

PART ONE – 1960, LONDON

CHAPTER ONE

The unshaven man, still in his pyjamas, sprawled in an old armchair, one leg dangling over its bald arm. He'd kicked off a slipper and was absently picking at his toe nails with one hand as the other turned the sports pages of a tabloid newspaper on his lap. The armchair sat in the centre of a bedsit. It was the only non-essential piece of furniture and from its stained embrace the man could have stretched his arm to touch the bed behind him, the small table against the wall opposite, and the stove to his right. Music crackled from a transistor radio sitting on a sticky plastic cloth covering the table and the smell of curried goat drifted through the open window from the kitchen one floor below.

The man hummed along with Adam Faith as he asked his baby what she wanted if she didn't want money. The man was in his 40s. He looked 50, perhaps older. Although quite tall, what little muscle he had once possessed had turned to slack, grey flab.

The telephone rang. It was also within reach - perched on the dusty windowsill - but the man ignored the ringing for some time. Then, with a great effort, he picked up the handset.

'Yeh?' he said, still reading.

'Del?'

'Who is it?' he asked.

‘Do you no’ recognise the voice Del? It’s Robbie.’ Del’s eyes widened and his stubbly jaw dropped. ‘Are ye there, Plumber? It’s Robbie Sands.’ Sands’s voice was hard, Glaswegian. Del Plumber stood up, the paper falling to the floor, and turned the radio off.

‘Yeh, yeh,’ replied Del, ‘you just took me by surprise, that’s all. When d’ja get out?’

‘Last week,’ said Sands.

‘Yeh?’

Plumber paused, his jaw gradually closing as he forced his brain into activity. ‘Well, I’m honoured, Robbie, that you should look me up so soon after your release,’ he blustered in his fast Cockney. ‘Very... wossname... thoughtful.’ The forced humour failed to hide the palpable nervousness in his voice.

‘Cut the crap Del. I need tae see you.’

‘Yeah, that would be... fantastic. Sure. But I’m a bit tied up at present. P’raps I could give you a ring in a few – ’

‘Tonight.’

Plumber paused. His eyes darted around the tiny room, calculating how long it would take to clear it and disappear. ‘Look, Robbie...see...well, things is different now, since you went inside...’

‘Och, dinnae fret yoursel’ Derek. I’m no’ mad at you. I just wanna talk, right? Just talk. Tonight at the “Frog”.’

‘I can’t tonight, honest. I’ve got something on. Next week maybe?’

‘What about now? I know where ye are. I could be there in an hour.’

‘No, no, no! Blimey, I dunno. I suppose I could slip in a quick one this afternoon.’

‘Five o’clock then.’

Plumber reached a decision. ‘Alright, around five. Just a quick one, right?’

‘I’ll be there. Dinnae let me down now.’ The line went dead.

Plumber put the handset down slowly. ‘Fuck,’ he said quietly.

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The clerks’ room was its usual, frenetic, five o’clock worst. Stanley was holding conversations with two solicitors on different telephones, Sally was fending off questions from two members of Chambers while scanning the Daily Cause List and Robert, the junior, was optimistically trying to tie a brief with one hand while pouring a cup of coffee for the head of Chambers with the other. Sir Geoffrey Duchenne QC had returned from the Court of Appeal ten minutes before, muttering that Lord Bloody-Justice Bloody-Birkett was to the law of marine insurance what Bambi was to quantum physics, had ejected another barrister’s conference already in progress from his room, and had slammed the door. He could still be heard giving a post mortem of the day’s defeat to the senior partner of the firm of solicitors that had instructed him. Superimposed on all this was the clatter of the two typists generating an apparently endless stream of fee notes to go out in the last post.

Charles Holborne poked his head into the clerks’ room and wondered if he would be able to make himself heard. He watched with a smile as Sally, pert, cheeky Sally from Romford - two ‘O’ levels and a nice line in caustic sarcasm - politely told Mr Sebastian Campbell-Smythe, a senior barrister of fifteen years’ call, to return to his room and not to disturb her. If he caused her to miss his case in the List, he would not be best pleased, would he? Sally, thought Charles, not for the first time, was ideally suited to life as a barristers’ clerk. She was quick witted and quick tongued enough to keep in line twenty-six prima donna barristers all her senior in years, supposed social status and intelligence without actually crossing the line into rudeness. At the same time she was attractive enough to flatter the crusty solicitors who sent work to Chambers, none of whom ever failed to enquire after

her health when they met members of Chambers at court. Stanley, the senior clerk, had high hopes of her.

