

CHAPTER 6

It was a typical winter Monday that did what it said on the tin—English to its marrow: a sky the colour of dishwater, and rain that didn't fall so much as cling. Watford's streets shone with the grimy clamour of wet tarmac and tail lights. I went looking for the Dog and Duck and found it hunched on a corner. I was there to see Detective Inspector Jack Donaldson, the man in charge of finding Sidney Finnigan. I, like Marvin Gaye, had heard through the grapevine that he liked to lunch at the Dog and Duck, a pub close to the police station.

Inside, the air was a rich stew: stale beer, dampness, old fryer oil, a whisper of bleach and somewhere under it all the sweet-sour smell of day old sweat. The pub was one big room trying to convince itself it was two. A long, open bar ran down the middle, edged with a brass rail dulled by fingerprints and time. Greasy lampshades pooled a lethargic amber glow. Beneath my shoes the carpet had the tenacious grip of toffee; sticky with a thousand celebrations or perhaps just as many regrets.

One side was a games room with a pool table with faded baize, and a dartboard, whose halo of divots boasted a litany of poor players. In one corner, the requisite wall-mounted plasma screen television, well past its sell by date, was churning a football match into mush, the picture always just one notch shy of good enough. Every sprinting player trailed a minor afterlife of pixels. Framed football shirts marched across the wall, yellow being predominant, the illegible scrawl of some footballer's signature across the chest.

Through the adjoining door, the lounge side announced itself with a rustle of tacky velvet wallpaper in tired floral, stained by generations of cigarette smoke. Small rectangular tables squatted in orderly rows, each inlaid with a little brass disc stamped with a number.

The tabletops had that worn and scratched feel of years of abuse. The walls were crowded with photos of the owner standing shoulder-to-shoulder with television celebrities. Having not lived in England for nearly thirty years, I didn't recognise a single face and felt perfectly undeprived.

The room was beginning to fill up with lunchtime trade; blowing white mist from their pursed lips, collars raised against the weather, shaking rain from coats.

I noticed Jack Donaldson walk into the bar trailing a younger man. I recognised the detective from his photo in the local paper. Donaldson was mid-fifties but looked as if he'd gone a few extra rounds with the calendar. He was smaller than me by a couple of inches and stockier, hair still mostly dark but salted. The lines in his face ran deep, not the superficial creases of laughter but the heavier grooves carved by grief. Nine months earlier, he had lost his wife to cancer. His suit was a respectable grey that bordered on shabbiness like a man who was just going through the motions of living.

In stark contrast, the younger man with him was half Donaldson's age, about my height and dressed in a fashionable thin lapelled blue suit, white shirt and blue tie, and looking like he'd stepped out of the window of some high street boutique. His hair was crisped into place by something that promised *Titanium Hold*, and shoes with a mirror finish. He smelled of expensive cologne and oozed arrogant confidence.

"Two lagers, Bill," Donaldson told the barman.

I walked up behind the detective and said, "Put that on my tab and I'll have the same."

Donaldson turned to face me. "Well, if it isn't Mr. Wolfe." He angled his head to his colleague. "Hey, Ken, this is the famous Richard Wolfe."

"The guy from the Janine Wolfe case?" the younger man asked.

Donaldson nodded. "The very same. A pleasant surprise, Mr. Wolfe. I was going to

have an official word with you soon, but you've saved me the trouble. Here to teach us poor plods how to catch the bad guys?"

"I only have a couple of hours, detective," I said. "But I can get you started."

Donaldson nudged the younger man. "He's a funny guy, Ken. We'd been stumbling around in the dark for a week trying to find this missing girl and this guy swans in, dismantles a biker gang like flat-pack furniture, rescues his niece, and blows the case wide open. A regular Harry fucking Callahan."

Ken looked nonplussed.

"It's a film about a vigilante cop called Dirty Harry," I clarified. "Clint Eastwood."

The young man's face showed no sign of enlightenment.

Donaldson sighed. "This is my DS, Ken Gilbert. Raised on Marvel and Star sodding Wars. Wouldn't know a classic film if it bit him in the ass."

