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First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Baskerville
An imprint of John Murray (Publishers)

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 9781399800532
Exclusive hardback ISBN 9781399809702
Trade Paperback ISBN 9781399800556
ebook ISBN 9781399800563

Typeset in Bembo Std by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform
to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.johnmurraypress.co.uk

John Murray Press, part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited
An Hachette UK company

Part One

Devon, soon

THE WORST SMELL IN the world is dead badger. He'd encountered it on his morning walk down a green lane; had caught the odour without seeing the corpse, but had guessed what it was before returning later with a shovel. Whether they all smelled that bad or whether this one had expired of noxious causes he didn't know. As it turned out, he couldn't do anything about it either – the creature had crawled into a tangled nest of roots to die, and it would require heavy machinery and a strong stomach to recover it. Lacking the former, and not wanting to put the latter to the test, Max opted for a third way: he'd walk a different route for a while, and see if one of the local farmers shifted it in the meantime. Which was why he wasn't sure the badger would still be there a couple of nights later, when he was running for his life.

The first of the intruders entered through the kitchen window. Max hadn't been asleep, though anyone watching the cottage would have been forgiven for thinking otherwise: the lights were out, the curtains drawn. He'd been lying in bed, not so much struggling with insomnia as letting it do its worst, when he'd heard the window latch being finessed open: a piece of wire sliding through the draughty gap he'd been meaning to repair, lifting the metal hook from its eye. Quieter than taking out the glass, but a long way short of silent. He'd pulled on jogging pants and a sweatshirt, slipped into a pair of trainers,

then froze in place, caught between two lives, trying to remember where he'd stashed his flight kit . . . You could worry you were losing your mind. That they were coming too late, and you'd long ago turned into whoever you were pretending to be.

(Max Janáček. Retired (early) academic; still footling around with a history book, but mostly just passing the days – taking long walks, cooking slow meals, losing himself in Dickens.)

The stairs were an out-of-tune orchestra of squeaks and whistles, every tread announcing that Peter or the wolf were on their way, unless you'd practised descending, and knew where to put your feet. So almost noiselessly he reached the sitting room, whose doorway was diagonal to the kitchen, and plucked the poker from its stand by the wood-burning stove. Not a great weapon, for all its iconic status in fiction. You needed high ceilings to accommodate your swing. Max Janáček understood a good swing: he was the man you saw walking the lanes, beheading dandelions with a stick. Who lived in a 500-year-old cottage in Devon, and could be counted on to do the neighbourly thing: keep an eye out for the old folk, whose company he was on the threshold of joining; litter-pick after the bank holiday rush; sign the petition resisting the makeshift industrial estate down the lane – numbering seventeen cabins now. This and more he'd been for more than twenty years, and whether the locals took him at face value or gave less than a tuppenny damn had become irrelevant, or had done until someone slipped the latch on his kitchen window and climbed inside more or less gracefully, breaking no crockery, dislodging no pans, and moving across the flagged floor in careful silence, intent – it would seem – on unlocking the back door and allowing his comrades ingress. Or her comrades, as it turned out. Whether Max would have jabbed her so hard at the base of the skull with the poker, then slammed her head on the floor when she fell, had he known it was a woman beneath

the break-in gear was something he could ponder at leisure, if he survived the night. Meanwhile, he checked her for weapons. She was carrying a Taser, which put her outside the range of opportunist burglars, but no ID, and nothing to indicate what she was up to. But he had to work on the assumption that she wasn't alone, an assumption confirmed when he picked up the landline to hear the deep silence of a well on a windless night. Inside the cottage – anywhere down this lane – his mobile made for a useful paperweight. So sitting tight and calling the cavalry wasn't an option, and wouldn't necessarily have been a sensible move anyway. Sometimes, it was the cavalry you had to watch out for.

The cottage sat midway down a sloping lane, and was half of a twinned pair. In the other lived Old Dolly, who had probably forgotten a time when she'd simply been Dolly. Certainly she'd earned the Old by the time Max moved in, and still regarded him as three-quarters a stranger, though he'd long reached the point where he was doing most of her shopping, all of her firewood gathering and a strong seven-eighths of listening to her bang on about immigration, which left him less uneasy than her habit of leaving a gas ring lit, to save striking a match for every cigarette. The next cottage along, a hundred yards distant, had been empty since Jonas Tripplehorn had gone to live with his daughter in Exeter; the cottage opposite – 'cottage' by local tradition; it had four bedrooms – was a second home, and invariably unoccupied during the week. And further down the lane were other dwellings, some housing young families, some retired labourers, and some home-based industries – IT and retro clothing; bespoke greetings cards and editorial services – and beyond them, on the other side of the railway bridge across which the London–Plymouth service rattled, the field now playing host to the makeshift estate that had roused such local ire. Corrugated-iron structures had been erected, one at a time, and makeshift barns built, now storing

the kind of heavy machinery you could dismember a dead badger with. Since this shanty town's foundation, traffic had multiplied tenfold, most of the vehicles heavily laden vans, with scaffolding poles tethered to flatbeds as the drivers headed to renovation jobs in the surrounding area; work which hadn't extended as far as repairing the potholes their vehicles left behind. Even now, as Max slipped out of a side window, he could hear an engine coughing in that direction, as if it were having one last drag before lying down for the night.