Sally turned towards the door and saw Charles. She smiled. She liked Mr Holborne. He was alright, one of the few members of Chambers who didn't talk down to her.

'Going to Mick's,' he mouthed, making saucer and cup-lifting motions with his hands.

'Hang on, sir,' she called as he disappeared. His head reappeared round the door.

'Don't forget you've got a con in half an hour,' she said. She reached over for the diary and looked for his initials. 'The buggery,' she said, as nonchalantly as if the case had been a vicar summonsed for careless driving, 'case of Petrovicj.'

Charles nodded, waved, and departed. He'd already read the case papers, and there was time for a cup of tea and a bite to eat at the café on Fleet Street before his client and the solicitor arrived for the conference.

Pulling his coat around him, Charles stepped out from Chancery Court into the rain. A gust of wind bowed the bare branches of the plane trees towards him and threatened to dislodge his hat. He jammed the hat more firmly on his head and walked quickly across the shiny cobbles towards the sound of traffic. He still loved the sensation of dislocation he experienced every time he walked through the archway from the Dickensian Temple onto twentieth century Fleet Street. The Temple had barely changed in three hundred years, and the sense that it was caught in an accidental fold in time was always strongest in the winter, when mist regularly drifted in off the Thames and the gas lamps were still lit at four o'clock each afternoon by a man with what resembled a six-foot matchstick. The Benchers responsible for running the Inn were debating the installation of electric lights and Charles knew it would only be a matter of time, but he would miss the hiss of the gas, the fluttering flames and the shifting shadows.

Charles turned onto Fleet Street and walked in the direction of St Paul's Cathedral, its dome barely visible in the murky light, past the Black Lubianka, the affectionate name of the Daily Express's imposing art deco headquarters, and through a small steamy door. He was greeted by a hot exhalation of bacon fat and cigarette smoke.

"Mick's" offered cheap meals for fourteen hours a day and was second home to both Fleet Street hacks and Temple barristers. Its all day breakfast, a heart-stopping pyramid of steaming cholesterol for only 1s 6d, was legendary. Charles loved the feel of the place, the easy conversations and ribald jokes about cases, clients and judges. The tension of a long court day – particularly the miseries of the unexpected conviction or swingeing sentence – could here be assuaged in a fog of smoke and chip fat. It was also a welcome change from the rarefied air of 2 Chancery Court, where most of Charles's Chambers colleagues dealt in the bills of lading, the judicial review, and the leasehold enfranchisement of civil work. It was, Charles thought with a wry grin, exactly the sort of place Henrietta detested.

At this time of day, with courts adjourning for the night and Mick's being on the route to and from the Old Bailey, the clientele was more barristerial than journalistic, although Charles saw and waved to Percy Farrow, a hack friend who'd covered several of his cases. Charles negotiated his way through the narrow gap between the tables towards the formica counter and ordered tea and toast. He looked for somewhere to sit, but Percy was deeply engrossed with a colleague, so Charles squeezed his way to a stool at the end of the counter, picking up a discarded Daily Mirror from an adjacent table. He turned to the back to check the football pages. West Ham had had a decent start to the season but they were playing Spurs that weekend, and Spurs were flying - odds-on to do the double.

When he returned to Chambers twenty minutes later, Charles could hear an argument in progress before he even opened the door. A tall barrister in pin-striped trousers was shouting at Stanley from the door of the clerks' room. He whirled round at Charles as he entered.

‘There you are! Now look here, Holborne,’ he said, using the formality of Charles’s surname to show his displeasure, ‘this is positively the last time. I’m going to take it up at the next Chambers’ meeting.’

Charles looked up at the man. His name was Laurence Corbett. He was at least six inches taller than Charles, blond and handsome. ‘Is there a problem, Laurence?’ asked Charles quietly, pointedly using the man’s first name.

‘Yes. That!’ replied Corbett, jabbing his finger in the direction of the waiting room.

‘Your con’s arrived, sir,’ explained Stanley.

‘And?’ asked Charles.

