, checked the contents, snapped it shut. She stood.

‘All jokes apart,’ she said, ‘you really are quite cute. So that would be a pity, wouldn’t it?’

‘What?’

‘If I screwed you, Andy, you’d be screwed for good. Dead. Charlie Lister’s like that. I’m mortuary meat.’

There was a coldness in her that chilled him. She was comfortless, but she needed comforting. She was unap- proachable, but he wanted to approach.

‘Give me a number,’ he said. ‘No, I know you won’t do that, too dangerous. Let’s meet somewhere, let’s leave it for a while, see what happens over Lister. This stuff you’ve given me. I mean...’

She turned towards him.

‘I sometimes go to the Shaw Theatre,’ she said. ‘Look- ing at the exhibitions in the entrance hall, you know? Say Friday?’

‘Friday.’

She moved another two steps upward.

‘Well, maybe Friday, who can tell? Or maybe the Friday after.’

He let her go then. He let her make her own way to the street and slam the door. He lit the gas underneath the saucepan he used as a kettle, and he had a little fantasy about the long legs and the pink inside her mouth.

He had to contact Peter Jackson. Of HM Revenue and Customs. Today.

### **Westminster. Donald Sinclair**

From late morning onwards, the coverage on radio, TV and then the evening papers became more and more laudatory. In news-rooms all over the kingdom – England and Wales as well as Scotland – a slow news day was gloriously transformed by speculative swoops, background pieces, and in-depth interviews.

At 3.15 Sinclair's political adviser Judith Parker fielded the first query as to his part in the saga, and by 5 pm there were reporters and cameramen waiting hopefully all round the Palace of Westminster to catch a glimpse of him, while others staked out his home in

Surrey and the London flat he hardly ever used.

Sinclair, who had spent an hour on the phone to Christian Fortyne, was confident that it was safe to put his head above the parapet, but thought a better tactic was to wait.

Tonight they could speculate, tomorrow he could assess how much it would be politic to reveal. In any case, if anything did go wrong, it left another clear day of denial time.

While Judith, a brisk, intelligent woman with ambitions of her own, guarded the phone, Sinclair sat in a deep armchair and dozed. He was awoken early in the evening by a gentle shaking of his arm.

'Sir Gerald Turner,' Judith mouthed, handing him the phone. 'I thought you'd want to speak.'

Sir Gerald was brief, but generous. A brilliant piece of work, he said, which confirmed everything he'd believed about his protégé. Wonderful.

'Thank you,' said Sinclair. 'Thanks indeed. But—'

The Home Secretary interrupted.

'The PM's delighted,' he said. 'Couldn't be more pleased. Between you and me, laddie, it's in the bag. Unofficially, the job is yours. What do you say to that?'

Donald Sinclair – was on his way.

### **Canal boat. Sarah Williams**

It was cold now, alone on *Cynthia's Beam*. Sarah Williams was not cold, but she knew that when the stove died down the air would quickly chill. She was up, curled in an Ikea comfy chair, but it was getting very late, and her lover Michael Masters would not come. She knew for certain he would not come tonight, and that was better, somehow, than the normal mistress state – a slave to hope. Tonight there was a party at his house, a huge defiant celebration, before he went to court to be sentenced in the morning. His wife would be the hostess. The lovely Barbara.

Earlier in the evening, Sarah had had a sudden wild desire to go cross country to his house, to walk in through the grand French doors, to gatecrash. That was the wonderful thing about the canal system – the boat was moored in empty, lonely countryside, unfindable, untraceable. But her bike was chained on to the roof, and in fact she could be at Michael's mansion in less than half an hour.

The urge had been quite strong, but she had been much stronger. Sarah was a good mistress, she knew the rules. She also knew, with certainty, that one day he would come to her, for good, for ever. Hard though it could be sometimes, she could wait.

She found herself smiling now, and she threw on some more coal. Tomorrow he would go to prison, and his reaction was to throw a party. She loved that in him, that defiance, that amazing joy at life. Only six months away, he said, and in an open jail, a sort of holiday camp with all mod cons. She was to keep the boat ready, to chug down through the system to the nearest mooring point to him, because he'd bribe his way out some weekends. Dirty weekends, love weekends, weekends she would almost die for, happily. To be at the party, in that enormous house, in all that rolling parkland that was his? No. She would rather be here, on this narrowboat, alone and waiting. For the day she'd be on *Cynthia's Beam* with him.

It would be the pair of them, for evermore. It was coming soon.

**It all went wrong. Not just for Masters, not just for Forbes, not even just Rosanna.**

**Michael Masters was a money man. His contacts spread right up to the top, he knew that his would get six months, the judge himself had told him so in private. So when he found himself sent down for four years in one of the country's oldest, most appalling jails, he was devastated.**

**Not as devastated, however, as was Alice Grogan. She missed her date with Forbes, and that was fair enough. But she received another visitor...**

### **Alone in London**

Alice was thinking how secure she was when Charles Lister came to call. She had moved apartments yet again, she had teed up Andrew Forbes to keep her hidden, she was safe. The only people who knew where to find her now were—

The window broke with a burst of glass and a splintering crash as the frame was pushed inwards. Alice almost screamed, then gave up. No one would hear her, no one would come. Alice had been around.

She knew it was Charles Lister, although he wore a mask. A balaclava helmet, only more so, with two small eyeholes and a mouth. He looked like a rapist from a nasty magazine. It was Charlie.

'Hi, Chuck,' she said. 'I guess you just dropped by to kill me.'

She was sitting up in bed, naked, and she got out of it to stand and face him. She was very fine to look at, slim and muscular and full-breasted, with a landing strip Brazilian. She was panting, which added to her beauty.

Maybe it was a rapist, she thought wildly. Please God. Anything, so long it wasn't Lister.

But the man was not there for sex. He was there to kill. He pushed her violently back against the wall, and slid a long, thin-bladed knife up under her ribcage and deep into her heart. Alice felt it as a red-hot wire, followed by an electric shock. As he stepped backwards she fell onto her knees, then onto her face. She was moaning, gently.

'Oh Chuck,' she said. 'You didn't have to do that.' She twitched, one time or two, then was still.

It had all been over in two minutes.

### **Bowscar. Induction suite**

Even with his brain in neutral, Michael Masters could not entirely ignore the processes he went through on arrival at the jail in Staffordshire. It was at once so similar to scenes he'd watched on film and television, and so completely different. The rooms were the same – drab, cream and green, impersonal – but they had a third dimension. As in the cells he'd stayed in overnight, it was mainly to do with smell, and heat. The air was almost palpable, redolent of boiled food and drains, so thick that he could taste it. Masters was not a particularly fastidious man, there was nothing fey or precious in his tastes, but he found himself reluctant to even breathe it deeply. It felt polluted, dangerous.

Then there were the processes. In the armoured prison van, the men who had travelled with him from London had seemed quite normal, unremarkable. Opposite had been a thin, handsome man with two-toned sculptured hair, who was possibly a

homosexual. He had a cut lip and a swollen eye, but appeared quite self-contained. Next to Masters was a youth, a black boy of barely twenty. He said nothing throughout the long journey, merely wringing his hands together and staring at the floor. Two men, white and in their forties, had worn suits, another wore a tracksuit bottom and an anorak, and an older man, Irish, had slept noisily for most of the time. When he had awoken, he had demanded to be allowed to piss, then dozed off again. He smelled of drink. But when they had disgorged, and been lined up to enter the reception suite, these ordinary, common or garden detainees had apparently been transformed, turned into Martians, aliens, creatures from the Black Lagoon. It was a transformation invisible to the naked eye, and certainly unbeknown to them. But the prison officers could see it, and they had become fierce and animated. They had shouted, and cajoled, and pushed. The apparent homosexual got it worst. Two officers ranged round him, at a distance of four feet, their eyes bulging like a music hall comedian's. They pointed at him, pantomiming shock, while the man stared back at them, disconcerted, beginning to be afraid. Masters watched fascinated. His mind was back in gear, but he could hardly believe the spectacle. It was like a comedy routine, like something from a play about conscription. The RSM's gavotte.

### **Another suite. Another day**

**Chuck Lister was the man who had killed Alice, but her death had given other men a bead on him. After the stabbing, he'd shipped out of England briefly to sort out his gigantic deal on the high seas, and Jackson's Customs crew, aided by Andrew Forbes, had been at Felixstowe to 'welcome' his return. But other law enforcers had been present also, with their own hidden agenda. Lister was snatched from underneath their noses. The Customs had been screwed. Before long he was in Bowscar, too. Bemused and in bad company. Very bad company.**

When the prison officers had gone, one of the Special Branch men drew a packet of Marlboro from his pocket and offered it. Lister took a cigarette, and the lighter. He inhaled deeply. He gestured round the small, bare room.

'Is this clean?'

'It's a prison, Charlie. Not the fucking Lubyanka. No bugs.'

The American's eyes were pale blue through the smoke.

'Then why the fuck,' he said clearly, 'am I in it? What the fuck went wrong? And when the fuck do I get out?'

The bigger of the detectives had close-cropped, greying hair. He took his lighter off the table and fiddled with it.

'Something went wrong,' he said. 'Some politician pulled a stunt, changed the whole scenario overnight. It was a fuck-up. Grade A. Sorry.'

Lister let smoke trickle from his mouth and rise beside his nostrils. Whatever they'd expected, he stayed calm.

'We had a deal. I've got to be out of England by a date. A lot of organisation's gone into this. A lot of love. I've got one whole gigantic stack of bucks riding on this date, and that's only an instalment. When do I get out?'

The spokesman tapped moodily at the formica with the plastic lighter.