When he hit the ground he dropped into a crouch, and waited to see what happened next.

Which was nothing, for a while. A pair of little owls hooted in the distance, a familiar duet of hunt and swoop, while on the main road, a quarter-mile away, a lorry banjaxed the quiet, hauling freight westward. There was cloud cover. Max knew the skies well enough to guess what stars he'd be looking at, this particular time and date, but had to be content to see them with his mind's eye only. More practically, from where he crouched he had a cross-section view of the lane and a full-frontal of the cottage opposite, which enjoyed enough shadowy places – the baggy hedge in front; the nook behind its outjutting porch – to conceal a ninja army. But if there were an actual professional threat lurking there, would they have sent a lone warrior into his kitchen? One he'd made pretty short work of, come to that? But it was pointless trying to second-guess an enemy whose purpose he didn't know. The owls hooted again. You could set your watch by them. If you were a mouse, it was probably wise to.

He wasn't sure how long the woman in the kitchen would be out, but no more than a few minutes would be his guess. It wasn't like calculated violence had been a habit even when he'd moved in circles where, if not the norm, it was at least an accepted accomplishment. No: the force with which he'd banged her head on the floor had more to do with outraged house-

holder sensibilities than long-dormant expertise. It would be sensible, though, to at least attempt to don the thought processes of the professional. Whoever they were, they suspected already and would soon know that their first incursion had failed. What they did next depended on their operational priorities. They wanted to be quiet, but they also wanted Max, and they might abandon thoughts of the former if the latter was within their reach. What, after all, would be the outcome of pandemonium? Lights going on in cottages, and a phone call to the police? Which might bring a rescue party, but not within the next thirty minutes, given the village's isolation. So it was a risk they'd doubtless take. In which case, he'd better formulate a response to an all-out assault on the cottage.

Legging it through the dark was the best he came up with.

And this wasn't the worst idea ever. They'd presumably arrived in a vehicle, maybe more than one, but they hadn't driven down the lane, or he'd have heard. So they had likely parked at the junction, where another lane headed to the main road, and a choice of exit routes. That would be their objective, and whether he'd be lying back here with a hole in him or trussed up in the boot of their vehicle while they achieved it, he couldn't know. The Taser, rather than – say – a knife or a gun or a cruise missile, suggested that killing him wasn't plan A, but all plans have contingencies, and if they couldn't take him alive, they might prefer to leave him dead. Neither outcome held appeal for Max, who, if he could make it twenty yards up the road, could slip through the hedge and into the field where their vehicles couldn't follow. He knew the terrain; they presumably didn't. He'd walked that field at night times without number; he'd lain on his back and admired the stars there, which was not a habit he boasted about to the neighbours. He wouldn't claim to know every bump and hollow, but familiarity should give him an edge. Still, he was a long way from being persuaded that this was the way to go when the decision was

made for him: a familiar clunk and sigh told him the front door was swinging open. The woman he'd laid low was back on her feet, and her reappearance had galvanised the waiting troops: a shape, two shapes, materialised out of the darkness and ran to join her. There could be others. If he was going to move, it had to be now.

People entered his cottage, and over his head an eerie light broke through the window. They were using torches, and his sill clutter – plant pots, vases, candles on saucers – came briefly alive, casting ghostly shapes onto the night air. Slipping out of the lee of the wall, he crept round the Volvo, whose keys were on a hook by the front door, and onto the lane. This was thickly hedged on both sides, its surface rockier than it used to be, thanks to the recent heavy traffic. It curved as well as sloped and the gap in the hedge allowing access to the field was at the point where the junction ahead became visible. He was walking by memory, trusting his feet. His jogging pants were deep maroon but the top he'd pulled on had a silvery sheen, and if there were moonlight he'd show up as a ghost; a disturbance in the dark, the shape of half a man. But there was no moonlight; there was cloud cover, and the black vault of a February night, and a bitter chill he was increasingly aware of, and then – no warning – the twin headlights of a parked vehicle at the top of the lane, pointing in his direction. He was pinned like a butterfly against a velvet cloth. Noises erupted behind him; not a circus, but a battery of urgent whispers. Torch beams picked him out as he reached the gap in the hedge, and slipped into the field.

It was like stepping through a curtain and finding himself backstage. The light vanished, and the only way of telling up from down was by using his feet. With arms outstretched, so when he tripped he'd break his fall, he tried to run. The field was a set-aside; no crops, just the rocky rubble of soil, grass and weeds. If Max chose one direction, he'd come out on a lane;

another, and he'd reach another field. His eyes were adjusting; the car's headlights were creating a spooky glow behind him and then there were torches again as his pursuers reached the gap in the hedge, and spilled through it.

Almost immediately he heard a cry of pain, as one of his pursuers took a tumble and broke – Max hoped – an important bone.

