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GALBRAITH

The Number One Bestseller

*THE*  
**HALLMARKED  
MAN**

A *STRIKE* NOVEL

ROBERT  
GALBRAITH

***THE  
HALLMARKED  
MAN***

A CORMORAN STRIKE NOVEL



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To Séan and Nadine Harris, who gave me back  
what I thought I'd lost forever.

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**MULHOLLAND  
BOOKS**

I had dipped in life's struggle and, out again,  
Bore specks of it here, there, easy to see,  
When I found my swan and the cure was plain;  
The dull turned bright as I caught your white  
On my bosom: you saved me—saved in vain  
If you ruined yourself, and all through me!

Robert Browning  
*The Worst of It*

# PART ONE

*Concerning the mines themselves he was not called upon for an opinion... all he had to do was to follow the veins and win the ore in paying quantities...*

John Oxenham  
*A Maid of the Silver Sea*

# 1

*Oh often have I washed and dressed  
And what's to show for all my pain?  
Let me lie abed and rest:  
Ten thousand times I've done my best  
And all's to do again.*

A. E. Housman  
*XI, Last Poems*

The windscreen wipers had been working their hardest ever since the BMW had entered the county of Kent, their soporific swish and clunk aggravating Cormoran Strike's exhaustion as he stared out through thick rain, which had turned the deserted road ahead to gleaming jet.

Shortly after he'd boarded the sleeper train from Cornwall to London the previous evening, his detective partner's boyfriend, who Strike always referred to inside his head as 'Ryan Fucking Murphy', had called to say that Robin had come down with a high fever and sore throat and would therefore be unable to accompany Strike on today's visit to their newest prospective client.

Everything about this call had annoyed Strike, and an awareness that he was being unjust – because this was the first time in six years Robin had taken a sick day, and if she had a temperature of 104 and a swollen throat it was perfectly reasonable for her to ask her boyfriend to call on her behalf – deepened rather than alleviated his grumpiness. He'd been counting on Robin driving him into Kent in her old Land Rover, and the prospect of

several hours in her company had been the only point in favour of keeping this appointment. A mixture of professionalism and masochism had stopped him cancelling, so after a quick shower and change of clothes at his attic flat in Denmark Street, he'd set out for the village of Temple Ewell, in Kent.

Having to drive himself wasn't only depressing, but also physically painful. The hamstring in the leg on which a prosthesis had replaced the calf, ankle and foot was tight and throbbing, because his sojourn in Cornwall had involved a lot of heavy lifting.

Ten days previously, he'd dashed down to Truro because his elderly uncle had suffered his second stroke. Strike's sister, Lucy, had been helping Ted pack up for his imminent removal to a nursing home in London when, in her words, 'his face went funny and he couldn't answer me'. Ted had died twelve hours after Strike had arrived at the hospital, his niece and nephew holding his hands.

Strike and Lucy had then proceeded to their uncle's home in St Mawes, which had been left to them jointly, to arrange and attend the funeral, and to make decisions about the house's contents. Predictably, Lucy had been horrified by her brother's suggestion that they might hire professionals to empty the place once they'd removed those sentimental items the family wanted to keep. She couldn't bear the idea of strangers touching any of it: the old Tupperware once used for picnics on the beach, their uncle's threadbare gardening trousers, the jar of spare buttons kept carefully by their late aunt, some of them belonging to dresses long since donated to jumble sales. Feeling guilty that Lucy had had to cope with Ted's final lapse from consciousness alone, Strike acceded to her wishes, remaining in St Mawes to lug boxes, nearly all of which were labelled 'Lucy', out of the house into a rented van, to throw rubbish into a hired skip and take regular breaks in which he administered tea and comfort to his sister, whose eyes had been constantly red from dust and weeping.

Lucy believed the stress of Ted's removal to a nursing home had brought on his fatal stroke, and Strike had had to force himself not to become impatient with her repeated bursts of self-recrimination, doing his utmost



not to match her fractiousness with ill-temper, not to snap, nor to become irritable when explaining that just because he didn't want to take more of the objects associated with the most stable parts of their childhood, it didn't mean he wasn't suffering as much as she was from the loss of the man who'd been his only true father figure. All Strike had taken for himself were Ted's Royal Military Police red beret, his ancient fishing hat, his old 'priest' (a wooden cosh with which to finish off fish still fighting for life), and a handful of faded photos. These items were currently sitting in a shoe box inside the holdall Strike hadn't yet had time to unpack.

Mile by mile, with no company except the emotional hangover of the past ten days and the aching of his hamstring, the dislike Strike had already taken towards today's prospective client mounted. Decima Mullins had the kind of accent he associated with the many wealthy, wronged wives who'd come to his detective agency hoping to prove their husbands' infidelity or criminality in hope of securing a better divorce settlement. On the evidence of their only phone conversation to date, she was melodramatic and entitled. She'd said she couldn't possibly visit Strike's office in Denmark Street, for reasons she'd disclose in person, and insisted that she was only prepared to discuss her problem face to face at her house in Kent. All she'd deigned to divulge so far was that she wanted something proven, and as Strike couldn't imagine any possible investigative scenario that didn't involve proving something, he wasn't particularly grateful for the pointer.

In this unpropitious mood he proceeded along Canterbury Road through a landscape of bare trees and sodden fields. At last, windscreen wipers still swishing and clunking, he turned up a narrow, puddled track to the left, following a sign to Delamore Lodge.

