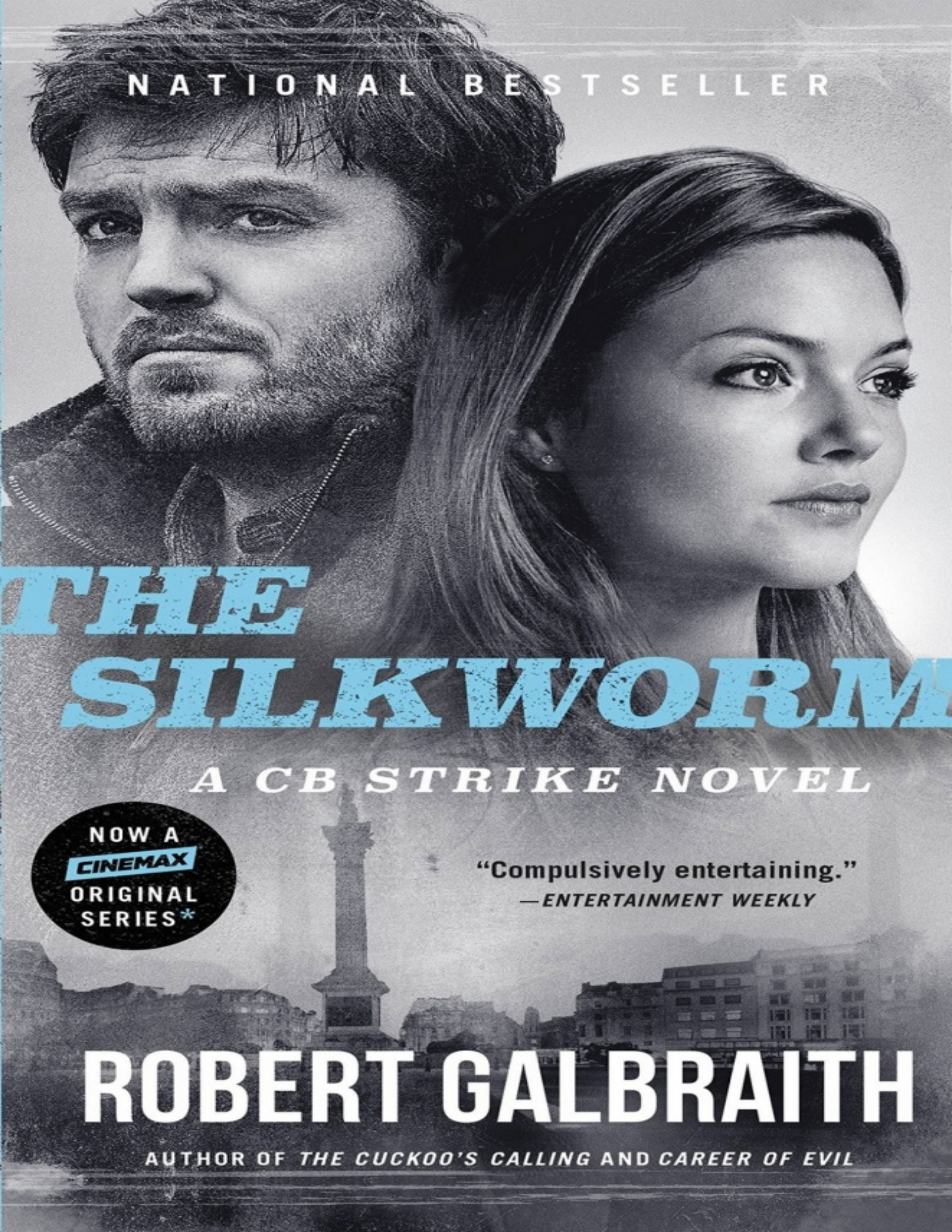
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ROBERT GALBRAITH
AUTHOR OF THE CUCKOO'S CALLING AND CAREER OF EVIL

The Silkworm

Robert Galbraith

MULHOLLAND BOOKS
Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston London

To Jenkins, without whom… he knows the rest

… blood and vengeance the scene, death the story, a sword imbrued with blood, the pen that writes, and the poet a terrible buskined tragical fellow, with a wreath about his head of burning match instead of bays.