He didn't pause, concentrating instead on running without falling flat on his face, but thought he could discern two separate beams of light playing across the ground. How far behind him? No way of knowing. How far to the road? Another few hundred yards, and the ground easier now he was getting used to it. But that went both ways: his pursuers would be picking up speed too, and they'd be younger than him, like most everybody else these days, and fitter too. An engine growled into life, and everything shifted up a gear. The bastards were no longer intent on silence, whoever the bastards were. But they couldn't, at least, follow him across a dark field in a car; an assurance that was of some comfort for two seconds, until the motorbike broke through the hole in the hedge, filling the field like an angry bull.

Time grows elastic at moments of stress. Apparently science supported this proposition, though for Max it was lived experience: the ever-slowing thud of his feet hitting the ground, the speeding up of the racket behind him. He gathered there were people who could identify motorbikes by sound alone, but he relied on counting their wheels, which was to say they were all the same to him, though this one worse than most. Somewhere up ahead was a padlocked five-barred gate, on the other side of which lay a lane. A little way down that lane was a turn-off: a steep hill leading past two cottages to a three-way junction. If he could reach there uncaptured, and far enough ahead, his pursuers would have to split up. But all of that was in the future, which was arriving too slowly, unless you were

riding a motorbike across a rough-toned field, spitting stony soil behind you. The light grew brighter, and Max tried to run faster, as if it were a near death experience he was hoping to avoid. Sixty-three years old. It was true it was the oldest he'd ever been; at the same time, it wasn't like seventy. Eighty. But time would take care of that, if it ever got back to behaving itself, and the bright headlight was swallowing everything now, clutching Max in its beam: he could see his own shadow rising up before him like a giant. In a fairy tale, it would turn and smite his pursuers; pound them into the soil. The motorbike was all but upon him; he could feel its breath on his arse. Then the gate materialised out of nowhere: he gripped its top and hurled himself over, hitting the ground like a beanbag. He'd be feeling that tomorrow, if tomorrow ever came. Behind him the motorbike screamed in anger, and scattered stony pellets: Max could feel them settle in his hair. He scrambled to his feet, and half stumbled, half ran down the road. The motorbike revved once, then twice, perhaps bearing Steve McQueen in mind as it considered jumping the gate, then roared back the way it had come, pausing halfway to confer – Max guessed – with the foot soldiers still slogging across the field.

It was biting cold but he was covered in sweat, and had no idea what was going on. Somewhere in the darkness, probably at the junction at the top of his own lane, a car came to life, and more headlights split the night. His motion became smoother as his legs found their rhythm. They wanted a chase? Here's a chase. Before the headlights could pick him out he'd reached the turn-off and was sprinting up the hill, along a lane no more than seven feet wide: one of Devon's narrow passages, allowing only one vehicle at a time. The memory of a recent walk was stirring. His breath grew painful as he passed the first cottage, which, like its companion, was elevated above the lane itself: its short driveway, on which a battered Land Rover sat, was damn near vertical, and its garden wall, as tall as

Max himself, was an ancient thing of overgrown rocks, held together by crumbling mortar and ambitious moss. He could hear the car slowing, its occupants trying to work out where he'd gone: whether he was still on the lane below or had turned up this narrow passage and disappeared into its shadows. The second cottage was a little further on. This was what he remembered: here, the cottage's garden wall was bulging dangerously at the level of a passer-by's head, so played upon by time and weather that it looked ready to collapse, to spew rocks and soil and earth across the lane. Perhaps that hint of impermanence was why the building was for sale; a sign announcing the fact had been planted in the patch of lawn behind the wall. Max turned up its driveway and grabbed the sign with both hands: FOR SALE, and an estate agent's details, atop a five-foot wooden pole . . . It came free from the ground surprisingly easily, as if he were Arthur releasing a sword, and he was king of the moment for as long as it took him to bury it again, push it down into the crumbly soil near the bulging wall as far as it would go. And then a little further. The lane lit up: the car had made its decision, and was coming to collect him. Easier to conquer that steep hill on four wheels: his own legs were trembling now, partly with the cold, mostly with all this effort. Not so long ago his worst problem had been insomnia. With the pole deep in the ground he adjusted his efforts; no longer pushing down he leaned on it, turning it into a lever. The lane was awash with headlights; the bushes on the other side glittering with life. He felt the earth give. The car was moving slowly, as if it suspected something. He leaned harder, putting all his weight into it. It was there, almost, just slightly out of reach, that release he was straining for, and the car growled louder, and something splintered in his grip, as if the pole had broken off in the ground, and if so that would be it, game over, except it wasn't, because everything gave in the same moment; there was a dull tumble as the first of the wall's rocks slipped

free and thudded onto the lane below, and then the earth was moving beneath his feet, and with a roar Max felt rather than heard half of the garden spilled onto the road: the rocks that had held it in place tumbling first, followed by the soil that had long been their burden: great wet chunks of it, with a looser gravelly content unfolding in its wake. He gave one last encouraging push on the pole and stepped back sharply, and the crunch he heard next was the car grinding into one of the larger rocks and coming to a graceless halt. He hurled the pole in that direction, and in a better life would have seen it pierce the windscreen rather than bounce off, but you couldn't have everything. He jumped back onto the lane, on the right side of the barrier he'd just created – scooping up a hand-sized rock as he did so – and ran off into the dark. Lights came on in the other cottage as a householder peered into the night, in search of the cause of the earthquake, while from the car two figures emerged. One scrambled over the rocks in pursuit while the other hung on to the door for a moment, trying to gauge the damage, and possibly contemplating insurance issues.