‘And my fiancée has been sitting waiting for me in that room with that rapist of yours!’

‘Yes?’ inquired Charles.

‘Don’t act the fool, Holborne. I know for a fact that you’ve been asked by several members of Chambers to keep your smutty clientele out of Chambers during normal office hours.’

‘Is Mr Petrovicj with the instructing solicitor?’ Charles asked Stanley.

‘Yes, sir, your client is sitting between Mr Cohen and his outdoor clerk. Mr Smith’s conference is waiting in there too, sir.’

‘Well,’ continued Charles, turning to Corbett and quickly stepping backwards to allow Robert to scurry past with an armful of brief, ‘I would have thought it unlikely that your betrothed would be ravaged in front of five witnesses, even assuming that my client was interested in her, which I doubt. Irresistible though you no doubt find her, Mr Petrovicj is charged with bugging another male. He’s not, if you’ll excuse the pun, into women,’ Charles smiled.

‘That makes no difference at all, Charles - ’

‘I thought it was “Holborne”,’ corrected Charles.

‘ - as you well know.’

‘I would have thought it made quite a deal of difference, particularly to Mr Petrovicj. However, if you’ll let me go and start my con,’ said Charles, turning his back on Corbett, ‘I can remove the evil influence from the room.’

Charles opened the door to leave, and then paused. ‘By the way, Laurence, I know you don’t do crime, but I’d’ve thought even you knew that a man’s innocent until proven guilty. Mr Petrovicj isn’t a rapist, or a bugger for that matter, till the jury says he is.’

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‘Over here, Del!’

Robbie Sands waited for Plumber at a table in the corner of the bar, two empty spirit glasses before him. The pub was the boozier most frequented by south London’s professional villains. Here you could buy or sell anything, recruit for any criminal enterprise, and get yourself killed if you bumped into the wrong man at the wrong time. It was reckoned to be one of the toughest pubs in London, but at this early hour Sands’s was the only occupied table. Plumber’s eyes flicked around the bar for possible danger and made his way over and sat down opposite the other man. Sands’s lean face had acquired a couple more scars since Plumber had last seen him at HM Prison Durham. The Scotsman assessed Plumber, his hard blue eyes narrowing, and shook his head sadly.

‘My God, you’ve got soft,’ he concluded. Plumber smiled and shrugged. ‘You must ha’ put on two stones since I last saw you.’

‘I suppose so. I’m older,’ said Plumber. ‘How you been?’

‘Och, no’ bad, all things considered.’

‘Had a bit of trouble?’ asked Plumber, nodding towards Sands’s face.

‘What, this?’ replied Sands, fingering a long scar on his left cheekbone. It was healed, but still pink, relatively recent. ‘You know what they say: you should’a seen the other guy. He was in the hospital wing for a month. Well,’ he said, after a pause, ‘are you gonna buy me a drink or no?’

‘Sure, sure Robbie. What’ll you have?’

‘I’ll have another large Bells thank you very much.’

Plumber bought the drinks and returned to the table.

‘So, what have *you* been doing for the last four years?’ asked Sands.

‘Nothing. That’s what I was trying to tell you on the blower. I ain’t done a single job since that one. I reckoned it was a warning, with what happened an’ all that, and I gave it up.’

‘So?’

‘So nothing. I do a bit of decorating when me cousin can get me the work, and I’m drawing wosname, dole, you know.’

‘How’s Mary?’

‘Dunno. She left two years ago. Ain’t heard a word since. My eldest, Maureen, she had a postcard from.... wosname... Ireland once, about a year ago. That’s it.’

‘You must be happy,’ said Sands with heavy irony.

‘Me? Oh, I get by,’ replied Plumber disconsolately. ‘Anyway, Robbie,’ he said, knocking back his drink, ‘I’ve got a lot on this evening, and I really - ’

‘Patience,’ said Sands, putting his hand firmly on Plumber’s arm, ‘is a great virtue.’ Plumber sat back in his seat reluctantly. Sands took a small sip from his whisky, looked about him, and lowered his voice as he spoke. ‘There are two things I want from you Derek, and the first is the whereabouts of a certain Robbie Millar.’

Plumber looked surprised. ‘Didn’t you ’ear?’

‘Hear what? Do you no’ remember where I’ve been for the last four year?’