The Noble Spanish Soldier Thomas Dekker

1

QUESTION

What dost thou feed on?

ANSWER

Broken sleep.

Thomas Dekker, *The Noble Spanish Soldier*

"Someone bloody famous," said the hoarse voice on the end of the line, "better've died, Strike."

The large unshaven man tramping through the darkness of pre-dawn, with his telephone clamped to his ear, grinned.

"It's in that ballpark."

"It's six o'clock in the fucking morning!"

"It's half past, but if you want what I've got, you'll need to come and get it," said Cormoran Strike. "I'm not far away from your place. There's a—"

"How d'you know where I live?" demanded the voice.

"You told me," said Strike, stifling a yawn. "You're selling your flat."

"Oh," said the other, mollified. "Good memory."

"There's a twenty-four-hour caff—"

"Fuck that. Come into the office later—"

"Culpepper, I've got another client this morning, he pays better than you do and I've been up all night. You need this now if you're going to use it."

A groan. Strike could hear the rustling of sheets.

“It had better be shit-hot.”

“Smithfield Café on Long Lane,” said Strike and rang off.

The slight unevenness in his gait became more pronounced as he walked down the slope towards Smithfield Market, monolithic in the winter darkness, a vast rectangular Victorian temple to meat, where from four every weekday morning animal flesh was unloaded, as it had been for centuries past, cut, parceled and sold to butchers and restaurants across London. Strike could hear voices through the gloom, shouted instructions and the growl and beep of reversing lorries unloading the carcasses. As he entered Long Lane, he became merely one among many heavily muffled men moving purposefully about their Monday-morning business.

A huddle of couriers in fluorescent jackets cupped mugs of tea in their gloved hands beneath a stone griffin standing sentinel on the corner of the market building. Across the road, glowing like an open fireplace against the surrounding darkness, was the Smithfield Café, open twenty-four hours a day, a cupboard-sized cache of warmth and greasy food.

The café had no bathroom, but an arrangement with the bookies a few doors along. Ladbrokes would not open for another three hours, so Strike made a detour down a side alley and in a dark doorway relieved himself of a bladder bulging with weak coffee drunk in the course of a night’s work. Exhausted and hungry, he turned at last, with the pleasure that only a man who has pushed himself past his physical limits can ever experience, into the fat-laden atmosphere of frying eggs and bacon.

Two men in fleeces and waterproofs had just vacated a table. Strike maneuvered his bulk into the small space and sank, with a grunt of satisfaction, onto the hard wood and steel chair. Almost before he asked, the Italian owner placed tea in front of him in a tall white mug, which came with triangles of white buttered bread. Within five minutes a full English breakfast lay before him on a large oval plate.

Strike blended well with the strong men banging their way in and out of the café. He was large and dark, with dense, short, curly hair that had receded a little from the high, domed forehead that topped a boxer’s broad

nose and thick, surly brows. His jaw was grimy with stubble and bruise-colored shadows enlarged his dark eyes. He ate gazing dreamily at the market building opposite. The nearest arched entrance, numbered two, was taking substance as the darkness thinned: a stern stone face, ancient and bearded, stared back at him from over the doorway. Had there ever been a god of carcasses?

He had just started on his sausages when Dominic Culpepper arrived. The journalist was almost as tall as Strike but thin, with a choirboy's complexion. A strange asymmetry, as though somebody had given his face a counterclockwise twist, stopped him being girlishly handsome.

"This better be good," Culpepper said as he sat down, pulled off his gloves and glanced almost suspiciously around the café.

"Want some food?" asked Strike through a mouthful of sausage.

"No," said Culpepper.

"Rather wait till you can get a croissant?" asked Strike, grinning.

"Fuck off, Strike."

It was almost pathetically easy to wind up the ex–public schoolboy, who ordered tea with an air of defiance, calling the indifferent waiter (as Strike noted with amusement) "mate."

"Well?" demanded Culpepper, with the hot mug in his long pale hands.

Strike fished in his overcoat pocket, brought out an envelope and slid it across the table. Culpepper pulled out the contents and began to read.

"Fucking hell," he said quietly, after a while. He shuffled feverishly through the bits of paper, some of which were covered in Strike's own writing. "Where the hell did you get this?"