Another headlight appeared at the foot of the lane. The motorbike was back.

Max wasn't looking at any of this; he'd reached the three-way junction and had taken the middle option. A hundred yards on, he knew, lay the opening to one of the green lanes he frequented on his morning walks: narrow tracks with stony footing – riverbeds in waiting – hemmed either side by trees and bushes, and if you didn't know they were there, you'd miss their entrances. A network of them mapped Devon, and once you'd entered their geography you could lose yourself beyond hope of capture. Provided you made that transition unseen.

The rock in his hand was a comforting keepsake. Behind him, someone was making heavy weather of pursuit, the noise of their feet slapping the ground suggesting swift motion was a novelty. But the motorbike was there too, growling in the

distance, and he didn't expect it would take it more than thirty seconds to negotiate the obstacle he'd caused, after which it would come roaring after him again, eating the distance with a lot less labour than the overweight goon between them. But thirty seconds in the dark could make up a small lifetime. That much he remembered from the long ago, a memory awake now in his bones.

Sooner or later, he would need a plan. And before he'd got that far, even, he'd need to recover his flight kit, provided these hooligans hadn't found it already.

The entrance to the green lane was just yards away. He was running as quietly as he could, hoping he was invisible; that the thug on his heels was too busy flirting with a heart attack to be paying close attention. Though also, as a contingency, he was tightening his grip on the rock in his hand.

. . . Flight kit. It sounded like a piece of tourist equipment. And so, in a way, it was, though most tourists have a destination in mind, and this particular bag was for those focused on departure. His passport – the word 'his' designating ownership rather than identity, but it was a passport he'd paid for, and definitely bore his photograph – plus a grand in cash and two prepaid credit cards worth 5,000 US dollars and 5,000 euros respectively. One change of clothing, a basic toiletries kit which included hair dye and tinted contact lenses, and a pair of insoles that would alter his gait enough to fool a computer. Or that was the notion, though computers were more sophisticated than they used to be. He'd spent years in the country, becoming a bumpkin. Surveillance technology, meanwhile, had been hanging out in city centres, picking up tricks. But you did what you could.

The bag was beneath a floorboard under Max's firewood basket, next to the burner in his sitting room, a hiding place he was reasonably confident would have eluded this bunch of amateurs, but there was no accounting for luck. And even if it

remained secure, he had to get back there undetected. But one thing at a time.

Here was the entrance to the green lane. He risked a look back, just making out the grumpy shape of a driver finding his land legs, and took a chance, hurling the rock with all the force he could manage. It missed its target, but not by much, and his pursuer flinched as it whistled past his head, and dropped to a crouch at the exact moment the motorbike reappeared, becoming a lump in the middle of the road the bike skewed to avoid, its cone of lamplight washing the hedgerow yellow. Someone – the cowering man; the bike rider – shouted in fear or anger, and Max slipped off the road and onto the green lane, where he ducked behind the first tree, no taller than he was, and held his breath as the hedgerow healed behind him and the long grass drew its curtain. He could feel damp seeping through his trainers and cold sweat on his back and arms. His chest ached and the taste of old coins filled his mouth. Meanwhile, rearrangements were being made; the motorbike's headlight levelled and found a straight line heading west. A moment later the machine itself roared by, leaving a deeper blackness in its wake, and Max heard but didn't see the luckless car driver lumber past. His breathing scored the night like tearing paper. Max waited until it faded before drawing air himself, feeling it enter his lungs like a baptism. Getting to his feet again made everything creak. Things like this should happen to a younger man, if they had to happen at all. Presumably someone had a good reason for setting all this in motion. Max would enjoy holding their head down a toilet, should the opportunity arise.

He made his way down the green lane as swiftly as compatible with balance. If it had been dark on the lane, here in this shaded alley things were pitch; the going slippery, except where tree roots and jagged stones offered trip hazards instead. The low branches were heavy and damp, and he was whipped in

the face every other step. Noise magnified in the dark, and he felt as stealthy as a hippo. But for now, at least, he'd evaded his pursuers, whoever they were. Soon, he hoped, he'd have time to put his mind to that. At the moment he was kept busy making sure he wasn't eaten by the country.

It became a counting game – every ten steps he'd pause and stretch his hearing. Scratches and rustlings were all he heard, as the green lane's inhabitants warned each other of his approach. Once he stumbled, and in the act of falling had a whole string of painful premonitions: a broken ankle, a painful night, a quiet day. The green lane would reach around him, and by the time his body came to light it would be wrapped in roots: a rustic mummy. But an outstretched hand saved him from worse than a jarred skeleton: he felt the impact in his teeth, but no real harm done. As he clambered up again his fingers curled round a stick, as if the world were offering an apology. Nothing like a stick for helping maintain balance. God, he was going to be good at being old, if circumstances allowed. He reached a junction with another green lane, and without pausing turned left – sometimes the best decisions were the ones you hardly made, the ones that made themselves for you. Though it was best not to make too severe an accounting. It could start to look like the life you'd lived had been a series of accidents; of unintentional explosions, and unwilling alterations. Another ten steps and he paused to listen. The motorbike was back within earshot, though it couldn't possibly be heading down the green lane. But it was.