"Dirty Harry only came out six years before the first Star Wars film," I said. "So technically, they are both classics. One has a blaster and the other one does the blasting."

Donaldson squinted at me. "Whose side are you on?" He gathered up his pint and nodded toward a table by the window. The three of us took a seat and Donaldson scanned the menu.

I took a look around the pub. "Mostly police in here from the station?" I asked.

The detective followed my gaze and said, "About fifty fifty with the local law firm down the road."

"Easy to tell the difference?" I asked.

"Yeah, see the ones in the shabby suits, careworn, haggard, unshaven, glassy eyed, over worked and underpaid?"

I nodded.

"Lawyers," he said.

I picked up on the irony. "My boss is one of those poor wretched figures," I said.

"Forced to drive around in this wreck of a Porsche."

Donaldson took a mouthful of his lager. "Of course, you were recruited by Stephen Grave's fiancée, Katherine Koslov, the barrister working for that London legal firm Janglers and Price."

"I was recruited shortly after I arrived here from Hong Kong," I said.

"I was led to understand that you walked on the other side of the street in Hong Kong," Donaldson said. "Triads I'd heard."

"No comment, officer," I said.

"Is Ms. Koslov family or something?" Donaldson asked.

"Or something," I said. "My grandmother married her grandfather which makes me family, apparently. It's a Russian thing so I've been told."

He closed the menu with a determined slap. "Since you're feeling generous, we'll have a couple of ploughman's." He raised the menu and showed the barman three fingers. "Bill does a great one. Consider it the cover charge for the information you want."

"What makes you think I want information?" I asked.

Donaldson took out a pen and scribbled his name on a bar mat and handed it to me.

"What's this?"

"My autograph," he said. "If you've not come for information, this is the only other thing you'd be here for. Either that or my sparkling personality."

I was starting to like Donaldson. "How much would this be worth on E bay," I asked.

"A few quid less than Elton John's," he said. "So, what the fuck do you want?"

"Sidney Finnigan?" I said.

"Ah, there you go, Ken," Donaldson told his junior. "Not just a friendly social visit."

"I was wondering if you had any meaningful leads," I said.

"Our investigation is still ongoing," Donaldson said.

Donaldson's colleague allowed himself a smug little flourish. "Unlike your attempt at police work on the Janine Wolfe case."

I shrugged. "I like to think of it as inventive and inspired investigative work."

Gilbert snorted with a mouthful of lager.

"*You* didn't find her," I said. "I guess you were too busy investigating which hair gel suits you the best."

The legs of the chair scraped on the floor as the DS rose from his chair, his face dark with anger.

"I wouldn't advise it, Ken," Donaldson said, placing a hand on the younger man's shoulder and easing him back down into his chair. "Our Mr Wolfe here is quite proficient with his hands."

"You should see my basket weaving," I said, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

Donaldson's tone sharpened. "I get that you're a real dangerous man and not afraid of us. Yes, we were remiss in the investigation of Janine Wolfe but we have hoops we must jump through. You were not similarly encumbered, hence the freedom to bend the rules."

"A teenager who was not found floating in a lake, a fraud uncovered and a thug brought to justice," I said. "Hardly a disastrous outcome."

Donaldson gave a slight nod of his head. He said, "Frank Slater will go down for his part in all of this but he has refused to implicate Finnigan. We only have your brother's testimony that Sidney Finnigan was even involved."

"What about Jimmy Savchenko?" I asked. "The bent property developer working with

Slater.”

“Mr James Savchenko now claims you coerced him into naming Finnigan.”

“That little slime ball is just scared because Finnigan hasn’t been caught,” I said. “We both know that Finnigan worked for Slater and used my niece as leverage to make my brother do his bidding. And we also know that if he’d succeeded, my niece, possibly my brother too, would have ended up dead.”

Donaldson rubbed a thumb along the condensation of his glass. “This whole thing has been a nasty little knot that I can’t untangle,” he said. “And I suppose you know nothing about three of Finnigan’s men turning up dead?”

“Didn’t I read somewhere that it was a drug related thing,” I said. “A turf war or something.”