Strike, whose mouth was full of sausage, jabbed a finger at one of the bits of paper, on which an office address was scribbled.

"His very fucked-off PA," he said, when he had finally swallowed. "He's been shagging her, as well as the two you know about. She's only just realized she's not going to be the next Lady Parker."

"How the hell did you find *that* out?" asked Culpepper, staring up at Strike over the papers trembling in his excited hands.

“Detective work,” said Strike thickly, through another bit of sausage. “Didn’t your lot used to do this, before you started outsourcing to the likes of me? But she’s got to think about her future employment prospects, Culpepper, so she doesn’t want to appear in the story, all right?”

Culpepper snorted.

“She should’ve thought about that before she nicked—”

With a deft movement, Strike tweaked the papers out of the journalist’s fingers.

“She didn’t nick them. He got her to print this lot off for him this afternoon. The only thing she’s done wrong is show it to me. But if you’re going to splash her private life all over the papers, Culpepper, I’ll take ’em back.”

“Piss off,” said Culpepper, making a grab for the evidence of wholesale tax evasion clutched in Strike’s hairy hand. “All right, we’ll leave her out of it. But he’ll know where we got it. He’s not a complete tit.”

“What’s he going to do, drag her into court where she can spill the beans about every other dodgy thing she’s witnessed over the last five years?”

“Yeah, all right,” sighed Culpepper after a moment’s reflection. “Give ’em back. I’ll leave her out of the story, but I’ll need to speak to her, won’t I? Check she’s kosher.”

“*Those* are kosher. You don’t need to speak to her,” said Strike firmly.

The shaking, besotted, bitterly betrayed woman whom he had just left would not be safe left alone with Culpepper. In her savage desire for retribution against a man who had promised her marriage and children she would damage herself and her prospects beyond repair. It had not taken Strike long to gain her trust. She was nearly forty-two; she had thought that she was going to have Lord Parker’s children; now a kind of bloodlust had her in its grip. Strike had sat with her for several hours, listening to the story of her infatuation, watching her pace her sitting room in tears, rock backwards and forwards on her sofa, knuckles to her forehead. Finally she had agreed to this: a betrayal that represented the funeral of all her hopes.

“You’re going to leave her out of it,” said Strike, holding the papers firmly

in a fist that was nearly twice the size of Culpepper's. "Right? This is still a fucking massive story without her."

After a moment's hesitation and with a grimace, Culpepper caved in.

"Yeah, all right. Give me them."

The journalist shoved the statements into an inside pocket and gulped his tea, and his momentary disgruntlement at Strike seemed to fade in the glorious prospect of dismantling the reputation of a British peer.

"Lord Parker of Pennywell," he said happily under his breath, "you are well and truly screwed, mate."

"I take it your proprietor'll get this?" Strike asked, as the bill landed between them.

"Yeah, yeah…"

Culpepper threw a ten-pound note down onto the table and the two men left the café together. Strike lit up a cigarette as soon as the door had swung closed behind them.

"How did you get her to talk?" Culpepper asked as they set off together through the cold, past the motorbikes and lorries still arriving at and departing the market.

"I listened," said Strike.

Culpepper shot him a sideways glance.

"All the other private dicks I use spend their time hacking phone messages."

"Illegal," said Strike, blowing smoke into the thinning darkness.

"So how—?"

"You protect your sources and I'll protect mine."

They walked fifty yards in silence, Strike's limp more marked with every step.

"This is going to be massive. Massive," said Culpepper gleefully. "That hypocritical old shit's been bleating on about corporate greed and he's had twenty mill stashed in the Cayman Islands…"

"Glad to give satisfaction," said Strike. "I'll email you my invoice."

Culpepper threw him another sideways look.

“See Tom Jones’s son in the paper last week?” he asked.

“Tom Jones?”

“Welsh singer,” said Culpepper.

“Oh, him,” said Strike, without enthusiasm. “I knew a Tom Jones in the army.”

“Did you see the story?”

“No.”

“Nice long interview he gave. He says he’s never met his father, never had a word from him. I bet he got more than your bill is going to be.”

“You haven’t seen my invoice yet,” said Strike.

“Just saying. One nice little interview and you could take a few nights off from interviewing secretaries.”

