

## Chapter Four

---

Dick leant back in the bank manager's guest chair, crossed his knees and exhaled a blue-grey cloud of smoke from a small cigar. There had been another Government announcement on the radio that morning about cigarettes and lung cancer.

'This seems in order,' said Mr Prescott, reading the final clauses of Kitty's title deed. He looked at the signature on the application for the loan that Dick had forged with such meticulous care. 'Could you tell me why your wife wants two thousand pounds?'

'It's for me,' Dick said truthfully. 'I've got an opportunity to go into business with Mr Victor Amos in his car-hire firm. Kit wants me to have the money if you'll lend it. We've fully discussed the idea.'

'Yes, I realise you must have done.' It didn't cross Mr Prescott's mind that Kitty Jarvis knew nothing about it. He looked again at the title deed, really to give himself time to think. Holding the deed would give the bank collateral security if the repayments on the loan were not met. But banks did not like having to enforce payments. To evict Kitty from her home, to dispossess her of her shop, would create bad publicity for the bank however just the claim. Mr Prescott felt he needed some assurance that the loan would be repaid without fuss.

He said, 'How would the additional capital be used, Mr Jarvis?'

'To buy more cars. I've got it all worked out here.' Dick produced from his inside pocket a neatly folded sheet of paper. 'With two, possibly three, more cars we could cover a huge area. The cars would never be idle.'

Mr Prescott studied the figures. Dick had taken into account every detail - the likely cost of good second-hand limousines, the costs of insurance and road tax, and the major cost of advertising the firm in areas which it had not previously served. There was also a note on competition, explaining that the proprietor of a similar firm in Castlewich had died recently and his cars had been sold off. It was a business-like document.

He asked, 'Have you abandoned the idea of expanding the shop into a supermarket?'

'Oh, *that*.' Dick cursed himself for forgetting his casual remark to the bank manager last time they met at Crossroads Motel. 'I did a lot of market research into that. It wouldn't be viable.'

'I see.' Mr Prescott continued to study the figures. He wished Kitty Jarvis had come in person to talk about a loan of such size. Still, married men usually managed their wives' affairs, and probably this was no exception. It seemed reasonable that Kitty Jarvis would want to help her husband with this loan.

He said, 'Presumably you'll concentrate full-time on the car-hire business, Mr Jarvis. That means you'll have to give up your new job.'

'I won't mind doing that.' Dick was delighted Mr Prescott had raised this point. It gave him an opportunity to deliver his best under-the-belt attack. 'I'm not at all satisfied with my present position. The firm's got no drive. Doesn't suit me at all. I only took it because of the sudden collapse of my previous employer.' He paused before delivering the body blow. 'Funny, but when we last met you must have known that was going to happen.'

Mr Prescott decided he disliked Dick even more than previously. The man had this ability to make people feel guilty.

He said, 'As a bank manager, all information that comes my way is confidential.'

'I realise that,' Dick said with mock forgiving. 'It would not have been right for you to tell me that I'd shortly be on the scrap heap.'

Mr Prescott suppressed a desire to tell Dick to clear out of his office. He said, mildly, 'Well, I suppose this gives me an Opportunity to make amends. I'll make the transfer into your account straight away.'

'I'll need a cheque,' Dick said quickly. Obviously Mr Prescott was not yet personally aware that Dick had recently moved his account into another bank. He had done that because he didn't want Mr Prescott to know that he no longer had an income and had been lying about his new job.

'A cheque it will be,' said the bank manager, rising to show the interview was over. 'I'll put it in the post to you today. Meantime, may I wish you the best of luck in your new venture.'

They shook hands and Dick left the bank a happy man, richer by £2,000. It had all been so incredibly easy, and he congratulated himself on how he had carried it out. As he passed a shop window he caught a reflection of himself puffing on his little cigar. Cigars, he concluded, suited his image, but in future he would like to be seen smoking a larger size.

Mrs Robinson came home with the morning shopping to find her husband sitting in the kitchen cross legged reading the newspaper, a cup of tea by his side. His police cap and cycle clips lay on the table.

'I hear you've arrested Mrs Brenton's son,' she said, putting down her shopping bag.

'Detained for questioning,' he said, not looking up from

the sports page.

'Where is he?'

Robinson nodded his head. 'In the back.'