'We know who fingered you,' he said. 'His name is Forbes. Andrew Forbes. Some sort of journalist, a writer. He'd...he'd been knocking off that woman. Alice Grogan. They'd been having an affair.'

Behind their still faces, both were suffering. Lister crushed the cigarette out between his thumb and index finger.

'I don't exactly know what you're trying to say to me,' he said. 'But let me tell you something straight. I'm working for an outfit, right? It's an outfit that stretches right across the world. If I don't get out as per schedule to meet a certain boat, that outfit is going to be gunning for somebody. Not any somebody, right, but you somebody.'

The bigger of the two detectives said quietly: 'We work for an outfit too, you know. We're not a one-man band.'

Lister gave a single shout of laughter. He stood up and gestured at the door.

'Why don't you fuck off before I lose my cool? Why don't you call the Mickey Mouse squad in? I'm fed up of your company.'

'Andrew Forbes,' started the smaller one.

'Is dead,' said Charlie Lister. He went and hammered on the armoured door. Booted feet approached. 'I'll expect a visit soon. Very soon.'

As the door opened, he added: 'Or Forbes won't be the only fucking one.'

**There were more men needing to get out than Masters and Lister. There were drug barons and terrorists, even a smattering of good honest criminals who had had enough of government hospitality. And they had networks. Some of them needed arms brought in from the outside. Some of them had men who manufactured arms. And smuggled them.**

**Peter Smith was one – a man from Gorton, Manchester. He made specialist weapons in tiny pieces, and paid sad tarts to bangle them inside. Where? Mouths, vaginas, anuses. The body has so many useful holes. To Peter, the women were dirt. Anonymous. Worthless. And he treated them as such.**

**Bowscar. After the drop**

'You done it, though? He got the gear?'

She dragged deeply on the cigarette.

'Don't shit yourself. It's thirty quid. I need it, don't I?'

Smith had his foot hard on the floor. The van's speed climbed towards twenty-eight. When it got there, he changed up to top.

'Make it forty if you like,' he said. 'You've done good.' The woman was surprised.

'What? Forty? Just because of that? For doing good?' Peter Smith showed his teeth. They were yellow.

'Don't be stupid, love. My name ain't Father Christmas. I gets to fuck you, too.'

'Oh,' she said.

She wound the window down and threw the fag butt into the road.  
'Forty-five,' she said.  
'Get stuffed.'

### **Visiting. Barbara stands by her man**

'What did you expect?' Masters asked her. 'A fucking butler to take your coat? For God's sake dress the part next time.'

The words went in like knives. Barbara had genuinely been looking forward to seeing him, and had genuinely been overwhelmed by the physical reality.

The visiting hall held thirty prisoners at a time, counted in like sheep to slaughter. Bored children, after waiting for an hour, became uncontrollable. The toddlers wet themselves, dramatically, on their fathers' knees. The women were knocked into by flying kids, vomited over by their babies.

With this all round her, Barbara discovered the other great agony of being a visiting wife. For all but a very

few couples, words were too difficult to say. All over the crowded room, men and women were facing each other across bare tables, saying nothing. Small children wound themselves around their fathers' necks and wondered why they looked so wild and sad. Others, inevitably, mentioned unmentionable names.

Barbara Masters sat staring at her husband, wishing she were dead. And Michael Masters sat staring at her almost sightlessly, wishing she were someone else.

**Being rich, and soft, and civilized, Michael Masters was a target in the jail. For the richest sex monsters, and the vilest prison officers, like Chris Abbey, say. Another reason he needed to get out was love. His mistress Sarah was moving up the country in their boat, *Cynthia's Beam*. He wanted a telephone, he wanted to be outside of Bowskar. He wanted to be inside of her...**

**He learned there was a plan afoot, and his cellmate Alan Hughes had a part in it. So Masters was at the epicentre. He was where the thinking happened.**

### **The Brain Cell**

'Alan,' Masters said, 'I don't know you well enough to be certain if you're joking. But just hypothetically, if I wanted to get Chris Abbey killed, or let's say smashed about a bit, could I do it? Without taking the blame, naturally.'

Hughes hunched himself forward.

'Look Mike,' he said. 'You can do anything in here when you know the ropes. You can shoot heroin, smoke dope, sniff cocaine. You can buy a gobble from a con any time you like and a prison officer if you pick your man and moment. You can fuck, you can drink, you can watch porn movies till your eyes pop out, you could get Chris Abbey's

best friends to beat him up within a fortnight. Or even Brian Rogers – because you're stinking rich. But what's the use?

He reached out for his makings, his fingers shaking slightly. He sighed.

'Your power's outside this nightmare, friend,' he said. 'Your power's in the real world, and that is where you want to be. Don't do the other shit.'

'So who's Brian Rogers?' Masters asked. 'Should I have heard of him?'

'He's one of the big boys. He runs the place. The unofficial governor.' He chuckled. 'You want a phone, Rogers can get you one, no trouble. Or you could have Chris Abbey, on a plate. Mm. What do you want most – revenge or telephone?'

Masters considered.

'I want the telephone,' he said. 'The rest depends. It's Abbey's smile that interests me. I'd quite like somebody to take it off his face. And tread on it.'

'I think I ought to warn you,' said Alan Hughes. 'About currency. The basic units in this place are sex, drugs, tobacco, money, information, promises. You're a millionaire. If we showed you the ropes you'd have no trouble getting currency. But smiles interest Brian Rogers a lot as well. And bodies. He's not precisely short of cash.'

Indeed, as they were talking, Brian Rogers had just taken delivery of a present. His door had been opened, and it had been pushed inside. The door had been locked, the spyhole closed.

It was Cherry Orchard.

**Orchard was the gay man Masters had seen in the Induction Suite – and he would be the first one of the prisoners to die. Brian Rogers liked to fuck people, and control them. His brutalising of Cherry Orchard was a catalyst. A crime of unintended consequences. But it pulled him into the inner circle, too. Peter Smith the armourer, in the outside world, was also getting deeper into trouble. After one banging run to the prison, friends came to call. They claimed he'd let them down.**

### **Night visitors. Gorton**

The two men were both small and stocky. One, with blond hair, was in his twenties. The other, older man was bald.

They walked before him, into the living room, and warmed themselves in front of the gas fire. The blond man went to the back window, which overlooked a garden, then over the backs of other houses. He pulled the curtains closed.

'Want a drink?' asked Peter Smith. 'I've got one some-where myself. It's Scotch. Want some?'

The blond man was looking round the room. The television was still on, quite loud. He went and stood beside it.

The other man said: 'So what went wrong?'

Peter Smith, by the bottle cupboard, turned, startled.

'Nothing!' he said. 'It all went perfect. She done the job.'

'Aye,' said the man. 'We watched.'

‘So what’s up then? Here – you’re not trying to get out of that last grand are you? Fucking hell.’

The man reached into his jacket contemptuously. He withdrew a brown envelope and tossed it onto the sofa.

‘She opened up her fucking mouth, din’t she?’ he said.

‘She was in a pub in Levenshulme, wa’n’t she? Clacking on. She got pissed and fucking maudlin, didn’t she? Said you made her smuggle stuff, and then you fucked her. Said you were a bastard, said her old man’d kill you when he comes out of the Scar, you’re a bastard.’

‘But I didn’t fuck her! What, that fat tart? I didn’t fuck her!’

‘Not the fat one, cunt. The thin one. Tony Geraghty’s tart. She’s put it all over, an’t she? Every bastard knows about it.’

Peter Smith found himself a tumbler and poured whisky into it. He had gone white.

‘Oh Jesus Christ,’ he said. ‘Not about the gun? She didn’t know it was a gun. I never told her nothing.’

The young man spoke from beside the television. His voice was very light.

‘Fair play,’ he said. ‘We don’t know if she said it were a gun. Fair play.’

Smith had an overwhelming surge of relief. He took a mouthful of neat whisky, gratefully, and coughed.

‘It’s not my fault,’ he wheezed. ‘I made the fucking gun, that’s all. I arranged to get it in. I did everything. It’s not my fault if some moronic tart... I’m not responsible for that.’

They waited patiently until he got his breath back. He was still very pale. The older man said quietly: ‘You’re re-sponsible for everything, Peter. That’s the deal. This woman could have caused a lot of trouble. People are upset.’

‘Yeah,’ said Peter Smith. His eyes moved to the fat envelope. ‘I can accept that. I’m sorry, honestly. What are you going to do to her? Do I have to buy her off?’

‘No need for that,’ said the bald man. ‘She’s dead. We’ve got her body in the car. We want you to look after her.’

‘Is this a joke?’

The young man said: ‘No joke, Peter. You’ve got your little cellar, haven’t you? You’ve told us lots of times. Your security is excellent. Brilliant. Nobody ever calls. Not even the milkman or a paperboy.’

The older said: ‘That’s why we chose you, Peter. For the job. That and the fact that you’re the best. The only problem is, that you’re going to have to join her, mate. Sorry.’

He stared like a mesmerised rabbit as the older man withdrew a pistol from his belt. It had a silencer that he recognised. He had made it.

‘I won’t tell anyone,’ he said. His voice was just a croak.

‘You might need me again, you know. I’m the best.’ The bald man smiled, regretfully.

‘You are,’ he said. ‘A genius. You just shouldn’t have blown the cover, should you? And for a bit of skinny little cunt.’

Peter Smith’s head was rising. His neck was stretching. His eyes were opening wide. He was about to start to scream. The younger man, bending swiftly, turned the TV volume up, loud, to cover the two shots. Then down again and off. It sounded as if someone had accidentally turned the knob the wrong way. Drunk, no doubt. Peter Smith,

once drunk this night, now dead, had jackknifed to the floor. The blond man checked his pulse.

'He's only twenty-nine,' he said. 'Tragic, in't it? And what an armourer. A magician.'

