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ROBERT
GALBRAITH

AUTHOR OF THE CUCKOO'S CALLING

The
Ink Black
Heart

A
CORMORAN STRIKE
NOVEL

ROBERT
GALBRAITH

THE
INK BLACK
HEART

A Cormoran Strike Novel



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To Steve and Lorna,
my family, my friends
and two bulwarks against anomie,
with love

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**MULHOLLAND
BOOKS**

*Two forms of darkness are there. One is Night...
And one is Blindness.*

Mary Elizabeth Coleridge
Doubt

PROLOGUE

*Wounds of the heart are often fatal,
but not necessarily so.*

Henry Gray FRS
Gray's Anatomy

1

*Why did you let your eyes so rest on me,
And hold your breath between?
In all the ages this can never be
As if it had not been.*

Mary Elizabeth Coleridge
A Moment

Of all the couples sitting in the Rivoli Bar at the Ritz that Thursday evening, the pair that was having the most conspicuously good time was not, in fact, a couple.

Cormoran Strike and Robin Ellacott, private detectives, business partners and self-declared best friends, were celebrating Robin's thirtieth birthday. Both had been slightly self-conscious on first arriving in the bar, which resembled an art deco jewel box, with its walls of dark wood and gold, and its frosted panels of Lalique glass, because each was aware that this outing was unique in the almost five years they'd known one another. Never before had they chosen to spend an evening in each other's company outside work, without the presence of other friends or colleagues, or the pretext of injury (because there'd been an occasion a few weeks previously, when Strike had accidentally given his partner two black eyes and bought her a takeaway curry as recompense).

Even more unusually, both had had enough sleep, and each was looking their best. Robin was wearing a figure-hugging blue dress, her long strawberry-blond hair clean and loose, and her partner had noticed the appreciative glances she'd drawn from male drinkers as she passed. He'd already complimented her on the opal lying in the hollow at the base of her throat, which had been a thirtieth birthday gift from her parents. The tiny

diamonds surrounding it made a glittering halo in the bar's golden lights, and whenever Robin moved, sparks of scarlet fire twinkled in the opal's depths.

Strike was wearing his favourite Italian suit, with a white shirt and dark tie. His resemblance to a broken-nosed, slightly overweight Beethoven had increased now that he'd shaved off his recently grown beard, but the waitress's warm smile as she handed Strike his first Old Fashioned reminded Robin of what her ex-husband's new wife, Sarah Shadlock, had once said of the detective:

'He is strangely attractive, isn't he? Bit beaten-up-looking, but I've never minded that.'

What a liar she'd been: Sarah had liked her men smoothly handsome, as proven by her relentless and ultimately successful pursuit of Matthew.

Sitting facing each other in leopard-print chairs at their table for two, Strike and Robin had initially subsumed their slight awkwardness in work talk. Discussion of the cases currently on the detective agency's books carried them through a powerful cocktail apiece, by which time their increasingly loud laughter had started drawing glances from both barmen and customers. Soon Robin's eyes were bright and her face slightly flushed, and even Strike, who was considerably larger than his partner and well able to handle his alcohol, had taken enough bourbon to make him feel pleasantly buoyant and loose-limbed.

After their second cocktails, talk became more personal. Strike, who was the illegitimate son of a rock star he'd met only twice, told Robin that one of his half-sisters, Prudence, wanted to meet him.

'Where does she fit in?' Robin asked. She knew that Strike's father had been married three times, and that her partner was the result of a one-night stand with a woman most commonly described in the press as a 'supergroupie', but she was hazy about the rest of the family tree.

'She's the other illegitimate,' said Strike. 'Few years younger than me. Her mother was that actress, Lindsey Fanthrope? Mixed-race woman? She's been in everything. *EastEnders*, *The Bill*...'

'D'you want to meet Prudence?'

'Not sure,' Strike admitted. 'Can't help feeling I've got enough relatives to be going on with. She's also a therapist.'

'What kind?'

'Jungian.'

His expression, which compounded wariness and distaste, made Robin laugh.

‘What’s wrong with being a Jungian therapist?’

‘I dunno... I quite liked her from her texts, but...’

Trying to find the right words, Strike’s eyes found the bronze panel on the wall behind Robin’s head, which showed a naked Leda being impregnated by Zeus in the form of a swan.

‘... well, she said she hasn’t had an easy time of it either, having him as a father. But when I found out what she does for a living...’

His voice trailed away. He drank more bourbon.

‘You thought she was being insincere?’

‘Not exactly insincere...’ Strike heaved a sigh. ‘I’ve had enough matchbox psychologists telling me why I live the way I do and tracing it all back to my family, so-called. Prudence said in one of her texts that she’d found forgiving Rokeby “healing”— Sod this,’ said Strike abruptly, ‘it’s your birthday, let’s talk about *your* family. What does your dad do for a living? You’ve never told me.’