## 2

*... I have lost him, for he does not come,  
And I sit stupidly... Oh Heaven, break up  
This worse than anguish, this mad apathy,  
By any means or any messenger!*

Robert Browning  
*Bells and Pomegranates No. 5 A*  
*Blot in the 'Scutcheon*

The house to which Strike had driven wasn't what he'd been expecting. Far from being a country manor, Delamore Lodge was a small, run-down dwelling of dark stone that resembled an abandoned chapel, set in a wild garden that looked as though it hadn't been touched in years. As Strike parked, he noticed that one of the Gothic windows had several cracked panes which had been covered from the inside with what looked like a black bin bag. Some of the roof tiles were missing. Viewed against an ominous November sky and through driving rain, Delamore Lodge was the kind of place local children might easily believe to be inhabited by a witch.

Placing his fake foot carefully, because sodden leaves from a few bare trees had formed a slimy carpet on the uneven path, Strike approached the oak front door and knocked. It opened seconds later.

Strike's mental image of Decima Mullins as a well-groomed blonde in tailored tweed could hardly have been wider of the mark. He found himself facing a pale, dumpy woman whose long, straggly brown hair had greying roots and which looked as though it hadn't been cut in a long time. She was

wearing black tracksuit bottoms and a thick black woollen poncho. In conjunction with the wild garden and the ramshackle house, her outfit made Strike wonder whether he was looking at an upper-class eccentric who'd turned her back on society to paint bad pictures or throw wonky pots. It was a type he failed to find endearing.

'Miss Mullins?'

'Yes. You're Cormoran?'

'That's me,' said Strike, noticing that she got his first name right. Most people said 'Cameron'.

'Could I see some ID?'

Given how unlikely it was that a roving burglar had decided to turn up at her house by daylight in a BMW, at exactly the same time she was expecting a detective she'd summoned into Kent, Strike resented having to stand in the downpour while fumbling in his pocket for his driving licence. Once he'd shown it to her, she moved aside to let him enter a cramped hall, which seemed unusually full of umbrella stands and shoe racks, as though successive owners had added their own without removing the older ones. Strike, who'd endured too much squalor in his childhood, was unsympathetic to untidiness and dirtiness in those capable of tackling them, and his negative impression of this dowdy upper-class woman intensified. Possibly some of his disapproval showed in his expression because Decima said,

'This used to be my great-aunt's house. It was tenanted until a few months ago and they didn't look after the place. I'm going to do it up and sell it.'

There were, however, no signs of redecoration or renovation. The wallpaper in the hall had torn in places and one of the overhead lamps was lacking a bulb.

Strike followed Decima into a poky kitchen, which had an old-fashioned range and worn flagstones that looked as though they'd been there hundreds of years. A wooden table was surrounded by mismatched chairs. Possibly, Strike thought, eyes on a red leather notebook lying on the table, his hostess

was an aspiring poet. This, in his view, was a step down even from pottery.

‘Before we start,’ said Decima, turning to look up at Strike, ‘I need you to promise me something.’

‘OK,’ said Strike.

The light from the old-fashioned lamp hanging overhead didn’t flatter her round, rather flat face. If better groomed, she might have attained a mild prettiness, but the overall impression was one of neglectful indifference to her appearance. She’d made no attempt to conceal her purple eyebags or what looked like a nasty case of rosacea on both nose and cheeks.

‘You keep things confidential for clients, don’t you?’

‘There’s a standard contract,’ said Strike, unsure what he was being asked.

‘Yes, I know there’d be a contract, that’s not what I mean. *I don’t want anyone to know where I’m living.*’

‘I can’t see why I’d need—’

‘I want an *assurance* you won’t tell anyone where I am.’

‘OK,’ said Strike again. He suspected it might not take much for Decima Mullins to start shouting or (and after the last ten days, he’d find this even less palatable) crying.

‘All right, then,’ she said. ‘D’you want coffee?’

‘That’d be great, thanks.’

‘You can sit down.’

She proceeded to the range, on which a pewter pot was sitting.

The chair creaked under Strike’s weight, the rain drummed on the intact windows, and the black bin bag stuck over the cracked panes with gaffer tape rustled in the wind. Apart from themselves, the house seemed to be deserted. Strike noticed that Decima’s poncho was stained in places, as though she’d been wearing it for days. The back of her hair was also matted in places.

Watching her make heavy work of brewing coffee, opening and closing cupboards as though she kept forgetting where things were, and muttering under her breath, Strike’s opinion of her shifted again. There were three

kinds of people he was unusually good at identifying on short acquaintance: liars, addicts and the mentally ill. He had a hunch Decima Mullins might belong in the third category, and while this might excuse her ill-kempt appearance, it made him no keener to take her case.

At last she carried two mugs of coffee and a jug of milk over to the table, then, for no obvious reason, sat down extremely slowly as though she thought she might do herself an injury by hitting the chair too hard.

‘So,’ said Strike, pulling out his notebook and pen, more eager than ever to get this interview over with, ‘you said on the phone you want something proven, one way or another?’

‘Yes, but I need to say something else first.’

‘OK,’ said Strike, for the third time, and he tried to look receptive.

‘I wanted you because I know you’re the best,’ said Decima Mullins, ‘but I was in two minds about hiring you, because we know people in common.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. My brother’s Valentine Longcaster. I know you don’t like each other much.’

This information came as such a surprise that Strike was temporarily lost for words. Valentine, whom he’d met infrequently and always reluctantly over a certain period of his life, was a good-looking, floppy-haired, extravagantly dressed man who worked as a stylist for various arty glossy magazines. He’d also been one of the closest friends of the late Charlotte Campbell, Strike’s sometime fiancée, who’d died by suicide a few months previously.

‘So “Mullins” is...?’

‘My married name, from when I was in my twenties.’

‘Ah,’ said Strike. ‘Right.’

Could she be telling the truth? He couldn’t remember Valentine mentioning a sister, but then, Strike had always paid as little attention as possible to anything Valentine said. If they were indeed brother and sister, Strike had rarely met a pair of siblings who resembled each other less, although in some ways that might add credence to Decima’s story: it would