'Good time to go, though,' said the older man. He opened the cellar door, so that they could push him down the stairs. 'I mean, he would have had an awful bloody hangover!'

### **The Flying Fuck Club. Sinclair, Judith**

Fucking on a short-haul jet plane, like the problems of running a high-risk love affair, had never given Judith Parker much pause for thought. At twenty-six, she was very pleased at the way her career in government was shaping up, and saw Donald Sinclair as a useful stepping stone. She had taken the not abnormal route to rightish orthodoxy by a basic grounding in left-wing student activism, which had given her both a taste for power and an awareness of the debilitating effects of believing in things too much.

She had graduated brilliantly – to the amazement of friends who thought she'd been much too busy with the important things to do any work – then shocked them even more by walking into a House of Commons job, at the heart of the system she despised. Judith argued she was acting as a sleeper, but did not keep up that pretence for long. She decided early on the Palace of Westminster was a gigantic rest-home for several hundred men with massive egos and tiny intellects, or perhaps a kind of whorehouse where drunken oafs debauched ambitious interns while their wives and children suffered back at home.

Judith still believed in politics, however – and loved the sex thing. It seemed wholly fitting to her that she should be able to locate and target some suitable male, and hitch her star to him. It was a bonus that Sinclair's lust for power gave her a lust for him.

As they sucked and licked and fingered in the first class lavatory on the Boeing, they indulged as usual in the dirty talk – politics – that was their ultimate stimulation. They had gone to America to research US jails – and found them bizarre, unreal, absurdist – and appallingly exciting.

'It's the money I can't get over,' said Sinclair. 'The cash they're pouring in. Imagine a system where the prisoners can sue you! We'd be bankrupt in two months! Oh Christ, yes, put your teeth on there. Harder. Oh yes, oh wonderful!'

'And the cells,' said Judith, when she had slipped on to another spot. 'Sorry to talk with my mouth full, but you've got to admit it, some of them aren't half as bad as hotels we've been in.'

Donald removed a nipple from his mouth to laugh.

'It's a good example of the lunacy, isn't it?' he said. 'They've poured cash in, they've built hundreds of new jails, and the crime rate's rocketing. What's more, they admit it! Rum.'

'We can't, though. I mean, one word and Bowscar could go off like a bomb. A bit like me. Now. Donald, it must be very hard!'

'Bad jokes as well, eh?' he teased. Sometimes, he thought, sex with Judith was like his job. A means to an end, pleasurable, necessary, but unimportant. Sex without love. Politics. The idea pleased him.

'That's why Gerald selected me, for the hardness,' he said. 'He's got liberality round his neck like an albatross. It suits him to be seen that way, but it makes it difficult to sort the

prisons out for good and all. I'm going to stick an A-bomb up their arse.'

No words for many seconds, then, and Judith dabbed her pubis delicately before she slipped her pants on fully. She flicked his folded penis clear, and zipped it briskly up. 'And then you'll stab him in the back,' she laughed. 'Only joking, darling. Obviously.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Shall we have champagne? The Mile High Marathon always makes me thirsty. And we've got two more prisons when we land...'

### **The Brain Cell. New men on the team**

'Without no guns,' said Brian Rogers, 'we've got much less control, that's all I'm worried about. I mean, knives, razors, knuckles – they're all right, but there's too many of them for comfort, isn't there? I mean, we'll get tooled up from now on, we'll start to organise some blades, but you never know who else is going tooled. There's some dirty bastards in this place, and I don't just mean the screws. What a tragedy, eh? All the other cunts escape, and we end up fucking slaughtered. Charlie, you know guns. You'd rather have one, wouldn't you?'

Charles Lister reached downwards and tucked two fingers underneath his trouser leg. When he straightened, a thin and wicked piece of steel glittered in his hand. One end was buried in a cork.

'My mama told me never walk naked in the big bad world,' he said. 'Sure I'd like a gun. But I can kill you with this if I need to. Or my fingers. I only tell you this, friends, in case there comes a time... But we're all buddies, OK? Alan, Michael, Matthew?'

'I ain't got nothing,' said Matthew Jerrold. 'My mummy told me the opposite to yours, Charlie. She say ask a police- man. And look where that got me!'

He smiled, but he knew that something big and terrible was about to happen.

They were riding on a tiger. And there was no way out.

**They needed guns, and guns were hard to smuggle in. Not very hard, and Masters knew the softest way. *Cynthia's Beam* was not far from his home now, his mistress had keys and secret access, and men could meet her in the woods outside – God bless the mobile phone! Like Sinclair's Barbara, Sarah felt she had no option.**

### **Stand by your man – Mark Two**

Sarah waited, frightened by the harshness of her breathing. After half a minute the man got back into the car and roared off into the night. Sarah went quickly to hers and got inside and locked the doors.

So now she knew. She'd given in to all the crap he'd asked of her. You fucking shit, she thought, I fucking, fucking *hate* you. Her hands were shaking so badly that she started off in third, then could not get a better gear. She stalled the engine, and restarted it. She crunched it into bottom, and began to cry. She had never been so devastatingly alone.

After a mile or two she had to stop the car and give way properly to her tears. She switched the lights and engine off and held onto the wheel and sobbed and shuddered until

she was exhausted. Then, calm, she blew her nose, and dried her puffed up eyes, and her cheeks, and her hands, and the steering wheel. She went round the inside of the car with a wad of Kleenex, to clear the condensation from the windows. She put her seat belt back on, and she prepared to drive.

So now she knew. Like all the other stupid, tragic women, she would do anything for him. As she drove along, she began to cry again. But gently.

### **Revenge plans. Hughes and The Animal**

‘What are you in for, Alan?’ McGregor asked Hughes at one point. ‘They say you killed two women. Two wives. Is that a fact?’

They were leaning on the rail around their balcony. Below them, through the netting, they could see other men, leaning, talking, walking.

‘It’s what I was convicted of,’ said Hughes. ‘There was only one body, though. The second wife. She fell downstairs and broke her neck. The first one was never found. She disappeared.’

‘So did you kill them? They’re all fucking bitches, women. I’d’ve topped my wife if I’d ever married her. She fucked off.’

‘The judge was a fan of Oscar Wilde, I think. To lose one wife could be classed as misfortune or whatever the old bore said. To lose two sounded like carelessness. He took a very dim view of it.’

‘So you could kill him, couldn’t you?’ said the Animal. ‘We could go together. We could hunt the bastards down and slaughter them. First Mr Justice Whatsisface, for my satisfaction, then your man, for being such a smartarse. Think about it.’

He was back to his obsession.

**After Cherry Orchard died, there had been a mini riot in the jail, defused by the governor, a clever and humane man called Pendlebury. At the Home Office the implications were discussed, but – in the way of governments – few people chose to take his warnings very seriously. Rumours, they said, just rumours and bravado... And Pendlebury was a raving liberal.**

**He was, perhaps. But much more was going on below the surface than even he had dreamed about. Factions were building. Brutal alliances were being formed. And concrete plans for when it all went up.**

**Most seriously, things were moving on outside, as well. Big things.**

The American associates of Charles Lister arrived in England on three separate days and by four separate points of entry, having fed false information to the corrupt Dutch

Customs officer to make sure their tracks were covered. They were two white men, Pete Delano and Al Pruchak, one black man, Sidney Gibbin, and a white woman, Syvil Hollis. Delano, who had done the hard work on the ground in Holland and Belgium, had brought five guns across, and innumerable documents. They had airline tickets, false ID, passports in various names and nations. The next task was to get some cars, go to Staffordshire, suss the prison out.

Three days after Sarah Williams had thrust Masters' bag of pistols through the car window in the country wood, another interview had taken place in Bowscar Prison between Charles Lister and two bulky, quiet men who were accredited as Special Branch. Despite their pleas for caution, Chuck had thrust the four pistols contemptuously down the front of his trousers, the cold barrel of the long Ruger hard against his pubic bone. The belly of his shirt camouflaged the butts, and he carried a jumper, which hid the ammunition.

The hardware had arrived.

### **Home Office. Sinclair and Sir Gerald**

'And if you're wrong about Pendlebury's ideas?' asked Sinclair. 'What then?'

'The man's a fool, a panic-artist,' replied Sir Gerald. 'And thanks to you, we've had a dummy run at Buckie, anyway. We'd give fair warning, then go in hard. We'd give them bloody noses and we'd show them where the power lies. Good.'

'Good,' Sinclair repeated. 'Except, sir, I don't think bloody noses would be in it. I think it would be terrible. I think there could be deaths. At the very least it would probably mean losing the building. They'd raze it to the ground.'

'So be it,' said Turner said. He was mocking, there was laughter clearly in his eyes. 'As you know, I think you are over-reacting, but if we have to lose a building, if it proves absolutely necessary, is that so bad a thing? We sacrifice a prison, but the effect is salutary. A few million spent, a few lives lost – catharsis!'

'It will be more than just a sacrifice,' said Sinclair. 'It will be a bloodbath, an appalling horror. If it spills outside the confines of the prison, if—'

'It won't,' Sir Gerald interrupted. He stood. The interview was over. 'It won't be allowed to happen. I've had a statement drafted, which you can look at if you like. You may tinker with the phraseology, naturally, but the sentiments will remain intact.'

He snapped his fingers, and an aide produced a sheet of paper. The die was cast.

### **London. Forbes and Rosanna**

Rosanna Nixon, once she had committed herself to Andrew Forbes, did it with whole heart. She had not made love properly for several years, and she had told herself she did not miss it. After three days with Forbes, she revised that slightly: she didn't know what she'd been missing.