The police house was custom-built. As well as providing two bedrooms and a dining-room and lounge, the architects had included a small office and a tiny cell where a prisoner could be held until collected by the police from Heathbury. The Robinsons always called the cell 'the back', and although it had never contained a prisoner Mrs Robinson scrubbed it out once a week. On the first day of each month P.C. Robinson oiled the lock on the heavy metal door.

'You've put a kid in there?'

'To cool down,' said Robinson. He drew his watch from his uniform breast pocket and looked at the time. 'I'd say he's about ready.' Half an hour had passed since Robinson had slammed the cell door on to the whimpering Rodge. 'Maybe he'll talk now.' He got up, carefully washed his cup, saucer and spoon and laid them neatly on the draining board.

'You shouldn't have put a kid in there,' said Mrs Robinson. 'He'll be scared out of his wits.'

The policeman paused at the kitchen door. 'That,' he said, 'was the intention. Leave police work to me, mother' He had called his wife "mother" ever since their first-born could speak, 'and I'll leave housework to you.'

Robinson went down the hall to the cell. With a rattle of keys he opened the metal door. Rodger Brenton was standing in a corner of the little cell, his face turned from the door. The floor was wet and the cell reeked of urine.

'You filthy little beast,' said Robinson. 'Do you realise my wife will have to scrub this place out after you?'

The boy said nothing. Robinson repressed an impulse to hit the boy's head, but there was too much in the newspapers and on the television these days about the police and the public. He knew he had taken a risk by imprisoning an unarrested, uncharged child prisoner for half an hour.

'Come out of there and follow me.' He stood back to let Rodge leave the cell.

Rodge's face was smudged with crying. He had started crying an hour ago when Robinson arrived at the school and told the headmaster that Rodger Brenton was wanted for questioning. He had cried all the way through the village as he walked beside P.C. Robinson towards the police house.

Robinson took Rodge into his office. 'Stand there,' he said pointing to a spot on the floor. 'Don't move an inch from there!'

Rodge stood where he was told, head down. Robinson sat behind his desk, shuffled around a few papers to prolong the suffering, then looked up. 'Who were you

with?'

The boy remained still and silent.

'You know what happens to prisoners who don't answer?' Robinson picked up a round desk ruler, official police issue. He tapped it on the palm of his hand. 'They spend longer inside. And once they're inside we can do anything we like to them.'

'You know what happens when you're sentenced by a magistrate for the birch? You're taken to a police station, your hands are tied to a tripod above your head, and then your trousers are let down and all the police officers on duty come in, as and when it suits them, to look at you hanging there with your bottom bare. Actually they don't want to look at your bottom - they want to see your face, so they'll remember you for ever more. Then, when it suits him, the station sergeant comes in, takes off his jacket, rolls up his sleeves, and does it. And you can blubber away for your mam, but nobody'll come and help you. After that they leave you hanging for a bit more, then they untie you, and boot you out of the bloody nick. Get the idea?'

Rodge slowly nodded.

'But,' Robinson went on, 'we help those who help us. How old are you?'

'Fifteen.' Rodge's voice quavered.

'Liar!' Robinson brought the ruler down onto his desk with a whack that made Rodge jump. 'How old are you?'

'Fifteen,' said Rodge. He wanted to cry again but couldn't. 'I'm small for my age.'

'How old were the other boys?'

Silence.

Robinson got up slowly and crossed to where Rodge stood motionless. He stroked Rodge's cheek with the heavy round ruler. 'Was one of them older than you, son?'

Rodge nodded.

'Then it wasn't really your fault, was it? You were drawn into it. And I suppose they've got all the money.'

'There wasn't any money,' Rodge protested.

'Or maybe ' said Robinson, 'you didn't know about the money. They nicked it when you weren't looking. Is that how it was, son?'

Rodge remembered everything clearly. Neither Norman nor Sandy were out of his sight during their time in the hotel's kitchens. But he was frightened of the policeman and what he might do, and the half hour locked in the tiny cell had left an indelible imprint of terror in his mind.

'It might have been,' he said at last. His body was shaking and he wanted to be sick.

'Tell you what,' said Robinson, a hand on Rodge's shoulder, 'give me their names and you're in the clear. You can run home.'