Panic can be time-consuming, and there were better ways of getting through the next little while. Max had two obvious choices: keep going or bundle himself into a clump of hedge and hope the bike would pass by without seeing him. Now that he'd branched off from his initial route his chances of avoiding detection had improved by some precise mathematical element he couldn't currently determine, but maths was a tricky

bunch of bastards, and he'd sooner trust his stick. The motorcycle's noise remained at a set distance, or seemed to: noise magnified in the dark, but also played games of its own. It could lurk round corners, or jump over hedges. Max continued on his way, trying not to hurry: less haste more speed, and other English word games. The world was dark and strange and familiar all at once. In his night-time ramblings, he never entered the green lanes. This was why: they could swallow you whole without even bothering to spit you out. Idiots sometimes drove them in vehicles they didn't care about any more than they did nature, but darkness contained risks even idiots steered clear of. Rocks shifted, stones rolled, and roots reached out and grabbed you. Cars that could bully their way through daylight found themselves wrecked by night's tricksters. Pedestrians like Max moved slowly, exploring the barely visible terrain with a stick, and keeping one foot on the ground at all times.

Somewhere behind him, the motorbike roared and revved. He hoped its rider was unprepared, and wearing non-protective gear.

When the stench hit him it was with the force of an avalanche, as if gravity were rolling boulders down a slope.

It was the dead badger. He'd not been aware he was approaching its ambit, and even now couldn't tell how close he was – it had gathered power since he'd first encountered it, its atmosphere expanding like an untended chemistry experiment – and his eyes began to stream, his head to fill. The worst smell in the world. He'd undersold it, calling it that. It was the smell of an afterlife gone bad; all the disappointments of eternity balled up into a single sensation, and delivered with the subtlety of a shovel in the face. The motorbike ceased its slow progress and growled from a crouching position. When Max turned, a static glow lit the bushes a hundred yards back, where the green lanes met. His watering eyes made the scene a kaleidoscope, fragments of light scattering and reforming, under which the motor hummed with indecision. It would follow him

or not. There was nothing he could do about it. He turned again and made his way forward, half blind, his rustling inaudible as long as the motorbike grumbled, and the air he was walking into grew solid with every step. The badger's death was crawling with life, its corpse a feasting table for insects, its putrid flesh, its rotting fur, a palace for famished worms. The stink was unbelievable. The darkness made it worse. There was something in his ears too, as if the animal's death had scored a symphony in the night: it was all drums and screaming strings and a conductor who'd lost the plot. The motorbike was on the move. Max didn't look back. He stumbled forward, stick in hand, and a wave of nausea splashed over him, splashed all around. He pulled the neckline of his sweatshirt over his mouth and nose, but it made small difference. Light was picking him out, an elongated stickman thrashing his way down a quivering corridor, which grew narrower ahead, and rockier underfoot. He must be passing the badger corpse now, off to his left, entangled in its rooty tomb, and Christ the smell couldn't get worse but it did: like walking into a wardrobe and having the door close behind you. The motorbike was throwing shapes as it heaved and rattled over the stony ground, its headlight's beam a wandering yellow scoop. Max's vision began to clear. Leaves were dancing ahead of him, and he couldn't tell if this were a breeze or the motion of the motorbike sending turbulence ahead to rummage down the lane, but either way he felt an approaching storm. The sweatshirt slipped free of his nose and the stench redoubled but he was past the epicentre now, and the motorbike hadn't reached it yet; still about eighty yards behind him, its progress cautious, its driver anxious not to spill on the rough terrain. Behind its headlight's glare there was only a grotesque lump, as if driver and machine had fused into a single being. This was how monsters were made.

Max had no idea why this maelstrom had been unleashed tonight. He was well pissed off about it, though.

There are advantages to being the one on foot in a motorbike–pedestrian smackdown, but none came to mind. What arrived instead was a shift of focus. Using people, changing the game, taking what came to hand – things didn't have to be broken to need a fixer. This wasn't so much Max remembering who he used to be as the person he used to be realising he was now Max. One or maybe both of them was gagging at the toxic shock, but at the same time that shock was slotting into place in the world he found himself in. Here on the green lane was a sphere, a snow globe, a goldfish bowl. It was a perfect circle everywhere you looked, and inside it was the worst smell in the world, and outside was everything else. And you were either in that sphere or not, and right that moment Max's advantage was that he knew this was so and the man on the motorbike didn't. Soon he would, and while he was adjusting to that new reality would be a good moment to interrogate his professionalism. Lots of people could do two things at once. Many had difficulty doing three.