On the morning after they first slept together, Forbes had brought her a mug of – milkless – coffee in bed, and made a tent of the duvet for them to drink it under. It was, he said, so that they could talk without the boys listening in, and that may well have been true. It also gave them the opportunity, in the light-spill as they moved, to study each other.

‘You look to me,’ he said, lifting the covers slightly and angling his head, ‘to be a skinny sort of piece. Under eight stone did you say? Your mammy would reckon you weren’t getting enough haggis and neaps. If your mammy could see you now.’

Rosanna blushed.

‘You’re quite fat,’ she said. ‘I’m not surprised, all the beer you drink. But you’re rather revolting, if this is honesty time. You ought to keep your mouth shut, in case I change my mind. Come to my senses.’

Resting on one elbow, his coffee mug on the mattress in his hand, Andrew reached across and took her nipple between his finger and his thumb. He stroked the thumbnail gently downwards.

‘You’ve got quite hairy nipples,’ he said. ‘Is that a sign of something? Your tits aren’t very big.’

‘They’re not hairy! There’s two hairs out of that one, and three out of that. It’s not my nipples, anyway. It’s the areolae.’

‘Christ,’ said Andrew. ‘Sorry I spoke. I like them, anyway. Lie down.’

‘I’m finishing my coffee. Lie down yourself and have a fantasy. Andrew. Stop it.’

Shifting her mug from one hand to the other, Rosanna rolled onto her face, propping on her elbows, slopping coffee.

‘Shit.’

‘Why?’

‘I’ve spilt my coffee.’

‘No, I meant why stop it? I’m not doing anything.’ Andrew sat up, and threw the rest of his mug down his throat. His action had uncovered Rosanna, face downwards, naked. He put his mug down and put his right hand on her bottom.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Rosanna. ‘It’s my upbringing, maybe. The religion. I’m not much good at this sort of thing, I never was. Sorry.’

Andrew turned to her, and put her mug down on the floor. He turned her over onto her back, half-covering her with the duvet. Rosanna put her palms under the back of her head, eyes closed. Outside there was birdsong, and early traffic. He studied her. Her armpits were unshaven.

‘You’re very tiny,’ he said. ‘But you don’t look like a girl, at all. You could eat your dinner off your stomach. How are you on coming? Orgasms? Being religious and all that.’

The flat white stomach convulsed twice, smoothly, as she laughed. She kept her eyes closed, and Andrew noticed that she coloured slightly.

‘Being religious,’ she replied. ‘I’ve never had one. I’ve only had one lover, as you know. An Irish Catholic. I’m lucky I’m not still a virgin.’

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, she drew her heels towards her, and moved her knees apart. Her thighs were very slim. Equally imperceptibly, Andrew moved his finger into the wider cleft.

‘You’ve got the longest hair I’ve ever seen,’ he said.

‘It’s very lovely. It’s straight, and it’s glossy. Most unusual. Most cunt hair’s curly. And short.’ He gave a little laugh. ‘Hence the name.’

He tugged it, very softly, and Rosanna had a thrill of shocking, lovely, pain. Her thighs were wide apart now, and Andrew’s lips were touching the topmost hair. She could feel his breath on her thigh, and she heard him breathing deeply. Her labia, opened with his fingers, glistened. Slowly, Rosanna lay down on her back once more. One hand she laid across his head, and ear.

‘Your clitoris is very sweet,’ he said. ‘It’s very small and pink. What’s wrong with your thigh? Why are you moving it?’

She did not know what Andrew was doing with her now, or with what. She knew nothing, except that her thighs were strained outwards, and her stomach and back were arched, pushing, pushing. There was a feeling of heat, of electricity, a sudden, spreading shock. Sudden but slow. Then a wonderful, extraordinary, release of energy, that she could not stop. She twisted, joyfully, like an animal, throwing one leg over the other and rolling right across the bed and Andrew, almost pulling off his ears. She ended up on her back again, lying on the bare board floor, legs stretched across the mattress, open. Her eyes were open, too, and she was laughing.

‘Christ,’ she said, ‘I’ve done it. You’ve done it! Andrew! Oh Jesus.’

Andrew covered her body, and her mouth, and everything, with his, and came into her. They were lovers.

## **The Brain Cell. Divvy-up**

Lister slipped out the Ruger. It was tight against his belt.

‘It’s still warm from rubbing on my pecker.’ He kissed the muzzle, theatrically. ‘I’ve gotten used to it. Fine by me, an automatic.’

Brian Rogers pushed the .25 across the table towards Masters, using the business end of the .38 Smith and Wesson. His eyes were full of some obscure pleasure.

‘Tart’s gun,’ he said. ‘It wouldn’t stop a Pekinese. So how do you feel about that, Mikey? You can tuck it in your bodice in case someone makes a pass at you.’

Lister said: ‘It’s not a bad little gun, Mike. Close range. Don’t let him put you on.’

‘I won’t.’ He turned to Rogers. ‘Close-range,’ he said, ‘it would turn a scrotum into mist. Think about it, Brian.’

He said nothing more, because his mind was full of disaster and mortality. Terrible things were going to happen, and he’d be at the heart of them. He pictured *Cynthia’s Beam*, lying easy, moored at the towpath near a lovely pub perhaps.

He wanted now to get to Sarah, and hide, and hold her and be held. To make a new life, to forget the people who had ruined him. For the moment, that would be enough. And more. Fuck the guilty ones, the great betrayers, let it be.

Let it be. He would go out with the others, but not for mayhem and destruction. He would get out and see his Sarah, and love would triumph after all. He would be with her

always, he would marry her, they would have children.  
It would be wonderful. It would.

### **The balloon goes up**

In the doorway of the cell a screw appeared, white-faced and agonised, one arm pushed and twisted up his back. And Brian Rogers shouted: 'Charlie! They're on their way! Do it, Charlie!'

God knows what was in Rogers' mind, but Charlie did it. An appalling, bubbling scream broke from the officer's face, and his lanky body shot across the narrow balcony and jack-knifed over the iron rail. As it did so, a gush of blood sprayed from his neck, out into the open body of the hall, through the suicide net and down, down, down, catching in the strings, hanging, dripping, splashing on the tiles three floors below.

As Mickie White turned back towards his cell, Charles Lister lifted the old man bodily and bounced him off the wall into the prison officers racing towards them. A shoulder flipped Mickie onto the iron rail, where he balanced grotesquely for a moment before plunging into the net. Like a child on a trampoline, he progressed inelegantly from its outside edge into the middle in four or five short hops.

Then Lister, exhilarated, threw his fists above his head and shouted.

'Come on, you guys! Let's go!'

In the servery, three floors below, Matthew Jerrold recognised his danger as a phalanx of furious, excited inmates came sweeping in. D-hall was a 'white wing,' and a whoop went up when he was spotted. Jerrold ducked and ran towards a group of officers, but their faces were contorted also, in fear or hatred, and he leapt sideways before he reached them, vaulting through a hot-plate hatchway.

He was in the preparation room. The few men left were blundering among the tables, trying to reach the doors, but to one side officers charged through to cut him off, while D-hall men seized steels and heavy trays and hunted him with joy. He died quite philosophically, dazed then dulled by the crashes to his skull. He wished he had not left the company of Alan Hughes.

**The Bowscar governor, Richard Pendlebury followed protocol to the letter. First he called the County Police Force, who officially had a plan for such emergencies, then the Home Office, who seemed bemused. As he struggled to make anyone see sense, he and his office staff retreated to the safety of the admin block. And waited for a miracle.**

**At last he got a man who understood...**

## **Behind the barricades. Governor's suite**

'Are you in a position to give details, sir? It's a matter of knowing what to send. Is it a full alert?'

At the far end of the corridor there were shouts, crashes, screams. Les Rix dashed to the office door and back again, like a caged animal. Probert said, 'For God's sake, sir! There's murder being done! They're killing!'

'I heard that,' said the voice. 'We're go. Don't worry, sir, we'll be twenty minutes.'  
'Twenty *minutes*?'

'I'm sorry, sir? We move by road, of course. But—' Pendlebury cut him off. He began to punch the numbers for the RAF. They could hear fighting in the corridor.

'Serple. Clear the admin staff. Down the fire escape. Ar-thur, is it safe? Or should we—?' He abandoned the phone call, knowing it was ridiculous. The air base was sixty miles away. They couldn't even land a helicopter near the prison. What could they do? Bomb the place?

'Lock them in,' said Probert. His colour was alarming, pasty with purple blotches. 'Lock us all in. It's our only defence. Are there any weapons? We can't go down the fire escape, we'd be walking into it. Are there any guns?'

**There weren't, of course. Just anarchy and mayhem. But shortly afterwards they could hear the sound of guns from other parts of the jail. And the sounds of screams, and shouts, and madness. Anything, except the sound of rescue...**

## **In the belly of the beast**

As they moved through the milling crowd, they spotted Billy Ford against a wall. He was laughing, and waved at them with a ten-inch carving knife.

'He's fucking drunk,' said Rogers. 'He's fucking mad, that bloke.'

'Yeah,' said Brian Rogers. 'But I hope they remember the idea's to get out, though. Fucking mad.'

They moved fast and carefully, watchful for attack, and when they reached the end of the passage, they stopped. An iron gate hung open, with a blue shirt, for some unfathomable reason, jammed between two upright bars. In two steps, they would be out of the prison-proper, the cell halls, and close to the laundry, the reception hall, the admin. And the gates.

As they hesitated, three prison officers turned a corner twenty feet from them, at a run. They were in riot gear, with helmets, clubs and shields. They were almost past the motionless prisoners before they saw them, and when it registered they were shocked beyond reason. As they stumbled to a halt Lister stepped in front of them, the long Ruger pointing at the nearest stomach. Rogers, beaming with delight, presented his .38 more like a Western gunslinger than a marksman, at eye height and arm's length, the barrel inches from an officer's face.