“You’re going to have to stop suggesting this,” said Strike, “or I’m going to have to stop working for you, Culpepper.”

“Course,” said Culpepper, “I could run the story anyway. Rock star’s estranged son is a war hero, never knew his father, working as a private—”

“Instructing people to hack phones is illegal as well, I’ve heard.”

At the top of Long Lane they slowed and turned to face each other. Culpepper’s laugh was uneasy.

“I’ll wait for your invoice, then.”

“Suits me.”

They set off in different directions, Strike heading towards the Tube station.

“Strike!” Culpepper’s voice echoed through the darkness behind him. “Did you fuck her?”

“Looking forward to reading it, Culpepper,” Strike shouted wearily, without turning his head.

He limped into the shadowy entrance of the station and was lost to Culpepper’s sight.

2

How long must we fight? for I cannot stay,
Nor will not stay! I have business.

Francis Beaumont and Philip Massinger, *The Little French Lawyer*

The Tube was filling up already. Monday-morning faces: sagging, gaunt, braced, resigned. Strike found a seat opposite a puffy-eyed young blonde whose head kept sinking sideways into sleep. Again and again she jerked herself back upright, scanning the blurred signs of the stations frantically in case she had missed her stop.

The train rattled and clattered, speeding Strike back towards the meager two and a half rooms under a poorly insulated roof that he called home. In the depths of his tiredness, surrounded by these blank, sheep-like visages, he found himself pondering the accidents that had brought all of them into being. Every birth was, viewed properly, mere chance. With a hundred million sperm swimming blindly through the darkness, the odds against a person becoming themselves were staggering. How many of this Tube-full had been planned, he wondered, light-headed with tiredness. And how many, like him, were accidents?

There had been a little girl in his primary school class who had a port-wine stain across her face and Strike had always felt a secret kinship with her, because both of them had carried something indelibly different with

them since birth, something that was not their fault. They couldn't see it, but everybody else could, and had the bad manners to keep mentioning it. The occasional fascination of total strangers, which at five years old he had thought had something to do with his own uniqueness, he eventually realized was because they saw him as no more than a famous singer's zygote, the incidental evidence of a celebrity's unfaithful fumble. Strike had only met his biological father twice. It had taken a DNA test to make Jonny Rokeby accept paternity.

Dominic Culpepper was a walking distillation of the prurience and presumptions that Strike met on the very rare occasions these days that anybody connected the surly-looking ex-soldier with the aging rock star. Their thoughts leapt at once to trust funds and handsome handouts, to private flights and VIP lounges, to a multimillionaire's largesse on tap. Agog at the modesty of Strike's existence and the punishing hours he worked, they asked themselves: what must Strike have done to alienate his father? Was he faking penury to wheedle more money out of Rokeby? What had he done with the millions his mother had surely squeezed out of her rich paramour?

And at such times, Strike would think nostalgically of the army, of the anonymity of a career in which your background and your parentage counted for almost nothing beside your ability to do the job. Back in the Special Investigation Branch, the most personal question he had faced on introduction was a request to repeat the odd pair of names with which his extravagantly unconventional mother had saddled him.

Traffic was already rolling busily along Charing Cross Road by the time Strike emerged from the Tube. The November dawn was breaking now, gray and halfhearted, full of lingering shadows. He turned into Denmark Street feeling drained and sore, looking forward to the short sleep he might be able to squeeze in before his next client arrived at nine thirty. With a wave at the girl in the guitar shop, with whom he often took cigarette breaks on the street, Strike let himself in through the black outer door beside the 12 Bar Café and began to climb the metal staircase that curled around the broken birdcage lift inside. Up past the graphic designer on the first floor, past his

own office with its engraved glass door on the second; up to the third and smallest landing where his home now lay.

The previous occupant, manager of the bar downstairs, had moved on to more salubrious quarters and Strike, who had been sleeping in his office for a few months, had leapt at the chance to rent the place, grateful for such an easy solution to the problem of his homelessness. The space under the eaves was small by any standards, and especially for a man of six foot three. He scarcely had room to turn around in the shower; kitchen and living room were uneasily combined and the bedroom was almost entirely filled by the double bed. Some of Strike's possessions remained boxed up on the landing, in spite of the landlord's injunction against this.