The air was starting to clear, and the motorbike was twenty yards behind, truffling its way along the gnarly passage, its human – Max could now see – being tossed around like a rodeo rider by the roots and rocks its wheels were crunching over. Any moment now. He took two more steps, prodding the ground with his stick as he moved, then looked back. Any moment. Another step, and again he looked back. The headlight's glare was sprawling between them, and he focused on the ground it illuminated, trying to map it – it would be good to know where the worst rocks were, the biggest roots. Any moment. The motorbike rocked and roared, an impossible beast, and Max had the sudden notion of himself as a horseless knight facing down a dragon. Which bucked and steamed and wasn't expecting what happened next: that Max should fling himself towards it, holding his stick like a lance. He was ready for the stench this time, re-entering its sphere as the motorbike joined

it from the other direction, and knew without being able to see that the rider was already confused because this wasn't right, the quarry didn't become the hunter. All the rider could do was wrench the bike sideways to block Max's escape. Though escape wasn't what Max had in mind; what he wanted was the rider to experience the impact of the badger's last gasp, which was happening now, he guessed – the bike, slanted sideways across the narrow green lane, was an effective barrier, but the rider had thrown his head back in disbelief or horror or shock, or whatever word best described being assaulted by airborne filth. His stick grasped lengthways, Max leaped, catching the rider chest-high, and the two of them piled onto the ground, the bike tumbling with them, trapping its rider's right leg and sending its headlight's beam directly into the sky, a yellow column in which insects swarmed. It might have been all over then, if Max could have got one headbutt in, but the driver wore a helmet: its visor raised, but his temples and forehead protected. His lungs weren't doing so well though. He'd gasped on impact, taking in a bucketful of busy air, and his face was screwed up in disgust. One of his arms was pinioned by Max's stick; the other he raised feebly in an attempt to batter Max's head, but the tide was against him. Some moments ago he'd been upright and mobile, astride a motorbike; now the bike was astride him, and he was breathing poisonous fog. Max shifted position so his stick was across the man's throat, and pushed hard, and as he did so he brought his face close to his enemy's and bit his nose. Jesus, he hadn't known he'd had that in him. His victim squirmed and screamed, his hot breath spraying Max's face with germs, but there was a time for worrying about hygiene and another for just getting on with the job. Between his teeth was gristle and grit. Between the two men the motorbike trembled. Between one moment and the next the fight was done: his victim wasn't struggling any more, he was crying. Max relaxed his jaws, released his grip on

the stick, took careful aim, and punched the man in the face just once, partly for reasons of caution, but mostly because he could still remember when his biggest problem was insomnia, and now he was cold, wet, muddy and scared. He got to his feet, trembling. The motorbike growled, like a wolf he'd fought to its knees, but it wasn't going anywhere. Keeping his breathing shallow, Max turned and stumbled away down the green lane, where, within a minute or two, the foul air faded. It took longer than that before the motorbike's noise was just a background whimper, mingled with its rider's sobs. When Max spat, it wasn't just saliva he cleared from his mouth. He noticed he was muttering to himself, and not in English either. But it was a little late to worry about maintaining his cover.

Back at Max's cottage, the woman whose head he'd banged against his kitchen floor had taken a couple of surreptitious ibuprofen halfway through her assigned tasks – 'Find out where he'd go. Find his phone, his laptop, his diary' – but her head throbbed, and she'd have a face like an aubergine come morning. The only phone was a Nokia brick on his bedside table. She'd dropped it into a freezer bag. There was a laptop too, old and battered and heavy, but nothing resembling a diary. Her stomach was churning, and she wasn't sure whether that was the assault, the medication swallowed dry on an empty stomach, or the whole burglary enterprise. Which hadn't gone swimmingly well, she'd be the first to admit, and also the first to be blamed. But there was always the chance she could redeem herself, and the best way of doing that would be climbing back into the car heavy-handed. Sometimes, guilty souls packed for a swift getaway. It was possible the bastard had an escape kit – go home with that, she'd be next best thing to forgiven.

It could be anywhere, of course, but easy reach was the thing. So she was checking his sitting room, which had walls of unequal length and a curved window space, both suggesting

hollow cavities, and keeping an eye on her watch at the same time when her phone trembled in her pocket. It had been sixty minutes since the flag dropped, which was way outside the ideal envelope. When things went bad, they went bad the way soap operas did: they got worse all the time, and didn't stop. She leaned against the wood-burning stove, one hand resting on its companion firewood basket, and took her boss's call in a whisper.

'Anything?'

'Phone and laptop.'

'Letters, postcards, Post-its stuck to the fridge?'

There hadn't been.

'Money? Anywhere?'

'A few quid.'

The boss paused. Then: 'Put a tracker on his car.'

Which answered an unspoken question. 'He got away, then.'

'No, we've got him here. It's a promotional thing, we're giving away free trackers this week.'

'... Sorry.'

'Jesus.'

He disconnected.

There were trackers in her kit bag, fastened to her belt. She looked the consummate professional, all the tools hanging at her waist. Probably the reason the target had heard her climbing through his window.

Rubbing the side of her head again, she straightened up and left the room. Then re-entered, walked back to the stove, opened it and peered inside. Nothing. Worth a look though, and worth another thirty seconds to root through the firewood basket. Again, nothing. She kicked the basket in frustration, shifting it half a yard, and left the room once more, unzipping the pouch containing the tracker as she did so. At the front door, she scooped the target's car keys from their hook: forget the wheel arches, forget the exhaust pipe, forget all the places

guilty people checked. She'd stick the bastard thing under the passenger seat. If he waited until they'd gone and doubled back, hoping for a motorised getaway, she'd be the one laughing come morning. Aubergine-faced or not.