'Lucky you,' he said. 'You've been chosen as our hostage!'

Out in the yard, it was the noise of shots from inside the admin block that broke down the last resistance of the officers in the gatehouse. They had bravely held their ground for many seconds, even when Brian Rogers, still beaming, had approached to within feet of their window with his hostage.

‘Open up,’ he had said, cheerfully. ‘Can’t you hear the fucker counting? Open that fucking gate.’

‘Five,’ said Lister loudly. ‘Six.’

It was then that shots were heard from the governor’s suite. The hostage let out a cry, and dropped

to his knees, and urinated uncontrollably. Then began to sob. Charles Lister kicked him violently.

‘Seven! Eight!’

The hostage started screaming at the gatehouse: ‘Open it! Open it!’

And Rogers turned and fired a bullet at the door. The .38 jumped and smoked, and Rogers gave a whoop of pure joy, his ears still ringing from the bang.

### **The cancer spreads**

The car that halted nearest McGregor and Hughes was a Fiat 500. The driver was a youth of nineteen or so, and his companion was a pretty blonde of seventeen. They could

see one of the men was bleeding, but it didn’t occur to them for many moments that they were in any danger.

When they were close, McGregor pushed Hughes into a stumbling run, while holding on to him for support. Hughes saw the faces through the windscreen change, the girl’s mouth opening to scream as McGregor flopped forward onto the car and wrenched the passenger door open.

Hughes did not move. He did not know what would happen next. And jumped in horror as the muzzle flashed. The girl’s face, hit just below the cheekbone, tore redly in front of his eyes, a ball of blood springing brightly from her right temple as he seemed to hear the bang.

Then McGregor seized her by the hair and jerked her towards him, simultaneously firing over her. Both these reports reached Hughes’ ears like one, and there was a lot of blood, and the muzzle – how, he did not know – was pointed at him.

McGregor moved fast and crabwise round the bonnet, and pulled the other door open. He dragged the driver out backwards, making a circular movement with his pistol, some sort of order. Hughes passed the bonnet, stepped over the bleeding youth, and fell into the driving seat. The engine was still running.

‘Drive,’ said McGregor. Mysteriously, he was in the passenger seat, wiping blood from the inside of the wind- screen with his sleeve, pointing the revolver at Hughes’ head. He made a small sound of disgust.

‘Yeach. Messy wee bitch. Curiosity killed the fucking cat.’

## ***Cynthia's Beam.* Sarah Williams**

Sarah Williams knew it was the day her man would come to join her. Michael had sent a final text. *Cynthia's Beam* lay less than two miles from the prison. *Cynthia's Beam*, and Sarah. She was waiting for him.

**But Michael Masters had been betrayed. He had been picked up in a black Mercedes and driven off to Manchester. He had ended up in a Gorton cellar, guarded by two men in overcoats. He was sharing quarters with two corpses. One of them was Peter Smith.**

**And Brian Rogers, gang boss and rapist extraordinary...was on his way to the canal side. To visit *Cynthia's Beam*.**

### **A hotel. Forbes and Rosanna.**

Being a journalist herself, Rosanna Nixon found many of Andrew Forbes' infuriating habits quite endearing. When they woke up in their hotel bedroom, he switched the radio on. Then, discovering as he often did that his slight hangover had produced a serious erection, he proposed to put it in her while they listened to the news. Rosanna, who was wearing nothing but a tee-shirt, spread her legs luxuriously and enjoyed the sensation of her vulva being nudged delicately open. It was not a serious fuck, but it was very pleasant – and there were the events outside their house the night before to chat about as well. Bowscar came third or fourth in the running order and just before Andrew, moving lazily, was about to come himself. Rosanna went 'ooh' when she heard the name, and looked automatically over her shoulder at the radio. Andrew, his head buried in her hair, put himself on hold. They lay still, wrapped around each other, listening.

'Overnight reports of escapes from Bowscar Prison, Staffordshire, have been denied by a Home Office spokesman,' the announcer said. 'A minor disturbance earlier is still being investigated, but nobody is reported to have been hurt. Bowscar, which houses more than one thousand men, some of them in the highest-risk security category, was the scene of another small disturbance last month. It is not thought that the incidents were related.'

'Fuck,' said Andrew, when the next item had started.

'I thought we were.'

But she was not serious. They were no longer. She moved her body under him, and he rolled to one side and clicked off the radio. He grabbed his phone.

'Andrew,' came Jackson's voice. 'Have you heard? Where the hell are you?'

'Hotel. They had my place surrounded when we got back home last night. We did a bunk.'

'It was Lister's lot. They came looking for you and they killed the Corsair Cavaliers.

You're in the shit, mate. And Rosanna. It's the mob, and they're going on a Mousehunt.

Sorry. It's not a laughing matter. Look – keep on the move, all right? I'm serious, mate.

Look for trouble.'

For twenty minutes afterwards, Forbes and Rosanna chased all the information they had round and round in circles. They were both cast down and worried by what they knew, as much for what it meant to Pendlebury as for themselves. They both knew they had to find the truth out fast, and they both knew it could only be achieved in person.

'Are you afraid?' said Andrew. Rosanna, getting out of bed, paused. .  
'Should I be?'

Andrew considered. He smiled.

'Nah, I spose not. After all, you've got me to protect you! Here – where you going?'  
He pulled her purposefully back, and laid her on her side. Then he lifted her knee onto his thigh and slid his hand between her legs. He began to stroke her properly, as if he meant it this time. Rosanna stretched, and sighed.

'That's unexpected,' she said. 'What have I done to deserve this sort of attention in the middle of a crisis?'

He put his lips into the soft part of her neck.

'Who knows,' he said. 'If the nasties get us, this could be our last. And I'm rather fond of you, my mouse. Didn't you know that?'

### **Home Office. Sinclair, Fortyne, Judith**

'I heard already,' Sinclair said. 'What about escapes? Anybody?'

Fortyne nodded.

'Dozens, maybe more. Nobody knows for certain. The Army and police are organising roadblocks, and any minute now the phones will be going mad. I'll rustle up some staff, and we'll need a joint committee with the MOD. Here would be the best location, we've got the files and plans and things, but you'll need to sort that out with the defence wallahs. Their minister's on his way from Devon.'

'Sir Gerald? Do we give him the full picture?'

'I'd say we were a little busy at the moment, wouldn't you? When I called him half an hour ago I told you his response. He also mentioned how good his relations with the military are. They're sure to tell him, aren't they?'

Sinclair let out a little hiss through his nostrils.

'Dangerous game,' he said. 'He'll be expecting updates if the situation gets worse.'

Fortyne looked straight into his eyes.

'I thought you wanted to screw him, Donald. I doubt you'll ever get a better stab at it.'

Judith's phone was ringing. The green one, dedicated to the press.

'What shall I tell them? What's the tactic?'

'The usual one,' said Sinclair. He knew Fortyne was right. If things were as bad as they sounded, he wouldn't get a second chance.

To Fortyne he said: 'We've got to cut the village off. We'll need a *cordon sanitaire* of eight or ten miles. Get your staff while I talk to the MOD. Then I want the police chiefs for Staffs and all the bordering counties, plus fire chiefs and medicos. Jesus, Christian. Jumping Jesus. What a *chance!*'

### **Bowscar. Sir Gerald visits**

The prison, when the Home Secretary finally got to see it, was devastated beyond belief. A low pall of smoke spread over the fields in the fitful easterly breeze, and the roof of one

whole wing had collapsed into the burnt-out shell. Fires were still burning in several other places, with fire engines drawn up near them.

As far as he could make out, there was not one unbroken window in the place, nor one stretch of un-stripped roof. Behind every chimney stack men flitted, with others standing at the parapets beside piles of jagged slates, which they threw intermittently at soldiers and firemen in the yards below. From one corner, most horribly, hung the corpse of a prison officer, dressed only in a uniform cap and shirt.

Much against his will, Turner had been persuaded to look at him through high definition binoculars. The face was blackened and contorted from strangulation, and had one ear ripped off. The man beside him – Colonel Benson – seemed to think it made a point.

The officer, whose slight rawness of manner marked him out as not quite establishment, had also expressed some bitterness that his units had not been allowed to storm the jail in the early hours as had been planned and – they understood – agreed. Since daylight, three hostages had died, including the hanging man. One had been thrown into the courtyard still alive, seriously injuring a sergeant and two corporals who had hoped to break his fall. The person who had aborted the attack, said Benson levelly, needed his head examining.

**Other agencies could operate with less constraint than a government under stress, largely because they had no fear of being secret – it was written in their genes. Lister had escaped, that was well known. Both the CIA and their British counterparts now had to silence him. And Peter Jackson and his pal de Sallis were roped in as observers – unofficially. Implicating the innocent in major crimes is a very useful tool.**

**While Andrew and the Mouse tried to get closer to the prison to see what they could see, their friend was taken to the wilds of Hampshire. Lister had gone there to get some arms and cover, and the story was that he would be arrested. That was the story...**

### **World's End. Jackson and de Sallis**

Peter Jackson and his American oppo had been silent in the unmarked vehicle for about ten minutes when they heard the shots. There were ten or twelve of them, but they came in short bursts, rather than one fusillade. A flights of rooks rose, cawing, over Liberty Wood, but the normal country sounds had soon returned.

De Sallis, who was smoking, threw his cigarette end onto the gravel driveway leading to Pratt's Farm, which was not visible from where they sat.

'These clever ones,' he said, laconically. 'It makes you wonder sometimes, I dunno. Chuck Lister must have called these guys to come and see him in this God forsaken hole, he must have told them where to find the fucking place. Didn't it occur to him he'd just killed their buddies outside Forbes's dump? Did he think they were going to fix him up a nice flight out?'