In all his nine years at school Rodge had learnt never to give away a friend. In countless television programmes he had seen British Secret Service agents withstand torture to keep secret the names of their contacts. 'I don't know who they were,' he said hopefully.

Robinson bent down and spoke quietly into Rodge's left ear. 'Give me their names, son, and you can run home, free as a bird. Don't give me their names, and five seconds from now I'm going to pull your head back and ram this ruler down your throat and break all your teeth in the process.' His free hand went up behind the boy's head and grabbed a mop of hair. Slowly he started to pull back Rodge's head. 'I'm going to count to five. One, two, three, four -'

Kitty Jarvis called up the stairs to her brother. 'Andy, Meg's on the phone for you.'

'Right. I'm on my way.'

Andy rolled off the guest-room bed and stretched his arms. The inactivity of leave was having its effect. For the first few days he had walked round Heathbury renewing old acquaintances and had twice taken the bus to King's Oak to visit Meg. Soon, as he found with every leave, he was yearning for something to do. Now, towards the end of his leave, he was returning to his room after breakfast each morning for a snooze, and snoozing again after lunch.

Eyes half closed, he put on his carpet slippers, fastened the top of his trousers, and went downstairs to take the phone call.

'Hello. Andy here.'

Meg sounded troubled. 'Are you terribly busy today?'

He said, 'Hardly. What's wrong?'

'I don't want to talk about it on the phone. Is there any chance you could get over here?'

Ten minutes later Andy jumped onto a King's Oak bus as it was leaving. He went onto the upper deck with the enthusiasm of a schoolboy on a day's outing. He didn't know why Meg wanted him, but he gained pleasure from feeling involved. He lit one of his last duty-free leave cigarettes, looked out at the inviting greenness of the Warwickshire fields, and asked himself why he had ever gone to sea.

For too long, he thought, he had been cut off from the normality of life, either afloat in a world of inorganic metal or ashore in the concrete jungle of a Naval establishment. Certainly he had seen places most people only read about, and he was grateful for that. But always there was the womb-like ship, tied up at

some quay waiting to suck him back after an evening on the town. Shore leave was usually measured in hours that only gave time for a hard-faced confrontation between sailors and civilians, be it Singapore or San Francisco.

He had enjoyed the comradeship, and since signing on in 1946 he had seen big changes in the pay and conditions of sailors. But there remained the deep class division between the upper- and lower-deck; sailors still called officers 'pigs', not without justification. As a petty officer Andy lived well, but his non-commissioned rank did not save him from being treated like a child by some of the ex-public school commissioned officers.

As a member of the Executive Branch he had no particular skills needed by the civilian world which he would soon be entering. He didn't know what he was going to do. He liked mixing with people and knew he could be popular, and to become a publican appealed to him. But breweries normally only appointed married couples. Andy had avoided marriage because it seemed a useless enterprise for a man who spent most of his life a long way from home. Now he might have left it too late. All the girls he had known as a youth in Heathbury were married; one had just become a grandmother at the age of thirty-eight.

The bus slowed as it approached King's Oak to let another bus pass. Instinctively Andy looked at the passing bus, to see if it contained anyone he knew. For a moment he saw Jill on the opposite upper-deck, tears streaming down her cheeks.

At King's Oak, Andy hurried from the bus stop to the motel. He found Meg in her sitting room. She managed a smile for him.

'What's the trouble?' He expected it had something to do with Jill.

To his surprise Meg said, 'Andy, I shouldn't spoil your leave like this but I need help. Sandy's been arrested.'

Andy suddenly felt useful.

P.C. Robinson brought his desk ruler down on to the desk top with a whack that reverberated throughout the police house. 'Answer me the truth!' he shouted.

Sandy and Norman now stood where Rodge had had to stand. They looked at the heavy desk ruler with terror.

'We've told you the truth,' said Sandy. 'It was a prank.'

Robinson came round his desk, and prodded the ruler into Sandy's stomach. 'Twenty eight pounds is not a prank, you little bastard! It's theft! Where is it?'

The boys were silent.

'All right, said Robinson, 'have it your own way. I'm going to telephone my superior officer in Heathbury. He'll send a car over, and you'll be taken away.' He drew a deep breath and affected an air of suppressed moral indignation. 'We might have sorted it out here, just between us. But no, you want to be big criminals. All right then, big criminals you will be.' He went to the door and called. 'Mother, will you come and keep eye on these two young swine, please?'