His small windows looked out across rooftops, with Denmark Street far below. The constant throb of the bass from the bar below was muffled to the point that Strike's own music often obliterated it.

Strike's innate orderliness was manifest throughout: the bed was made, the crockery clean, everything in its place. He needed a shave and shower, but that could wait; after hanging up his overcoat, he set his alarm for nine twenty and stretched out on the bed fully clothed.

He fell asleep within seconds and within a few more—or so it seemed—he was awake again. Somebody was knocking on his door.

"I'm sorry, Cormoran, I'm really sorry—"

His assistant, a tall young woman with long strawberry-blond hair, looked apologetic as he opened the door, but at the sight of him her expression became appalled.

"Are you all right?"

"Wuzassleep. Been 'wake all night—two nights."

"I'm really sorry," Robin repeated, "but it's nine forty and William Baker's here and getting—"

"Shit," mumbled Strike. "Can't've set the alarm right—gimme five min—"

"That's not all," said Robin. "There's a woman here. She hasn't got an appointment. I've told her you haven't got room for another client, but she's refusing to leave."

Strike yawned, rubbing his eyes.

"Five minutes. Make them tea or something."

Six minutes later, in a clean shirt, smelling of toothpaste and deodorant but still unshaven, Strike entered the outer office where Robin was sitting at her computer.

"Well, better late than never," said William Baker with a rigid smile. "Lucky you've got such a good-looking secretary, or I might have got bored and left."

Strike saw Robin flush angrily as she turned away, ostensibly organizing the post. There had been something inherently offensive in the way that Baker had said "secretary." Immaculate in his pinstriped suit, the company director was employing Strike to investigate two of his fellow board members.

"Morning, William," said Strike.

"No apology?" murmured Baker, his eyes on the ceiling.

"Hello, who are you?" Strike asked, ignoring him and addressing instead the slight, middle-aged woman in an old brown overcoat who was perched on the sofa.

"Leonora Quine," she replied, in what sounded, to Strike's practiced ear, like a West Country accent.

"I've got a very busy morning ahead, Strike," said Baker.

He walked without invitation into the inner office. When Strike did not follow, he lost a little of his suavity.

"I doubt you got away with shoddy time-keeping in the army, Mr. Strike. Come along, please."

Strike did not seem to hear him.

"What exactly is it you were wanting me to do for you, Mrs. Quine?" he asked the shabby woman on the sofa.

"Well, it's my husband—"

"Mr. Strike, I've got an appointment in just over an hour," said William Baker, more loudly.

"—your secretary said you didn't have no appointments but I said I'd

wait."

"Strike!" barked William Baker, calling his dog to heel.

"Robin," snarled the exhausted Strike, losing his temper at last. "Make up Mr. Baker's bill and give him the file; it's up to date."

"What?" said William Baker, thrown. He reemerged into the outer office.

"He's sacking you," said Leonora Quine with satisfaction.

"You haven't finished the job," Baker told Strike. "You said there was more—"

"Someone else can finish the job for you. Someone who doesn't mind tossers as clients."

The atmosphere in the office seemed to become petrified. Wooden-faced, Robin retrieved Baker's file from the outer cabinet and handed it to Strike.

"How *dare*—"

"There's a lot of good stuff in that file that'll stand up in court," said Strike, handing it to the director. "Well worth the money."

"You haven't finished—"

"He's finished with *you*," interjected Leonora Quine.

"Will you shut up, you stupid wom—" William Baker began, then took a sudden step backwards as Strike took a half-step forwards. Nobody said anything. The ex-serviceman seemed suddenly to be filling twice as much space as he had just seconds before.

"Take a seat in my office, Mrs. Quine," said Strike quietly.

She did as she was told.

"You think she'll be able to afford you?" sneered a retreating William Baker, his hand now on the door handle.

"My fees are negotiable," said Strike, "if I like the client."

He followed Leonora Quine into his office and closed the door behind him with a snap.

3

… left alone to bear up all these ills…

Thomas Dekker, *The Noble Spanish Soldier*

"He's a right one, isn't he?" commented Leonora Quine as she sat down in the chair facing Strike's desk.