‘This is England,’ Jackson replied. ‘Nobody understands our secret services, least of all a foreigner. Lister probably thought he’d killed two muggers.’

‘Horseshit. He probably thought his friends’d do anything for the green, just like him. One sixty million out there on the ocean is the buzz. I wonder who’ll be playing for it now?’

They could hear the crunching of feet on gravel. Two of the detectives came into sight, their faces grave. The first one said to John de Sallis, ‘Look, I’m sorry mate, there’s been an accident.’

The second spoke to Peter Jackson.

‘What’s your angle on capital punishment in the Cus- toms these days?’ he asked. ‘Do you agree with it? Because I think it’s just come back.’

The two policemen glanced at each other. Their faces split. They both gave shouts of laughter.

### **On the road. Forbes and the Mouse**

Andrew and Rosanna played out the first part of the trip to Bowscar as a road movie. Once beyond the grind of London’s traffic in their hired Golf, they found some country music and acted stupid. The day was fine and Rosanna hitched her skirt up to show her knickers, while Andrew played the horny-handed cowboy with the inside of her thigh. They listened to the radio, however. Constant rolling news.

The angles altered slowly, and remained downbeat. By midday it was admitted that there’d been a riot, but a very minor one. There’d been a fair amount of damage done, but no dangerous people had escaped. They knew that this was untrue, and it intrigued them. Nearly ten miles from the prison, they saw a roadblock up ahead.

‘God,’ said Rosanna. ‘What the hell’s going on?’

It took them half an hour to work out that Bowscar was a no-go area, but they still tried to ignore the implications. When Rosanna rang the prison there was no tone of any sort, the line was dead. She suggested, dubiously, they should try the governor at home.

‘Well, you’ve got the number,’ Andrew said. ‘But Pemberton’s not going to be there, is he?’

‘Not the number, stupid. We’ll go there. This is a road movie, remember? We’ll go and talk to Eileen, the lovely, mysterious daughter. You’ll be expected to sleep with her, in the genre.’

She assumed her Bonnie Parker role, although with noticeably little heart.

‘But I’m warning you, bo – I got a real mean little shooter down my stocking top.’

### **Cynthia’s Beam**

His snoring might have brought her round. The back beside her was huge and white, practically hairless, and vibrated with a contented rhythm. With the side of her face, she

could feel the lump hammer underneath the pillow, that this animal had not even noticed as he rolled about the bed. But she knew she could not reach or use it.

She had been sick, she smelled, she was dying for the lavatory. But Rogers, waking just then like a happy child, opened his eyes, and coughed, and rolled over on her as he fumbled with the knots that held her legs. And Sarah went numb, incapable of normal thought or movement, let alone response.

And she watched her mobile while he raped her, she watched it hanging, swaying, on the cabin wall. The mobile that had betrayed her, yesterday. And only Michael knew the number now.

It did not ring.

### **Home Office, Queen Anne's Gate**

Rumours of the simmering row in Westminster surfaced spectacularly when the *Guardian*, in an exclusive front-page piece, revealed that Sir Gerald Turner, shortly before the Bowskar disaster, had said he would be prepared to sacrifice one of Britain's prisons as a way of demonstrating just what would happen. His cries of anguish were audible throughout Parliament, and of rage throughout Queen Anne's Gate.

He in turn leaked his fury to *The Times*, suggesting that it was a pack of lies, and he knew who was responsible. Sinclair refused to rise to the bait, but Radio 4 next morning broadcast a tape on which he could clearly be heard saying

'It will be more than just a sacrifice, it will be a bloodbath, Sir Gerald.'

Later, in the House, Sinclair said piously that he utterly deplored leaks, from whatever source and for whatever reason, and what was more, he had absolutely no recollection of such a conversation. Next morning's tabloids followed up this denial with allegations that Sir Gerald had been anxious to 'send in the troops' the morning after the riot, 'whatever the consequences in terms of human life'. Another lie, he said.

That night, however, as Sinclair and his mistress drank champagne, the name of Masters recurred too often. They both felt that he would be outside the prison somewhere, that his wealth would have made sure he had escaped. They knew more than his wife about his love life, also, thanks to the secret services, but still not half enough. They knew he had a girlfriend and a boat, and they knew he had good reasons to discreetly disappear. Damned good reasons. They also guessed he wanted some revenge.

'Best case,' said Donald, 'would be the bastard's dead. We don't believe in fairies though, do we? But he's a canny operator. I just hope he's clean away and won't come back and end up back in jail for even longer. But if he does...I could be in the shit.'

'And if he does, my love,' said Judith. 'Turner's still in the deeper shit. And there's more bastards than just Masters we don't know about, aren't there? That Irish godfather who escaped, what's he called, the Armagh Wolf? And all those drugs barons, the yardies, the insane Islamists – it's Gerald's can to carry for the lot of them. Just play it cool, my love, and he goes down. And if he goes down, you go up, don't you?'

She put her glass down and walked over to the bed. She patted it. She smiled a certain smile at him, and ran her tongue around her lips, lasciviously. 'Talking of which, I think I'd rather like to lick your cock,' she said. 'Semen and champagne. You're going to be top dog, my love. Top dog and dirty with it. Please do come and let me fuck you now.'

**The Armagh Wolf that Judith spoke about was a man called Conor Brady. Not a terrorist, who might have been freed under the Good Friday Agreement, but a successful criminal, the sort of man who might have colonized America in the old days – or founded the New York police. Jail had not suited him, and now he was outside – in the house where Peter Smith the armourer had died. And he had Michael Masters with him, as a hostage.**

**Who was pining for Sarah Williams, his lost love. He needed her. To speak to her, at least. It was worth anything to him.**

### **Gorton. Masters and the Wolf**

In Bowscar, it was said, Conor Brady had not smiled in thirty-seven months. He smiled now.

'So,' he said. 'How do we get the money?'

'You don't.'

The smile deepened.

'So you don't stay alive. I've got Tweedledum and Tweedledee. I won't even soil my pretty little hands. So what's the proposition?'

'A mobile phone. I need to make a call. Not to Barbara. To another woman. Not for money, but because I've got to talk to her. If you want it straight, Mr Armagh Wolf – for love.'

'And when you've talked to her?'

'I'll contact Barbara. I can do that, you can't. Give me a mobile, and there's no more argument. You can even listen if you're that prurient.'

This time Conor Brady laughed.

'A million for a fucking phone call. Love's young dream. I wouldn't fucking dream of listening.'

They both knew he was lying. And neither of them cared.

### **On the road. Again**

**After the Bowscar knockback, Forbes and Rosanna tracked down the governor's daughter Eileen, who was a wonderful source of contacts and arcane information to be followed up. Now the London house was a no-go area they kept on the move, liaising incessantly with Peter Jackson. The news they got was sometimes chilling. One warning was that pictures and descriptions were in circulation, they could be lifted any time.**

'Peter, is this gen, or are you winding me up?' asked Forbes. He and Rosanna had

absorbed a lot, had got their spirits back, they felt invincible.

'It's more than gen,' said Jackson. 'It's from the horse's mouth. I'm getting pure info from a contact in the Special Branch since we helped with Charlie's friends. I won't ask where you are, but what's the strength at your end. How's Rosanna?'

Forbes told him everything, unable to break his mood. Of finding Sir Gerald Turner's daughter Carole Rochester in Leicester and learning of the secret flat she'd shared with Sinclair when they had been lovers, of her mobile home near Llanbedrog, of the Michael Masters scam. Indeed, his elation grew.

'We've got enough to hang Sinclair,' he said. 'We'll even be able to spring a confrontation on him, if we're lucky. Carole thinks he won't have moved out of the lovenest, he's too big-headed and too idle, he thinks he's fireproof. Otherwise, we'll get him at the House!' 'Christ,' said Jackson. 'You don't half sound confident, old son. Hasn't it occurred to you just what you mean to that twat? Apart from Carole Rochester, you and Rosanna are the only threat. You're the only ones with anything at all on him.'

'He doesn't know that, though. He doesn't know we've talked to her. We're just two nuts who disappeared the night the Scar blew up. Anyway—'

Jackson interrupted: 'And the night two spooks got shot to death outside your house. And who've been baiting him for weeks about the Animal. Anyway what?'

'There's Masters, too. He's the biggest threat, for Christ's sake. We're just chickenfeed. He could bring Sinclair down.'

'If he's still alive,' said Jackson, sombrely. 'This time they mean it, Andrew, they're not going to pay the ransom. Sinclair put his name on it, but it was a Cabinet decision. Death warrant.'

He said no more. Forbes sighed.

'All right,' he said, 'you win. Playtime over. But I'm going to see him, Peter, nothing's going to stop me. And I'm going to keep a smile stuck on my face, OK? Got any good ideas? We need somewhere to hole up in town. Not your place, obviously. They know you.'

Jackson mentioned an address in Clapham. It was a mutual friend of theirs, who was in Australia. The phone was not connected, it was safe.

'That's good,' said Andrew. 'Sinclair's gaff's in Stockwell, not far away. Any more instructions, Uncle?'

'Get into London quick, and ditch the car. Get to Clapham and don't be seen. I've got leads to follow up, and for now you're on your own. Stay that way. Stay hidden. How's the Mouse on growing beards?'

'She's got one already, thanks, and I'm in love with it. And her.' He stopped. There was a heaviness around his heart. 'Oh by the way, that's official now, old cock. All sexual fantasies

obtainable only on licence from now on. You're excluded. Sorry.'

There was a brief pause. Then Jackson said: 'I'm very happy for you both. Live to enjoy it.'

He rang off before Andrew could reply.