Mrs Robinson came along the hall from the kitchen. 'I will, but there's someone here to see you.' She pointed with her thumb into the kitchen. 'I left him in there.'

'All right. It seems these young gentlemen don't want to co-operate, so they'll have to be sent away.' He paused, hoping his threats might make one of the boys break down and confess. 'Right, mother, just see they don't steal anything from my office.'

Robinson went to the kitchen to see who wanted him. He realised the whole village would be full of gossip by now, and had half expected the parents to turn up at the police house. In the days before the war parents were glad if the police gave a delinquent child a good hiding. Now, with all this television, they stood on their rights. It made a policeman's job much more difficult.

Andy Fraser was standing in the kitchen. 'Sorry to trouble you, officer. I believe you've got Mrs Richardson's son here.'

'That is correct.'

'I'm his uncle. I'd like to know what it's all about.'

'He's going to be charged with breaking and entry,' said Robinson, 'and with the theft of a sum of money from Fairlawns Hotel.'

'Has he admitted that?'

'I'm very sorry, but I can't discuss that with you, sir.' Robinson opened the kitchen door, to show Andy he could leave now.

'He's still a minor,' said Andy, not leaving, 'and I want to see him.'

Robinson studied the tall suntanned man standing in his kitchen. 'All right. You can question him in front of me.' He called down the hallway, 'Mother, send along Richardson, double quick. Don't forget to keep an eye on the other one. Remember, we have thieves in our home.'

'They're not proved as thieves yet,' said Andy.

Robinson didn't bother to answer that. Sandy came down the hall, his face lightening a fraction on seeing his uncle.

'Did you steal this money?' Andy asked.

'No.'

'Then who did?'

'I don't know, honest.'

'Tell me exactly what happened, Sandy.'

Andy listened silently while Sandy recounted the incident. Previously, when he had had to tell the story to the policeman, Robinson had repeatedly interrupted him so that some details were confused or omitted altogether. When Sandy finished Andy turned to Robinson: 'I've heard him. Now what's this about some money stolen?'

'I'm sorry, sir,' Robinson said, making the 'sir' sound like an insult. 'but I do not answer questions from you.'

Sandy answered the question. 'They found the back door had been broken open and cash gone from a money box.'

Andy turned to Robinson. 'Have you taken fingerprints from that money box?'

Robinson grasped the kitchen door handle, preparatory to opening it again. 'Is that all you wished to see the prisoner about?'

Andy realised he could get no further by remaining in the police house. 'That's all,' he said, 'for the time being.'

Robinson smartly opened the kitchen door. Andy left without another word. As he walked back towards the motel some children ran up to him: 'Has Old Robby flogged them yet, mister?' He didn't answer.

Kitty put a teaspoon of fresh tea into the pot and poured in boiling water. 'There's nothing like a twice-brewed pot, luv. Gives tea strengtll.'

Jill nodded. She sat on the edge of an armchair in the room behind the shop. Her face was white and she felt empty through crying.

'Want anything to eat yet, luv?' Kitty poured thick brown tea from the resuscitated pot.

'No thanks.'

'You'll have to tell your mother about this, Jill. You don't want to keep things to yourself, not within the family.'

Jill sniffed. Her handkerchief was a soggy ball in the palm of her hand. 'She's got enough trouble on her plate with Sandy.' She sipped tea from her cup. 'What if I'm pregnant?' It was the fourth time she'd asked the question, the first that she'd dare use the actual word .

'We won't know about that for a month. luv. If you are' - Kitty gestured and smiled - 'well, it's not the end of the world.'

'I'll kill myself.'

'You won't, you know,' said Kitty. 'You might run away, but I hope you won't do that either.'

'I can't think why he's gone.' Jill shivered and suddenly started crying again. 'He must have packed and gone during the night. I'll never see him again.'

'Now then. luv, we can't be sure of that either.' Kitty sat on the arm of the chair and put her arm round Jill's heaving shoulders. 'Don't you know anything about him at all?'