‘Oh, haven’t I?’ said Robin, with mild surprise. ‘He’s a professor of sheep medicine, production and reproduction.’

Strike choked on his cocktail.

‘What’s funny?’ Robin asked, eyebrows raised.

‘Sorry,’ said Strike, coughing and laughing simultaneously. ‘Wasn’t expecting it, that’s all.’

‘He’s quite an authority, I’ll have you know,’ said Robin, mock-offended.

‘Professor of sheep— What was the rest of it, again?’

‘Medicine, production and reprod— *Why’s* that so funny?’ Robin said, as Strike guffawed a second time.

‘Dunno, maybe the “production” and “reproduction” thing,’ said Strike. ‘And also the sheep.’

‘He’s got forty-six letters after his name. I counted when I was a kid.’

‘Very impressive,’ said Strike, taking another sip of bourbon and attempting to look serious. ‘So, when did he first become interested in sheep? Was this a lifelong thing or did a particular sheep catch his eye when he was —’

‘He doesn’t *shag* them, Strike.’

The detective’s renewed laughter made heads turn.

‘His older brother got the family farm, so Dad did veterinary science at Durham and, yeah, he specialised— Stop bloody laughing! He’s also the editor of a magazine.’

‘Please tell me it’s about sheep.’

‘Yes, it is. *Sheep Management*,’ said Robin, ‘and before you ask, no, they don’t have a photo feature called “Readers’ Sheep”.’

This time Strike’s bellow of laughter was heard by the whole bar.

‘Keep it down,’ said Robin, smiling but aware of the many eyes now upon them. ‘We don’t want to be banned from *another* bar in London.’

‘We didn’t get banned from the American Bar, did we?’

Strike’s memory of the aftermath of attempting to punch a suspect in the Stafford Hotel was hazy, not because he’d been drunk, but because he’d been lost to everything but his own rage.

‘They might not have barred us *explicitly*, but try going back in there and see what kind of a welcome you get,’ said Robin, fishing one of the last olives out of the dishes that had arrived with their first drink. Strike had already single-handedly finished the crisps.

‘Charlotte’s father kept sheep,’ Strike said, and Robin felt that small frisson of interest she always experienced when he mentioned his former fiancée, which was almost never.

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, on Arran,’ said Strike. ‘He had a massive house there with his third wife. Hobby farming, you know. Probably a tax write-off. They were evil-looking bastards – the sheep, that is – can’t remember the name of the breed. Black and white. Huge horns and yellow eyes.’

‘They sound like Jacobs,’ said Robin, and responding to Strike’s grin, she said, ‘I grew up with massive piles of *Sheep Management* next to the loo – obviously I know sheep breeds... What’s Arran like?’

She really meant, ‘What was Charlotte’s family like?’

‘Pretty, from what I can remember, but I was only at the house once. Never got a return invitation. Charlotte’s father hated the sight of me.’

‘Why?’

Strike downed the last of his cocktail before answering.

‘Well, there were a few reasons, but I think top of the list was that his wife tried to seduce me.’

Robin’s gasp was far louder than she’d intended.

‘Yeah. I must’ve been about twenty-two, twenty-three. She was at least forty. Very good-looking, if you like them coke-thin.’

‘How – what...?’

‘We’d gone to Arran for the weekend. Scheherazade – that was the stepmother – and Charlotte’s father were very big drinkers. Half the family had drug problems as well, all the stepsisters and half-brothers.

‘The four of us sat up boozing after dinner. Her father wasn’t over-keen on me in the first place – hoping for something a lot more blue-blooded. They’d put Charlotte and me in separate bedrooms on different floors.

‘I went up to my attic room about two in the morning, stripped off, fell into bed very pissed, turned out the light and a couple of minutes later the door opened. I thought it was Charlotte, obviously. The room was pitch black. I moved over, she slid in beside me –’

Robin realised her mouth was agape and closed it.

‘– stark naked. Still didn’t twig – I had most of a bottle of whisky inside me. She – ah – reached for me – if you know what I’m saying –’

Robin clapped a hand over her mouth.

‘– and we kissed and it was only when she whispered in my ear that she’d noticed me looking at her tits when she’d bent over the fire that I realised I was in bed with my hostess. Not that it matters, but I hadn’t been looking at her tits. I’d been getting ready to catch her. She was so pissed, I thought she was going to topple into the fire when she threw a log on it.’

‘What did you do?’ Robin asked through her fingers.