### **Canal side. Cynthia's Beam**

And then Sarah's phone, at last, did ring. Her hands and feet were tied, she was naked, and as it warbled, her back arched uncontrollably and she made a tortured sound.

'Fuck me,' said Brian Rogers, 'you've got a caller, girl. Secret admirer, is it? If he could only see you now!'

He leaned across her, and looked at the display. Then clicked it on and held it out to Sarah's face. She was groaning. She was mewling with distress.

'Speak up,' he said. 'It's your knight in shining armour. Tell him what a lovely time you're having. Speak!'

She heard the voice, and almost choked with pain.

'Sarah,' said Michael Masters. 'Sarah? Sarah, please.'

Rogers put the phone up to his mouth.

'Hallo, Mickie, how's it going, lad? It's Brian, innit? Sarah can't speak now, she's got her mouth full, know what I mean?'

And Sarah screamed. A tearing, grinding scream. And Masters listened to her.

### **Wolf and lamb and video**

**Masters could not get the money to buy off the Armagh Wolf. There were men in government who said it would be unpatriotic, and there were ways of closing down his other sources, too. Barbara, who perhaps should have known better, damn nearly killed herself to get the cash, and there were many voices on the internet, and in the gutter rags, who said she had. Conspiracy.**

**Michael Masters, himself, never believed the money would not come somehow. But one day he had a date with Tweedledum and Tweedledee in a Gorton cellar that truly reeked of death.**

The speed was staggering, and Masters was numb. His screams to Sarah had been the last feeling sounds he'd made, and now he was indifferent. So these cunts were going to kill him, so fucking what? He'd gone down to the cellar like a lamb. A lamb at gunpoint.

'It's the stiffs,' said Conor Brady. He indicated two body bags laid out in a corner.

'You'd've thought the smell of oil would've masked it, wouldn't you?'

Tweedledum and Tweedledee seemed disaffected.

'Fucking crap body bags,' said the older one. 'You should've gone to Costco. They're meant to keep them sweet for months. These stiffs are fucking 'anging. Shite.'

'Can't get the staff,' the Wolf apologised to Masters.

'Nothing but moan, that's all I ever hear. Peter Smith, he never moaned. The man that made the gun.' He indicated the lathe and other tools. 'He was the best. He had to go, though, just like you. I can't afford to piss about.'

It was beginning to sink in on Masters that he really was about to die. This lunatic and his henchmen were really going to kill him in cold blood. The body bags were real. The lumpy shapes inside were real. Oh sweet Jesus. Sarah. Oh Sarah. My poor love.

‘I could get the money afterwards,’ he said. ‘There’s still a deal to do. I’m loaded, Conor. You could have the fucking lot.’

‘Aw come on, boss!’ It was the younger sidekick. He had produced a big handgun from somewhere, and it had a silencer. ‘I’ve got me laptop in me bag. We’re going to put it up on YouTube. It’ll go viral, it’s a fucking cert!’

‘I’m serious,’ said Michael Masters. ‘Everything you want. All of it.’

‘Ah give over,’ laughed the Armagh Wolf. ‘You’ll get on YouTube, did you not hear the man? Let that be enough for you, don’t be so fucking greedy.’

‘Ah well,’ said Masters. He didn’t argue any more. He didn’t choose to care. ‘It was worth a try.’

‘And so it was,’ said Brady. ‘Look on the bright side, Michael. The trick is – never say die!’

### **A mobile home. North Wales**

Angus John McGregor died quite unexpectedly. He had asked for a bowl of soup, and when Hughes brought it to him, he found him dead. He had looked like a corpse for days, but in death he was different. The lines around his mouth had gone.

‘What shall we do?’ said Hughes. ‘We’d better call the law.’

‘We could make love,’ said Carole Rochester. ‘Angus wouldn’t mind. We don’t have to use the bed, do we? The floor’s all right.’

There was no reason to ask if she was joking.

‘This is very sudden, Alan. I apologise. I just wanted to, that’s all.’

‘It’s a normal reaction as I understand it,’ he said, steadily. ‘It’s called the Stockholm Syndrome. Captors and captives get confused. Dependent. They sometimes fall in love. I’d like to try. If you can stand a failure?’

They took each other’s clothes off and, oblivious to McGregor’s sightless stare, they did quite well, they thought. Then, lying on her back, Carole asked Hughes: ‘Did you really kill your wife? Your wives?’

‘In my heart of hearts,’ said Hughes, ‘I like to think I didn’t. But I did kill one of them. The other one just disap- peared. The one I killed fell down the stairs. I didn’t push her, but I didn’t try to save her. I’m lying. She was pushed. I pushed her.’

‘I’d have liked to have pushed my husband down the stairs. And my father. And Donald Sinclair.’

‘No stairs in here,’ said Alan Hughes. ‘We’re safe.’ She turned to him, and put her head on his chest.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I feel that. Tonight – let’s put old Angus on the floor, shall we? He wouldn’t mind.’

### **Queen Anne’s Gate**

It was one of Sinclair's former journalistic colleagues who alerted him to the YouTube viral hit, and Sinclair moved like greased lightning to suppress it, to get it dropped. He telephoned the ministry technicians and threatened them with the direst of consequences

for failure, then interrupted an official Prime Ministerial reception with the most urgent codeword possible.

The tape was dynamite. Death on YouTube, and distinctly bloody, pure cinema. The target on his knees, pale faced and pleading, with an empty body bag laid out behind him, two more behind that, not empty in any way at all.

And then a shot, a peculiar, muffled squirting noise, and a close up of the smoking silencer. Laughter, from three throats. A corpse stretched out on the cellar floor, a slight twitching, and then cut off. No sound, abrupt. To blackness.

Within twenty minutes news-rooms staff across the media were locked in scenes that could have been from Hollywood. Jostled by humourless men with Secret Service faces, they were moved from their computer terminals and made to line the walls. Telephones were left unanswered, while duty producers and editors were conducted to their offices and told to speak to nobody. Injunctions burst forth to kill thoughts of reproducing the clip, in any medium, or as stills. Donald, served by Judith Parker, drank ice-cold Becks and sweated blood.

In the event, try as Whitehall might, they were no match for the modern media, which truth to tell few of them even understood. Although the TV news output was filleted, the virus spread across the internet, way beyond control.

At 10.46 that night, Sinclair took a call on the hot-phone from Velma Goodman, the PM's rottweiler. The PM, she said, was incandescent, what was he going to do about it? Sinclair cited Sir Gerald Turner as the man in charge, and Velma almost spat. Turner had fucked up, she said, Turner was fucking toast. Who had named Michael Masters, who had said the Government would not pay, who had set off the media wildfire, who had hung them out to dry? Who would save them? Who?

At 10.53, leaving a trusted deputy to watch the hot- phone, Sinclair, Fortyne and Judith went into an empty office for a conference. Their strategy decided, at 11.12 Judith and Fortyne started ringing their main contacts, while Sinclair contacted the very top of State security. The subject was not the YouTube scandal, but Bowscar Prison.

Suddenly, it appeared, the situation had become critical.

Latest intelligence was that random killing of hostages was taking place, and the Government had been forced to act. A crack force of assault troops would be going in tonight. Repeat – *tonight*.

That news alone – official, from the highest sources – was enough to clear everything off the front pages. But Judith Parker promised updates throughout the action, and suggested special editions and print-runs would be needed into the early hours. The media loved it, they were galva- nised, they lapped it up like cream. Michael Masters? Who was Michael Masters? He was forgotten, he was yesterday. Last year's news...

'We're on the move,' said Christian Fortyne, when Judith had made her last call. 'Donald, that was a classic carve-up. Should we tell Sir Gerald, do you think!'

They all three laughed like drains.

### **Bowscar. The attack**

The timing of the last assault was critical. All the intelligence the military had gathered over the course of the siege suggested that between 3 and 4 am would be best, as there was very little detectable activity in the jail at that time. It was also desirable from a reportage point of view.

The main problem they faced remained the hostages. There was no way of knowing where or how they were being kept, or how close they were at any time to people who might kill them. The simple fact was that the troops would go in blind, and could provoke a massacre.

'The pity of it is,' said Judith Parker, 'that if we had a few more days, they'd probably all come out anyway, of their own accord. Sod bloody Michael Masters.'

'Unlucky, yes,' said Sinclair. 'But there's no alternative. In any case, if some hostages do get hurt, it'll hardly be our fault, will it?'

Over the next few hours, the logistics kept them fully occupied. The designated hospitals were alerted, the camps where the bulk of the prisoners would go were manned, and the governors who had high-security places waiting were told to expect 'visitors' in the tail-end of the night. Sinclair went up to Bowscar, but kept himself well-hidden until the press – protesting violently – had been moved back.

He heard the signal given, and he watched the troops go in. He thought of Buckie, and he crossed his fingers.

### **Mobile home. Jackson follows leads**

Carole's body was in the corner. There was a bullet hole in her cheek, and blood on the wall beside her. A slightly-built man was lying on his back on the floor, looking as if the Special Branch men had been dragging him when Jackson had arrived. In an armchair, with a pistol in his hand, sat the smallest corpse. The Animal. There was a black gash and ripped flesh at his throat, as if he had shot himself at very close range – after he was dead. The smell of gunsmoke lingered in the air.

'That's Angus McGregor there, that little shite,' the man said. 'As far as we can see he shot the other two, then himself. The woman's been fucked. You know Angus McGregor? The Animal. Escaped from Bowscar.'

'Christ. He got all this way. Poor bitch, I wonder how she copped for this lot?'

'We're just clearing up. Now, can we help you? Because we're a wee bit busy here, as you can see.'

Jackson could see very well. He guessed they were setting up the scene now, for a photograph.