‘Yeh, well... he’s dead.’

‘What?’

‘Yeh. Heart attack. He was in the laundrette doing his smalls or whatever, and keeled over. Dead as a... wossname.’

‘Bastard,’ said Sands, with venom.

‘Yeah, well, I get how you feel Robbie, given the circumstances, but the bloke’s dead, so what’s it matter now?’

‘Dead? He’s not half as dead as he would ha’ been if I’d got hold of him! That fat slob always was lucky.’ There was a long pause while Sands nursed his drink.

‘What was the other thing, Robbie?’ asked Plumber.

‘Eh?’

‘The second thing you wanted from me.’

‘Och, aye. What’d you say to a hundred grand for two hours’ work?’

Plumber shook his head. ‘No, sorry Robbie,’ he replied, getting quickly to his feet, ‘I knew it was gonna be something like that, and I just ain’t interested. Like I said on the blower - ’

Sand reached up and grabbed Plumber’s wrist in a vice-like grip.

‘You sit down!’ he hissed dangerously, pulling the other man back to his seat. ‘You owe me, you little Cockney weasel.’

‘I told ya, it weren’t me - ’

‘I know it wasnae you, Derek,’ he replied, putting a nasty emphasis on his companion’s name, ‘or we’d not be having this nice wee chat. And you know I’m not joking, don’t you?’

Plumber knew. Only the year before their job together Sands had been acquitted of the murder of a hapless East End cabbie who’d had the misfortune to see Sands emerging from

the back of a bullion van as he pulled off his balaclava, and the recklessness to pick Sands out of a line-up.

‘But let’s not forget: I did four years, four years which you spent free as a bird. Do you no’ think they asked me who the driver was, eh?’

Plumber looked down.

‘Oh yes they did, and I remained silent, didn’t I, my mouth tighter than a carp’s arse.’ Sands’s voice lost some of its edge, but he retained his hold on the other man’s wrist. ‘I’m just making the point that you owe me, Derek, for four years of silence.’

Plumber looked away unhappily.

‘Two hours’ work, Derek. 30 minutes for each year inside I saved you. And at the end you’ll be a rich man. You could retire, buy yourself a wee place in... where was it your Maureen lived? Bournemouth?’

‘Hove.’

‘There y’are then.’

‘I really ain’t sure – ’

‘Oh, but I *am* sure. I’m sure you’re the man for the job. I’m sure this one’s a winner. And I’m sure no one else’s on to it.’

‘How can you be sure of that?’

‘Cos the bloke whose idea it was got involved in a fight just as he was about tae get parole.’

‘But - ’ started Plumber, but Robbie held up a warning finger to let him finish.

‘And most of all, Derek, my friend, I’m *sure* that Detective Sergeant Donegan would love to hear who *did* drive the getaway car four years and eight days ago on a certain robbery.’

‘You wouldn’t!’

‘Aye, I would. This job’s perfect. We could both retire forever. And I need you to be able to pull it off. You’d better believe me, Derek: there’s nothing I wouldnae do to persuade you.’

Plumber stared hard at him, and then sighed. ‘I’ll get us another drink,’ he said wearily. Sands released him.

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‘Thank you Mr Holborne,’ said the alleged buggerer as they shook hands.

‘Glad to help, Mr Petrovicj. I’ll show you the way out. I think the clerks will have gone by now.’

Charles showed him to the door and pointed down the stairs. ‘Are you going to the tube?’

Petrovicj nodded. ‘If I can find it. I got lost on the way up.’

‘Yes, it’s a bit of a maze in the Temple if you don’t know it. Go down the stairs and turn right. Turn right under the arch, go diagonally across the courtyard, and down the steps in the far right corner. Follow your nose, and you’ll come out on the Embankment. If you get lost, just keep heading towards the river.’

‘Okay. Thanks again.’

Charles returned to his room where Mr Cohen, his instructing solicitor, waited.

‘Well, what do you think, Charles?’ Cohen and Partners had been instructing Charles loyally since he had been in pupillage, and Charles didn’t mind Cohen using his first name. It was an informality that most of his colleagues wouldn’t have tolerated.

‘I don’t know, Ralph. It’s certainly helped, seeing him in conference, and I think he’ll make a reasonable witness. He has a chance, but much depends on what we can make of Mr Thompson, the complainant, in cross-examination.’