‘Shot out of bed like I had a firework up my arse,’ said Strike, as Robin began to laugh again, ‘hit the washstand, knocked it over and smashed some giant Victorian jug. She just sniggered. I had the impression she thought I’d be straight back in bed with her once the shock wore off. I was trying to find my boxers in the dark when Charlotte opened the door for real.’

‘Oh my *God*.’

‘Yeah, she didn’t take too kindly to finding me and her stepmother naked in the same bedroom,’ said Strike. ‘It was a toss-up which of us she wanted to kill most. The screaming woke Sir Anthony. He came charging upstairs in his brocade dressing gown, but he was so pissed he hadn’t tied it properly. He turned the lights on and stood there holding a shooting stick, oblivious to the fact that his cock was hanging out until his wife pointed it out.

“Anthony, we can see Johnny Winkle.”

Robin now laughed so hard that Strike had to wait for her to compose herself before continuing the story. At the bar a short distance from their table, a silver-haired man was watching Robin with a slight smirk on his face.

‘What then?’ Robin asked breathlessly, mopping her eyes with the miniature napkin that had come with her drink.

‘Well, as far as I can remember, Scheherazade didn’t bother to justify herself. If anything, she seemed to think it was all a bit of a laugh. Charlotte lunged at her and I held Charlotte back, and Sir Anthony basically seemed to take the view that it was all my fault for not locking my bedroom door. Charlotte was a bit inclined that way too. But life in squats with my mother hadn’t really prepared me for what to expect from the aristocracy. On balance, I’d have to say people were a lot better behaved in the squats.’

He raised his hand to indicate to the smiling waitress that they were ready for more drinks, and Robin, whose ribs were sore from laughing, got to her feet.

‘Need the loo,’ she said breathlessly, and the eyes of the silver-haired man on the bar stool followed her as she walked away.

The cocktails had been small but very strong, and Robin, who spent so much of her life running surveillance in trainers, was out of the habit of wearing heels. She had to grasp the handrail firmly while navigating the red-carpeted stairs down to the Ladies’ Room, which was more palatial than any Robin had visited before. The soft pink of a strawberry macaron, it featured circular marble sinks, a velvet sofa and walls covered in murals of nymphs standing in water lily-strewn lakes.

Having peed, Robin straightened her dress and checked her mascara in the mirror, expecting it to have run with all the laughing. Washing her hands, she thought back over the story Strike had just told her. However funny she’d found it, it was also slightly intimidating. In spite of the vast array of human vagaries, many of them sexual, that Robin had encountered in her detective career, she sometimes felt herself to be inexperienced and unworldly compared to other women her age. Robin’s personal experience of the wilder shores of sexual adventurousness was non-existent. She’d only ever had one sexual partner and had reasons beyond the usual for wishing to trust the person with whom she went to bed. A middle-aged man with a patch of vitiligo under his left ear had once stood in the dock and claimed that nineteen-year-old Robin had invited him into a dark stairwell for sex, and that

he'd choked her into unconsciousness because she'd told him she 'liked it rough'.

'I think my next drink had better be water,' Robin said five minutes later, as she dropped back into her seat opposite Strike again. 'Those are seriously strong cocktails.'

'Too late,' said Strike, as the waitress set fresh glasses in front of them. 'Fancy a sandwich, mop up some of the alcohol?'

He passed her the menu. The prices were exorbitant.

'No, listen—'

'I wouldn't have invited you to the Ritz if I wasn't prepared to cough up,' said Strike with an expansive gesture. 'I'd have ordered a cake, but—'

'Ilsa's already done it, for tomorrow night?' Robin guessed.

The following evening a group of friends, Strike included, would be giving Robin a birthday dinner, organised by their mutual friend.

'Yeah. I wasn't supposed to tell you, so act surprised. Who's coming to this dinner, anyway?' Strike asked. He had a slight curiosity about whether there were any people he didn't know about: specifically, men.

Robin listed the names of the couples.

'... and you and me,' she finished.

'Who's Richard?'

'Max's new boyfriend,' said Robin. Max was her flatmate and landlord, an actor who rented out a bedroom because he couldn't make his mortgage repayments without a lodger. 'I'm starting to wonder if it isn't time to move out of Max's,' she added.

The waitress appeared and Strike ordered them both sandwiches before turning back to Robin.

'Why're you thinking of moving out?'

'Well, the TV show Max is in pays really well and they've just commissioned a second series, and he and Richard seem very keen on each other. I don't want to wait until they ask me to leave. Anyway' – Robin took a sip of her fresh cocktail – 'I'm thirty. It's about time I was out on my own, don't you think?'

Strike shrugged.

'I'm not big on having to do things by certain dates. That's more Lucy's department.'

Lucy was the sister with whom Strike had spent most of his childhood,