"Yeah," agreed Strike, sinking heavily into the seat opposite her. "He is."

In spite of a barely crumpled pink-and-white complexion and the clear whites of her pale blue eyes, she looked around fifty. Fine, limp, graying hair was held off her face by two plastic combs and she was blinking at him through old-fashioned glasses with overlarge plastic frames. Her coat, though clean, had surely been bought in the eighties. It had shoulder pads and large plastic buttons.

"So you're here about your husband, Mrs. Quine?"

"Yeah," said Leonora. "He's missing."

"How long's he been gone?" asked Strike, reaching automatically for a notebook.

"Ten days," said Leonora.

"Have you been to the police?"

"I don't need the police," she said impatiently, as though she was tired of explaining this to people. "I called them once before and everyone was angry at me because he was only with a friend. Owen just goes off sometimes. He's a writer," she said, as though this explained everything.

"He's disappeared before?"

"He's emotional," she said, her expression glum. "He's always going off on one, but it's been ten days and I know he's really upset but I need him home now. There's Orlando and I've got things to do and there's—"

"Orlando?" repeated Strike, his tired mind on the Florida resort. He did not have time to go to America and Leonora Quine, in her ancient coat, certainly did not look as though she could afford a ticket for him.

"Our daughter, Orlando," said Leonora. "She needs looking after. I've got a neighbor in to sit with her while I'm here."

There was a knock on the door and Robin's bright gold head appeared.

"Would you like coffee, Mr. Strike? You, Mrs. Quine?"

When they had given Robin their orders and she had withdrawn, Leonora said:

"It won't take you long, because I think I know where he is, only I can't get hold of the address and nobody'll take my calls. It's been ten days," she repeated, "and we need him home."

It seemed to Strike a great extravagance to resort to a private detective in this circumstance, especially as her appearance exhaled poverty.

"If it's a simple question of making a phone call," he said gently, "haven't you got a friend or a—?"

"Edna can't do it," she said and he found himself disproportionately touched (exhaustion sometimes laid him raw in this way) at her tacit admission that she had one friend in the world. "Owen's told them not to say where he is. I need," she said simply, "a man to do it. Force them to say."

"Your husband's name's Owen, is it?"

"Yeah," she replied, "Owen Quine. He wrote *Hobart's Sin*."

Neither name nor title meant anything to Strike.

"And you think you know where he is?"

"Yeah. We was at this party with a load of publishers and people—he didn't want to take me, but I says, 'I got a babysitter already, I'm coming'—so I hears Christian Fisher telling Owen about this place, this writer's retreat place. And afterwards I says to Owen, 'What was that place he was telling

you about?' and Owen says, 'I'm not telling you, that's the whole bloody point, getting away from the wife and kids.' "

She almost invited Strike to join her husband in laughing at her; proud, as mothers sometimes pretend to be, of their child's insolence.

"Who's Christian Fisher?" asked Strike, forcing himself to concentrate.

"Publisher. Young, trendy bloke."

"Have you tried phoning Fisher and asking him for the address of this retreat?"

"Yeah, I've called him every day for a week and they said they'd taken a message and he'd get back to me, but he hasn't. I think Owen's told him not to say where he is. But *you'll* be able to get the address out of Fisher. I know you're good," she said. "You solved that Lula Landry thing, when the police never."

A mere eight months previously, Strike had had but a single client, his business had been moribund and his prospects desperate. Then he had proven, to the satisfaction of the Crown Prosecution Service, that a famous young woman had not committed suicide but had been pushed to her death from a fourth-floor balcony. The ensuing publicity had brought a tide of business; he had been, for a few weeks, the best-known private detective in the metropolis. Jonny Rokeby had become a mere footnote to his story; Strike had become a name in his own right, albeit a name most people got wrong…

"I interrupted you," he said, trying hard to hold on to the thread of his thoughts.

"Did you?"

"Yeah," said Strike, squinting at his own crabbed writing on the notebook. "You said, 'There's Orlando, I've got things to do and there's—' "

"Oh yeah," she said, "there's funny stuff happening since he left."

"What kind of funny stuff?"

"Shit," said Leonora Quine matter-of-factly, "through our letter box."

"Someone's put excrement through your letter box?" Strike said.

"Yeah."