‘You’re going to have a field day, Charles! Thompson’s got half a dozen convictions for dishonesty.’

‘Agreed – but nothing serious, and certainly not for blackmail. If Petrovicj is telling the truth, Mr Thompson’s moving up a long way from shoplifting.’

Cohen packed his files into his briefcase. ‘You haven’t had a chance to read the Aaronberg papers I sent down, have you?’ he asked.

‘I’m afraid I haven’t yet: things have been a bit hectic for the last week.’

‘There’s no hurry, but I would appreciate it if you could give them your special attention. The client’s *meshpuchah*,’ said Cohen, lapsing into Yiddish.

Ralph Cohen, a greying man in his early sixties, had been a solicitor since just after the Great War. He practised in criminal and matrimonial cases, with a sprinkling of business-related disputes, largely in the East End of London where having a Jewish surname had been a positive advantage. Charles on the other hand (né Charles Horowitz) had realised that too Jewish a surname was going to be a disadvantage at the Bar. Anti-Semitism had been a daily nuisance – sometimes worse – at Charles’s school, and his father had prompted him to take up boxing. He’d been good, too, representing the RAF for the year he was in before the war was over and then obtaining a Blue when he picked up his education again at Cambridge. His proficiency at fighting meant that he was never physically challenged there, where the anti-Semitism had been more subtle, but by the time Charles was called to the Bar in 1950 he had been known as Charles Holborne for two years. There was nothing he could do about the black curly hair and dark brown, almost black, eyes.

Charles never referred to his background professionally and would have preferred others to do the same. Nonetheless, somehow, despite the camouflage of the false surname, someone had known someone; that someone had known Charles's father; and so shortly after Charles finished his pupillage, a drunk driving brief landed on his desk with his name on it – the first ever that was not a “return” from another barrister. It wasn't a case of a “Jewish mafia” as some of Charles's colleagues whispered; had he been no good, he'd never have received a second brief, but as long as he was as good as the next man (or better) there was nothing wrong, as old Mr Cohen used to say, with instructing a nice Jewish boy, even if he pretended he wasn't. A man's got to live, right?

‘Family?’ asked Charles, slightly embarrassed at not being sure of the exact meaning of the Yiddish word, and slightly irritated at the assumption that he would know.

‘In-laws,’ replied Cohen. ‘Not that close, but close enough that my Sadie's giving me a hard time.’

‘What's the charge?’

‘Tax fraud. He's in the *schmutter* business - garments - in Mile End’.

‘I'll look at it tonight if I can.’

‘No rush. It was only committed from the Magistrates' Court two weeks ago; next week will do.’

‘O.K.’ said Charles, rising. ‘I'll see you on Tuesday in any event at Isleworth Crown Court.’ The two men shook hands, and Charles showed the solicitor out.

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The pub on the Old Kent Road was getting quite crowded as the evening trade came in. Sands had pulled on a flat cap and was hunched over his drink. He didn't want to be recognised.

'Well, Derek, what do you think?' he asked, leaning forward and raising his voice just enough to be heard over Lonnie Donegan blaring from the jukebox.

'It sounds alright. That is, assuming you've done your homework - '

'I've done ma homework Derek, believe me. I've spent the last week checkin' it out - '

' - but I'm worried about the shooters. We never needed 'em before, and I don't see why we do now.'

'You've never done a job like this before. I'm telling you, we need them. Like I said, they're no' real anyway, just good imitations; just enough to put the fear of God into the bastards.'

'I still don't know,' said Plumber, shaking his head. 'You're talking a lot of time if we're caught. I'm older'n you. I'd be drawing me pension before I was out.'

'But we won't be caught, not if you do everything exactly as I told you.'

Plumber didn't answer at first. 'But I'm just a driver. Can't you get someone else to cross the pavement?'

'It does nae need three people; it needs two. You'n me. Why split it three ways when there's no need?'

'I dunno.... I'm not happy with it.'

'You'll be plenty happy with a hundred grand. Come on, smile you miserable bugger. You're gonna be very, very rich.'