Jill shook her head. 'Only that he's very kind'

Kitty could say nothing to that. Philip sounded like a typical member of his sex. She remembered the first man she ever slept with, a soldier she met on holiday with Meg when they were on holiday in war-time Keswick. She would never have believed anything against that soldier, even though she never knew his name.

'I'm sure he is,' said Kitty. 'As soon as Dick gets back from work we'll go in the car to the motel, and we'll tell your mother all about it.'

'No! I couldn't!'

'You'll stay in the car while I go in first. Believe me, luv, it'll be all right.'

Jill groped for Kitty's hand. 'You promise to go in first, Aunty Kitty?'

'I promise.' Kitty squeezed Jill's hand in return. The shop bell tinkled. 'I'll have to go, luv, but I'll be straight back.'

Alone, Jill tried to recreate in her mind the smell of Philip's herringbone jacket. She looked down at her stomach and wondered what was going on in there.

Hugh Mortimer slid his Jaguar into his reserved space in the Fairlawns Hotel car park, took his overnight case from the boot, and walked to the back of the hotel. A local man he knew, Archie Gibbs, was working on the frame of one of the doors, inlaying new white wood where the frame had been damaged.

'Touch of wood rot?' said Hugh, passing.

'The break-in,' said Archie, clearly delighted to be the first to spread the bad news to Hugh Mortimer.

Hugh stopped. 'Break-in?'

'There was three of them, smashed their way in with a crowbar, pinched about thirty quid, and scared the daylights out of old Trumper.'

'Well, I suppose it was bound to happen.' Hugh started to walk towards the the entrance he normally used.

Archie called after him, 'Robinson the Bobby's got them all, Mr Mortimer. One of them was Meg

Richardson's son.'

Hugh paused. 'Thanks. Thank you for telling me.' His pace quickened as he entered the hotel and went up the back staircase.

He dumped his overnight bag on the bed in his private suite, decided not to shower yet despite the long drive from Bristol where he had settled a labour dispute on a building site, and hurried down to the office he shared with Eric Cowley and the other directors of the hotel. Eric was at his desk, dull-faced through broken sleep holding a white telephone handpiece to his ear. Before him on the desk was a silver coffee tray with a cupful of black coffee.

'Mr Cowley speaking' - he saw Hugh enter the office, and waved a greeting - 'I think someone is playing games. The kitchen has sent me a bowl of salt instead of sugar with the coffee I ordered. Kindly do something about it, pronto!' He cradled the phone and smiled a welcome to Hugh. 'It's a wonder I wasn't sick on the carpet.'

'What's this about Meg Richardson's son?' asked Hugh.

Eric told him the story, adding that he hadn't been able to go to sleep again last night.

'I don't like it.' Hugh said flatly.

Neither do I.' Eric put a hand to his aching head. 'I hope that they get thumbscrews, canes, whips, and that their beastly young bodies be deposited in unconsecrated ground.' He smiled mischievously, then frowned as stabbing pains from lack of sleep raced across his eyes. 'Sorry, Hugh, but one of the little blighters confessed and duly shopped Meg's son and some other boy.'

'She may be a rival,' said Hugh, 'but she's also a friend.' He had a strong belief in loyalty and co-operation between people in the same line of business. 'What was Trumper doing during all this?'

Eric shrugged. 'Sleeping I suppose. He pretends he was in another part of the building mending some bloody electric plug.'

'Do we have to prosecute?'

'They *did* steal twenty-eight pounds,' Eric said. 'I don't want to see kids get into trouble, but we have to consider our guests' property for the future. If they get away with it we're inviting every village boy to come and plunder.'

'But do you realise what this will mean to Meg Richardson? Her son will have a criminal record, for ever!'

Eric's head was throbbing with tiredness and he longed for a cup of sweet black coffee, 'I really don't mind what we do, Hugh. But remember the chef's now short of twenty eight pounds which we've got to make up. They didn't break in for the fun of it.'

'I'll drop over and see Meg.' Hugh hurried out of the office.

In the Fairlawns kitchens, four storeys below the spacious office where Eric Cowley was staring into his cup of black coffee and salt, the waiter Riccardo Lauricelia cursed both the ancestors and a future progeny of the waitress Maria Zagari. He was speaking to his friend, the kitchen porter Fernando Gonzalez.