'No,' he said. 'No interest to me now. Oh well. It was a lovely drive.'

'There's a good pub down the road,' said one of the policemen, suddenly quite friendly.

'The Ship. They all speak fucking Welsh there, but they seem quite human. If you were planning on staying local?'

'No,' said Jackson. 'I'll get back. Duty calls.'

'Ah. But you haven't seen us, have you? Know what I mean?'

'Not a word, of course. We're only interested in the live ones in my line of trade. Dead men pay no VAT. See you.'

'London, is it?'

'That's right. London.'

But he did not return to London. Instead, in Llanbedrog, he turned right on the road to Aberdaron, where he had stayed in a hotel as a kid. He'd have a night off, stay out of the pull of trouble, drink some beer. What more could he do?

He needed to contact Forbes and Rosanna. He had to talk to them.

He had to warn them...

### **Queen Anne's Gate. Sinclair, Fortyne, Judith**

Donald Sinclair, a glass of ice-cold Beck's in front of him, was still chuckling when the phone rang. It was his wife. Her voice was colder than the beer.

'I suppose you're satisfied now, are you?' she asked. 'Donald, what exactly does this mean? And incidentally, are you intending ever to come home?'

Sinclair frowned.

'Yes, this evening, if I can get away. I've moved heaven and earth, but you must understand how rushed it's been.'

'Oh I do,' said Mary, icily. 'I'm expecting the announcement any moment.'

'What announcement?'

'Oh, pick any one from twenty. Your appointment as Home Secretary. Goose-stepping in primary schools, transportation, arming the police. You name it. You've turned into a savage.'

'Dear dear,' said Donald Sinclair. 'Perhaps I'd better stay away tonight, then. I wouldn't like my jackboots to make the bedclothes dirty, that would never do would it?'

He put the receiver down and drank some beer. He smiled at Judith.

'That was a reprieve. The mad lady I took to wife and bed. Tonight I'll take you to bed again, and a bloody good thing too. Do you think I'm a savage?'

'What, in bed? Try me!'

### **Clapham. Stockwell.**

Forbes and Rosanna, holed up in the rather poky borrowed flat in Stormont Road, listened to all the news they could absorb, and watched the news channels almost obsessively. There had been no mention of them, and no pictures on the screen, but they found this unsurprising in view of the vast amount of footage that the siege provided.

They lived from the fridge and freezer, and slept a lot, and made love.

At ten o'clock on the evening that Sinclair was made Home Secretary, they took a bus to Stockwell and walked to the address that Carole Rochester had given them. They watched the street door for nearly half an hour before they moved.

Inside, Donald and Judith were talking seriously. The evening was meant to have been a celebration, and they had drunk champagne and eaten some marvellous game pie she'd sent out for from Queen Anne's Gate that afternoon. But Sinclair had been quite moody and Judith, attributing it to his wife, had swung between sympathy and irritation.

'It's mad,' she said. 'She's like a *Guardian* leader, for God's sake. What she calls hypocrisy, I call common sense. Your wife's stupid.'

'Maybe.'

'Maybe nothing. You played Turner at his own dirty little game and you wiped the floor with him. You've won! Now *cheer up*, damn you!'

It sounded good. The shades of doubt were lifting. He had won...

Nevertheless, he was very cautious when he went down to the street door. And he put the chain on first.

'Hallo,' he said, to the man and woman standing on the doorstep. 'Can I help you?'

'My name's Andrew Forbes. This is Rosanna Nixon. We understand you've been looking for us.'

At first, and for several seconds, Sinclair was stunned. The secret services, the police, had been looking for this pair for days. Yet they had found him, at an address even the secret services did not know. Suddenly, it struck him as laughable, ridiculous. Instead of fear or anger, he felt euphoria. He was tempted, for a moment, to ask them in. He did not, though.

'Indeed I have,' he said. 'How nice of you to drop by. What can I do for you?'

The couple appeared to him to be totally unthreatening. The man was scruffy, and the woman was small and fragile, like a child. She was nervous.

'There were a few things we wanted to put to you,' said Forbes. 'Miss Nixon, as you know, saw James McGregor murdered on the roof at Buckie. The night you were staying at the Fox Hotel under the name of Swift. Then you had his brother taken to an English prison, and held in isolation. The governor complained, and warned you about the unrest in the prison, and ultimately freed him from solitary confinement, against your instructions.'

'Which were probably illegal, anyway,' put in Rosanna, fiercely. 'Then you had the gall to blame Mr Pendlebury for everything. You can't deny that.'

Forbes put his hand out to touch her sleeve. It was a tender gesture.

'There's the question of Michael Masters, too,' he said. 'We've got evidence that you were directly responsible for his imprisonment and death. Don't you think you'd better let us in to talk?'

Donald Sinclair, disconcertingly, laughed. It was a bark, almost of delight.

'The ragged-trousered philanthropist and his moll!' he said. 'Who do you reckon's going to publish it? How quickly can you persuade the media to put their heads on the chopping block for me, I honestly can't wait. Fuck off, will you, crawl back to your hole.'

At this time, in this place, until they had regrouped, Andrew and Rosanna had no shots left, and all three of them knew it. The frontal ploy had failed. Sinclair unclipped the chain and stepped into the doorway. They retreated before him, as if from an attack.

'How far do you think you're going to get?' he asked them. 'Outside this front door?'

We've almost picked you up before, you know, we've missed by inches. Does that worry you? It ought to. Now go.'

He swept towards them, and they retreated further. They turned, and began to walk away. Sinclair shouted after them: 'Did you come by car, you idiots? You'd best check underneath it before you drive away. You might just find a bomb!'

### **Aberdaron. Peter Jackson**

He had been staring at the Irish Sea for hours. The scene in the mobile home had been gruesome, but the attitude of the men he'd spoken to was worse. The great divide, he thought. Us and them. The law abiders and the criminals. Increasingly, he felt the gap was narrowing. Increasingly, he found himself appalled.

It was hard to get a signal where he was. He tried several locations, walking up and

down. He climbed a steep bank, went on to the shore. Nothing. Not enough to make a call.

In the end he texted them, and even that sat in his mobile for long ages, refused to go. It never happens on the telly, Jackson thought. You never see a police sting end with no one getting through. You never see a gang of criminals miss a bank raid rendezvous because the signal's crap.

He kept it brief, avoided text speak, avoided melodrama. It still sounded stupid, though. With luck they wouldn't even get it.

**mobile home disaster. much blood. gone to seaside.  
drive careful. mean it.**

He wondered, as a car drove by him very slowly, if maybe he'd been followed. Bollocks. He was going mad.

He went and had a pint of bitter. He was missing London badly.

## **Llyn Celyn. Forbes and Rosanna**

**The news in the bleak aftermath to Bowscar was extraordinary, and seemingly without cease. The bloody, murderous ending to the siege, the mounting casualties, the politicians pushing and being pushed, cold-blooded executions in London streets, rape and carnage. They had not heard from Jackson, nor had they been able to contact him, but they knew there were things that only they could do. Their first duty, they felt, was to Carole Pendleton. Her hour of need was perhaps the greatest.**

They were well into Wales when they heard about Donald Sinclair. For lack of alternative they had hired a car in Rosanna's name, and on her licence. It seemed unlikely they could keep Andrew's presence hidden, but they were both tired, miserable, running on hope. Rosanna Nixon was not, yet, so well known.

After the first, terrific, shock, the news about Sinclair had rather cheered them. Ghoulish, but why try to hide it? But as the words rolled on, their faint feeling of relief soon faded.

The stark statement of the facts was followed by a panegyric which was the soul and model of obsequiousness. From Buckie to Bowscar, they were told, his star had glittered in the firmament, it was ever climbing. For Rosanna and Forbes, it was a bitter cup to swallow. After a few minutes, they switched off.

'Another hero for democracy,' he said. 'Fucking hypocrites.'

'Do you think we ought to go on now, though? Just to get arrested? Shouldn't we try and get away somehow? I've got friends in France, you must have contacts. We can get the story out. There's got to be a way.'

It was starting to rain; they were well into North Wales. Andrew flicked on the windscreen wipers, and flicked his eyes onto her small and anxious face.

'Oh, there'll be a way,' he said. 'Don't worry, little Mouse. What about your old flame? Dublin Desmond? He'll tuck you into bed, for old times' sake!'

The Mondeo, with wet moorland rising to its right and the black and ruffled waters of Llyn Celyn close on the other side, swept round a bend at sixty miles an hour. Rosanna laughed.

'Shut up, oaf!' she said, and rapped the outside of his thigh with hard, sharp knuckles. He felt her eyes on him and glanced at her once more. It was a moment, half a second. When he looked back, he faced a scene of carnage. Two Army lorries, one on its side, lay halfway across the road ahead. Ambulances and police were also there, and the orange hazard lights were almost blinding.

'Fuck, ' said Andrew. 'Here's a turn up.'

The verge had been made into a carriageway so that traffic could move in both directions. Close to the black waters of the lake, a mobile crane was balanced like some enormous praying mantis. It was bellowing black smoke as the engine throbbed and gunned, and as they passed the roof of a car broke through the surface.

'Poor bastard,' Andrew said. 'How could that happen? Army lorries? What the fuck?'

A policeman was screaming at him, and banging on the roof.

'Move on! Move on! Move on!'

The old instincts crashed back in. No way to talk to a reporter. Andrew swung the Mondeo hard into a patch of ground just off the carriageway.

'We're press!' he shouted. 'We're with the BBC!'

The policeman was inexperienced enough to drop slightly back.

'My orders—'

And Rosanna Nixon screamed. A wild, tearing, awful scream burst from her mouth. Her hand clawed Andrew, and the scream went on.

Rosanna Nixon screamed.