Charles wrestled with the key in the lock of his front door, unable to get the thing to turn. His grip on the cloth bag containing his robes and the huge briefcase, both in his left hand, began to slip, and the set of papers clamped between his head and shoulder slid to the floor. He threw everything to the porch floor in exasperation, reached again for the keyhole, and the door opened. A pretty blonde girl of about twenty stood on the threshold, her hair tied in a ponytail. She had some sheets over her arm, as if she had been in the middle of making up a bed.

‘Yes?’ she asked. ‘Oh, it’s you Charles,’ she said, opening the door to him. Her pretence of not knowing Charles raised his ire one degree further. Fiona, the au pair, had joined the household against Charles’s wishes three months previously. Her older sister had been at school with Henrietta, and Henrietta had been prevailed upon to give Fiona a temporary job while she looked around London for something more permanent. Within a fortnight of her arrival Henrietta had warmed to the arrangement and Charles had cooled to it. With no children and a cleaner who came twice a week, Charles had protested that there was no earthly reason to pay the girl good money to sit around drinking coffee all day, but by now she and Henrietta were the best of friends and Fiona’s stay had become indefinite. Charles was sure that her insolence, to which Henrietta seemed oblivious and which grew more offensive daily, was learned at her mistress’s shoulder.

Charles scooped up his papers and other burdens and brushed past her. ‘Where is – ’ he began, but Fiona had closed the door and disappeared towards the rear of the house. Charles dropped his things onto the Italian tiled floor and went upstairs to Henrietta’s dressing room. That was another innovation he had not liked. When they had moved into the house, a house he had thought far too expensive and ostentatiously large for the two of them, it had at least had the advantage of two spare bedrooms. Henrietta however had decided that she required a “dressing room”, which had now become her own bedroom with an en suite

bathroom. At least half the week her “bad head” or the demands of his late-night working meant that she slept there.

‘Oh, there you are. You’re late.’ Henrietta was standing at her dressing table, trying to fasten a necklace. ‘Here, do this for me, will you?’ she said.

She was in evening dress, her long chestnut hair piled in a complicated way on top of her head. The dress was cut very low at the back, and Charles knew she was not wearing a bra. As she approached Charles and handed him the necklace, Charles could smell the perfume he had bought her for Christmas with the proceeds of the indecency plea he had done at Knightsbridge Crown Court. Almost everything they owned, with the exception of gifts from her family, was associated with the payment for a particular case, and it amused him, and irritated Henrietta, to identify their belongings by reference to the crime that had paid for them. Thus, last year’s holiday had been the fraud at the Old Bailey; Henrietta’s dress, the one she was wearing, was the armed robbery at Snaresbrook Crown Court, and so on. Who said crime didn’t pay?

‘You smell good,’ he said.

‘Thank you.’

He finished fastening the necklace and kissed the nape of her neck. She moved away without response.

‘You, on the other hand, look dreadful,’ she said, looking at him through the mirror of her dressing table, and inserting her earrings. ‘Late con?’ she asked.

‘Yes. The buggery I told you about.’

Henrietta shook her head. ‘I bet half the Temple covets your practice, Charles.’ She disappeared into the bathroom.

‘Look,’ he replied, calling after her, ‘I’ve had a hard day. Can we save the shabbiness of my practice for the next row? We’ve the whole weekend free, if it’s important to you.’

‘I really can’t see why you don’t move completely into civil,’ she said from the bathroom, ignoring his plea. ‘You’d earn more and you’d be able to keep up with the paperwork without working every night. Daddy says you’ve the mind for it.’

‘How nice of Daddy,’ replied Charles under his breath, as he followed her into the bathroom where she stood in front of the full-length mirror, straightening her stocking seams.

‘And I just don’t believe all this social conscience nonsense,’ she said. ‘I think if you examined your motives, you’d find you just hanker after the gutter.’

Charles put his arms round her from behind and cupped her breasts. ‘So? We both like a bit of rough.’

She sighed. ‘I may have liked it once, Charles. But now...’ She shrugged. ‘Take your hands away please. You’ll mark the silk.’

“‘Had a hard day dear? Sit down and have a drink, and I’ll massage your shoulders. Dinner will only be a few minutes”,’ said Charles, with heavy irony, but he removed his hands as requested.

‘Fuck off, Charles,’ said Henrietta, walking past him out of the bathroom and beginning to search through her wardrobe. The words somehow carried added venom when spoken so beautifully, and by such a beautiful woman. Charles followed her out and sat on her bed, watching her bare back and slim hips, hating her and wanting her. She found what she was looking for: a fur coat, a gift from her father for her last birthday.