The last watcher departed at 6:34, as the first builder's van trundled down the lane towards the industrial encampment. The sky had lightened enough that trees had shapes instead of character, though the rolling clouds suggested that the morning would be smeary and grey, with a better than even chance of turning dismal. Once the watcher's car reached the top of the lane and made the right turn that would take it to the main road, Max emerged from the hedge in which he'd been crouching and creaked his way down to his cottage. The bird-song, normally a pleasure, was unusually irritating this morning. He needed a shower, proper clothes and breakfast, and was aware that a clock had started ticking. He had to find out what had just happened before it happened again. Which meant he needed to be in the car and away as soon as possible.

He was in and out of the cottage inside twenty minutes, locking up behind him and poking his head round Old Dolly's door thirty seconds later, a half-eaten fried-egg sandwich in his hand, a rucksack on his back. His neighbour was up by five most mornings, in case – he surmised – they made smoking and being curmudgeonly illegal overnight. Every moment asleep was a moment wasted.

'I'll be away a while, Doll. A few weeks maybe. Possibly longer.'

'And you're telling me this because?'

'So you'll remember, when you start starving to death, why you're running out of food.'

'I managed all right before you turned up.'

'We were twenty years younger then. The Queen Mother was managing all right.' The last of his sandwich in his mouth,

he opened her fridge. Most of the veg he'd bought last time was still there, in varying states of decay. The only green thing inroads had been made on was the bottle of Gordon's. 'I take it back. You're going to live forever.' He shut the fridge. 'Unless you're already dead. That would explain a lot, come to think of it.'

'What was all the activity last night?'

'You have very vivid dreams.'

'Don't gaslight me, you shiftless refugee.'

'Speaking of which.' He turned off her gas ring. 'There are cheaper ways of lighting up, you know. And a box of matches wouldn't hurt the planet.'

'Tell that to the tree they're made from.' Suggestibility at work: she reached for the cigarettes she kept in her housecoat's pouch, an action that, for Max, always brought a kangaroo to mind. 'And you're changing the subject.'

'It turns out I have unpaid bills. Someone came round to collect.'

She nodded, as if this confirmed a long-held suspicion. 'Being a deadbeat's caught up with you, has it? Always pay your debts, that's my motto.'

'Unless it's to your neighbour, right?'

'Did I ever ask you to do my shopping? Or did you just poke your nose in?'

Mention of noses wasn't welcome. Max made a face he hoped Old Dolly wouldn't notice. 'I didn't like the idea of you starving to death, and someone moving in who kept the TV low. I've been listening to the rubbish you watch for free all these years.'

'Then don't pretend I owe you anything.'

Max made the *doof doof doof* noise of *EastEnders*' drums, and came forward to light her cigarette with the plastic lighter she kept for igniting the gas ring. As he bent to apply the flame, he kissed the top of her head gently.

‘Piss off, paedol!’

‘Don’t open the door to strangers. Jonas’s number’s on that postcard next to the phone. He’ll sort you out if you need anything.’

‘What would I need, my age?’

‘It’s too early for the big questions, Doll.’

Another van rumbled down the road, and she scowled. ‘Bloody pikeys. Someone should have a word with them.’

‘Always full of good ideas.’ Adjusting the rucksack which hung from one shoulder, Max gave her a three-fingered salute which she returned half-heartedly with two of her own. He imagined her still scowling as he drew the door closed and set off down the lane. In his mind Old Dolly was always scowling. It was difficult to picture someone acting entirely out of character.

Four minutes later – a bell was tolling seven – he was at the encampment at the far side of the village. A mini industrial estate established by stealth, and hoping to convince the local council that it had acquired established-use status, this was run by an exile from Plymouth known, for complicated reasons, as Neezer. It was Neezer who bore the brunt of the villagers’ ire for having brought this makeshift builders’ yard to their border, though as Neezer pointed out, when he could be bothered, the field he’d purchased with what he consistently referred to as ‘legal cash’ was separated by the railway line from the village proper, ‘and is therefore outside your jurisdiction, squire’, a form of address he used gender-neutrally. This technical nicety notwithstanding, no self-respecting local set eyes on Neezer or any of his cohort without resort to that brand of freezing contempt perfected by teenagers, French waiters and the English middle class. Which, Max surmised, Neezer was all broken up about on the inside, because it never showed anywhere else.

This morning, as at every other hour of the day, Neezer wore a pork pie hat and a plaid waistcoat over a white shirt and black jeans, an unlit roll-up in the corner of his mouth

completing the outfit. When he heard Max approaching over the redundant cattle grid, he was making coffee in a microwave hooked up to a generator that had the kind of dry cough that would call for a lateral flow test if a human had it, and benignly watching a man who looked about eighty trying to load a dishwasher into the back of a van. ‘You want to be careful, squire,’ he said as Max came into earshot, and if it seemed he were addressing the elderly labourer, his follow-up put that right. ‘Get seen hobnobbing with the likes of me, your posho neighbours’ll have you tarred and barrelled.’