“How convenient,” Donaldson said. “What about the biker gang house you infiltrated to get your niece? Quite a scene, Ken. You should have seen it: one man with a knife sunk in his shoulder, needed surgery; another pinned to a table by a similar blade; a dead man in the loft with a crushed windpipe. And fires in the street when several bikes mysteriously exploded. Like a scene out of a James Bond movie it was.”

“He’s a fictional British spy, Kenneth,” I explained to Gilbert.

“I fucking know who James Bond is,” Gilbert bristled. “And don’t fucking call me Kenneth.”

He clearly did not like me using the formal version of his Christian name.

“Is Kenneth what your mummy calls you when you’ve been a naughty boy?” I asked.

Donaldson’s hand was back on his colleague’s shoulder. “He’s baiting you, Ken. As much as I’d like to arrest him for assault, I can’t afford the time you’d spend in the hospital. We’re short staffed as it is.”

“What happened in the house was self-defense, detective. Did you find my fingerprints on the knives?” I asked.

“We did not,” Donaldson said, “And considering those who received the knife wounds are languishing in prison it’s unlikely their testimony would stand up in court.”

“As far as the dead guy in the loft there were no witnesses to say how he met his end,” I said.

“I may applaud your results, Wolfe,” Donaldson said, dropping the civility. “However, I do not condone the method.”

“Well that’s another night’s sleep ruined,” I said.

“How about we yank you in,” Gilbert said.

“Yeah, you could do that,” I said. “But in case you were not paying attention, Kenneth, I have this kick ass lawyer who’d have me out before your first nappy change.”

Even Donaldson smirked at that. “He’s right, Ken. We have no evidence. He knows it and we know it, and his lady lawyer would have him out and slap us with a false arrest lawsuit.”

The ploughman’s lunches arrived and we ate them in silence while the buzz of activity continued around us. Shortly after finishing the food, Donaldson’s empty glass was replaced by a full one.

He toasted me. “Very generous of you, Mr Wolfe.”

“Should you be drinking on duty?” I asked.

“Who are you, my fucking mother?” Donaldson asked, wiping his mouth on a paper napkin. “Why do you want to know about Finnigan?”

“While he’s still out there, my niece and my brother are in danger,” I said. “My brother did testify against him and Finnigan strikes me as a spiteful man.”

Donaldson studied me over the rim of his glass. "I suspect his spite would be directed at another target before your brother or his daughter," he said. "Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Wolfe?"

"My name is Rick," I told him.

"It may be Rick to your friends, but thankfully I do not move in those exalted ranks," Donaldson said. "I've already seen what happens to your enemies, so I'll stay on the professional fence if you don't mind."

I nodded. "Fair enough. What about Finnigan's wife? Have you spoken with her?"

"I realise you think of us as a bunch of bumbling plods, but sometimes we do manage to do our jobs," Donaldson said.

"Is that the correct collective noun?" I asked. "A bunch of lumbering plods? I quite like a congregation of incompetent coppers."

Gilbert continued to smoulder at the edge of my vision like a discarded cigarette

"She said she didn't know where he is and could care less if he ever came back," Donaldson said.

"No love lost there then," I said. "Any known associates?"

"Finnigan's number two is a guy named Fred Butcher who has also disappeared."

"They'll have gone to ground somewhere," I said.

"Finnigan is smart. He has resources and money and could be almost anywhere," Donaldson said. "Assuming he's even in the country."

"I think he is and I will look for him," I said. "I can stir things up in ways you can't."

"In ways which are illegal," Donaldson said.

"Probably."

"When Finnigan murders you," Donaldson said. "I'll be sure to arrest him. Or at the

very least issue a strong caution.”

Gilbert laughed at that.

“A word of warning, Wolfe,” Donaldson continued. “I have too many officers out already looking for Finnigan. Don’t make me use any more looking for you.”

The Detective Sergeant couldn’t resist the need to have the final word.

“Step out of line, Wolfe, and we’ll lock you up and throw away the key,” he said.

“You’d never find me, Kenneth,” I said, standing. “I’d smell that cheap shit cologne you wear from a mile away.” I threw forty quid on the table. “There’ll be change. Treat yourself to a lemonade.”