‘Etta,’ he said more softly, using what had once been his pet name for her, ‘can we stop fighting long enough for you to tell me where we’re supposed to be going?’

She turned to him, her face a picture of scorn. ‘We aren’t going anywhere. *I’m* going to Peter Ripley’s do with Daddy. It’s been in the diary for weeks.’

‘What?’

‘Charles, for God’s sake, don’t pretend you didn’t know about it. I asked you over a month ago if you wanted to come, and you made it plain in your usual charming way that you wouldn’t - and I quote - “*voluntarily spend an evening with that bunch of pompous farts*” - close quote. So I made an excuse to Daddy as usual, and agreed to go with him. Mummy’s away till next week. Ring any bells?’

Charles nodded. He didn’t remember the exact words he had used to decline the invitation, but he’d have to plead guilty to the gist. This particular ‘do’ was the dinner to mark the end of Mr Justice Ripley’s last tour on the Western Circuit before retirement. All the judges and barristers practising on the circuit had been invited and of course Charles’s father-in-law, the erstwhile head of his Chambers and now also a judge on the same circuit, would be present. In the absence of Martha, Henrietta’s mother, who was visiting her sick sister in Derbyshire, Charles and Henrietta had rather unexpectedly received an invitation.

Charles had often attempted to explain to Henrietta why he hated these dinners. It wasn’t that he didn’t know which fork to use or how to address a waiter. The Judges, the Benchers, their wives, the High Sheriff - they all shared a common background. They had gone to the same schools, same universities, played cricket in the same teams, attended the same balls, knew the same people. Charles could “busk it” - be convivial, pretend to know what, or who, they were talking about - but it was an act. The sons of Jewish furriers from Minsk by way of Mile End did not mix well with the sons and grandsons of the British Empire. He may have cast off his Jewishness while at University, but he knew he’d never be one of them. When he did attend such events he often came home hating everyone there and, for some reason he couldn’t explain, himself.

Henrietta must have read his mind. ‘Tell me something Charles: what made you choose a profession where you’d feel such an outsider? And why, if you wanted to do criminal work, did you accept Daddy’s invitation to join a mainly civil set of chambers? You

talk about “tribes” – which you know I think is complete rubbish, but anyway - and then deliberately join tribes where you know you’re going to feel uncomfortable. And then you complain!’

‘You don’t understand. If you’d grown up – ’

‘Oh dear,’ she interrupted. ‘Frying again tonight?’ she asked acidly, referring to the chip she alleged Charles carried on his shoulder. ‘If you mention the Jewish thing once more Charles, I’ll puke. Your father may have grown up in Bow or wherever it was, but it’s hardly the Warsaw ghetto. And not everybody’s an anti-Semite. I’m not Jewish, and I married you, remember? The only person who’s conscious of your religion is you.’

‘What? Do you suppose for one minute I’d have got into Chambers had you not committed the dreadful *faux pas* of marrying me? Half the members of Chambers can’t stand me.’

‘That may be so. But it’s nothing to do with your religion. Every time you upset someone, it’s never your fault – it’s theirs because they’re anti-Semitic. It’s a perfect self-defence mechanism.’

Charles stood up wearily, pulling off his tie. ‘Can we please leave this one for now Henrietta? I’ve had a particularly difficult day.’

‘Yes, we can leave it for now, Charles, because I’m off. I believe Fiona has made something for you to eat, but if not I suggest you walk to the pub in the village.’

She swept past him, checked, and returned to plant a kiss on his cheek. She was about to move off again, but Charles grabbed her forearms. He looked hard at her, shaking his head slightly, a puzzled and pained expression on his face. Henrietta looked reluctantly up to his eyes and held their gaze for a second. Then the armour of her anger cracked, she bit her lip, and looked away, but not resisting his hold on her.

‘I don’t know, Charlie,’ she said softly, in answer to his unspoken question. ‘I wish I did.’ He pulled her gently towards him, wanting to put his arms round her, but she resisted, shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head. She ran from the room. Charles listened to the rustle of her dress and the sound of her feet flying down the stairs, and then the slam of the front door. He didn’t hear her crying as she drove away.