Max would have grinned at the idea of Old Dolly being ‘posho’ if he weren’t feeling the effects of a sleepless night. ‘I think you mean feathered,’ he said, slipping the rucksack off his shoulder and leaning against the wooden upright holding Neezer’s corrugated iron roof in place. The sheltered area contained a rocking chair, a small kitchen table on which the microwave sat, a standard lamp, a cardboard box holding three bottles of wine and a carton of milk, a small lockable cupboard of the kind found next to hospital beds, and which was indeed stamped PROPERTY OF EXETER HOSPITAL, and – because the world was full of people, and every last one of them unique – a three-shelved bookcase, about a foot wide, stuffed with teach-yourself guitar manuals. Nowhere in Max’s field of vision was a guitar.

‘Yeah, I’d not put weight on that, I were you.’ The microwave pinged, and Neezer removed his coffee. ‘It’s a bit non-load-bearing, if you catch my drift.’

Max stood straight, keeping a grip on the bag with one hand, and dipping into it with the other. ‘That must give you a nice secure feeling.’

‘Temporary structure. Need permission otherwise.’ He wrinkled his nose as Max came nearer. ‘What’s that odour?’

Despite the thirty-second shower and change of clothes it was in his hair, and clinging to his skin. ‘I’m using a new moisturiser.’

‘You should sort it out, squire. Smells like dead fucking badger.’

‘It’s on my list.’ He counted a hundred in tens from the wad of cash he’d taken from the bag. ‘Here’s my parking fee. Car ready?’

As well as signing a petition against the encampment Max had stowed a car there, a fourteen-year-old Saab he’d bought in Exeter from a man in a pub. This had been eighteen months ago, after it became clear that the camp wasn’t going anywhere soon, and replaced Max’s previous parking scheme, whereby he’d left his secret wheels in a lock-up in Newton Abbot. This had been okay as a fallback, but its drawbacks included Newton Abbot being a fair hike away. If Neezer had been amused at providing Max with a hideaway garage in the camp at the same time as Max was adding his voice to the chorus of outrage at the camp’s existence, he didn’t mention it. It was possible that such examples of man’s Janusian nature no longer surprised him. That or the hundred quid a month stifled his own outrage adequately.

He made a vague wave towards a nearby structure, similar to the one under which he was sitting but larger, beneath whose tin roof were various shrouded shapes almost certainly cars. ‘As you left it, squire. If it went then it should go now, provided time’s whirlywhatsit hasn’t wrought its rusty changes.’ He sipped his coffee and made a face, whether of approval or disgust wasn’t easy to determine. ‘Maintenance and valeting, that was never part of the arrangement.’

It had been, was how Max recalled it, but there was little point arguing. He handed the notes to Neezer, who stuffed them into his waistcoat pocket without counting, and couldn’t resist asking: ‘Do you own a guitar, Neezer?’

‘No. Why?’

‘Just, you seem anxious to learn how to play.’

‘Oh, yeah, right. No, I am learning. Still doing the theory though, squire.’ Coffee cup in his left hand, he mimed holding

the instrument, twiddling the fingers of his right. 'Day I actually pick one up, I'll already be an expert. Know what I mean?'

Max sort of did. Fetching the car keys up from the belly of his bag, he gave the same three-fingered salute to Neezer that he'd bestowed on Old Dolly, and headed off to rescue his car from its canvas shroud.

Watching him leave, Neezer tapped the roll of cash in his waistcoat pocket, and called encouragement to the octogenarian struggling with the dishwasher. 'You wanna bend your knees, squire. Don't wanna do your back in, not at your age.'

Then he poured the rest of his coffee away, pulled a book from his shelf, and started to read.

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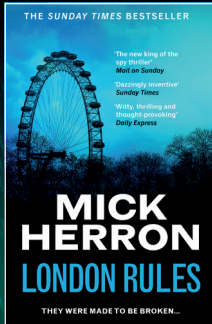
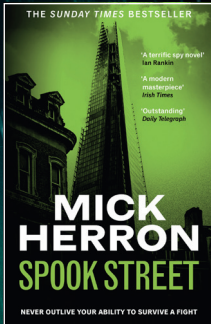
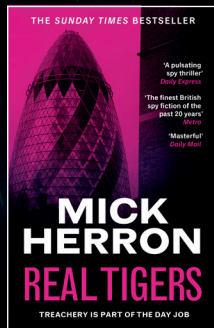
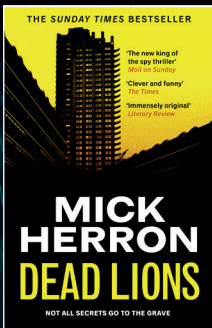
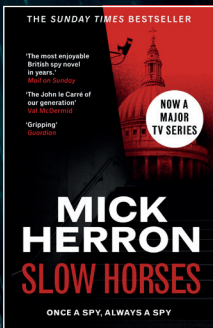
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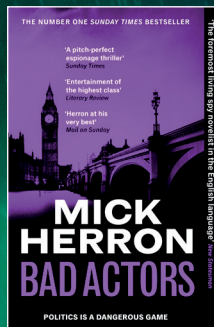
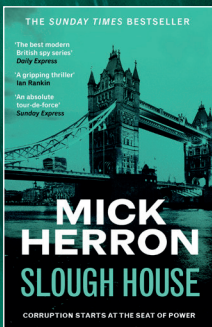
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