'Last night I tell Maria' - he spat on his fingers- 'to put the sugar into the sugar bowls. What she do? She put salt! I, Riccardo, find the salt.' He made a gesture like an opera singer in full song. 'You know how I find the salt?'

'Not actually,' said Fernando. He had only been in England six weeks and had found the words 'actually' and 'really' his most useful allies in seeming to maintain a conversation in English.

'Because,' said Riccardo, making two clenched fists, 'because the Colonel Prendergast, a fine old gentleman who takes his breakfast always in the morning like in the army, he put the salt on his Rice Crispies! *That is* how I find the salt!'

'Really?' said Fernando. trying to look very sorry for Colonel Prendergast.

'And Maria? Where is Maria? Having her day off! So quickly I am changing all these salt for these sugar, then someone tell me something and I forget one bowl - just one bowl. And you know who got this bowl?'

Fernando shook his head. 'Not actually.'

'Mr Eric Cowley, *he* got the bowl.'

'Actually?'

'Mr Eric flippin' Cowley himself in person,' said Riccardo, who had learnt some of his English from an Irish cook.

'Really,' said Fernando, shaking his head in despair at this calamity. He believed the English ate too much sugar anyway, but affected a solicitous air for his superior, Riccardo.

'It is never raining but is pouring,' said Riccardo. He poured sugar into a silver bowl, tasting it with his finger to make sure. 'When Maria come back tonight, I will give her some pieces of my tongue!' He put the silver bowl on to a little silver tray, hung a serviette over his arm, and left the kitchen uttering Sicilian threats.

Fernando Gonzalez pulled from his overall pocket a small dog-eared notebook and a stub of pencil. He opened the little book, wet the pencil with his tongue, and laboriously wrote down the new English phrases which this calamity had brought his way:

IT IS NEVER RANING BUT IZ PORING...I WILL GIVE HER SUM PEECES OF MY TUNG!

With a mounting anger Andy listened to the voice of Meg's solicitor piping on the telephone. '...Not really my line of country, Mr Fraser...Once the boy has been charged, very different matter...Why not ask him to own up and take his punishment like a man, and everybody can forget about it?...Soon blow over...'

Andy butted in, 'Are you coming out here or not?'

'I'm very busy at the moment,' said the solicitor. 'got a lot of conveyancing on hand -'

'I'll find someone else!' Andy slammed down the phone. He was not, he realised, making a success of the defence of Alexander Richardson, alias 'Sandy'. 'Your solicitor's no damned use,' he told Meg.

Meg was comforting Stevie. A girl in the village had thrown a stone at her, and two boys had asked if she was a thief like Sandy.

Meg said, 'Did you believe what Sandy told you?'

Andy didn't answer immediately. 'I don't know, Meg. Perhaps they went in to play this prank, then they saw the cash box and were tempted. What matters is what can be proved.'

'I'm sorry,' said Meg, 'but I don't agree. If Sandy's guilty I'll stand by him, but I won't protect him from whatever he deserves.'

Andy said, 'We don't know that he is guilty yet. The older boy might have taken the money, and Sandy won't split on him. There's all sorts of possibilities. Where can we find a solicitor who doesn't sit on his behind all day?'

'There's the Heathbury *buff* book. It's in my office.'

Andy hurried to the office across the corridor. He recognised that his enthusiasm to help Sandy did not spring solely from family love. Eighteen years of naval discipline had given him a deep loathing of tyrants like P.C. Robinson.

He flung open the office door. 'I'm looking for the Heathbury trade directory.'

Ruth Bailey was typing a long letter for which she was taking no carbon copies. Her face reddened and she pulled the upper exposed part of the letter towards herself, concealing it from Andy. Her mind had been a long way away.

She said, 'The what?'

'You call it the buff book,' he said.

'I'll get it for you.' To pretend the letter was off no importance she released the part she was holding and went to a cupboard containing all kinds of trade directories. 'What do you want to look up?' she asked, trying to make her voice normal.

'Solicitors - good ones.' Andy couldn't resist a quick glance at the top of the letter in the typewriter:

*Darling,*

*Good news, at least for me. That strange man, P. Winter, has vanished into the blue. Shed empty this morning - gone, and best forgotten. He was my bete noir with his lack of insurance card or P45. Why should I tell you such stupid things? Perhaps because I yearn for someone to talk to -for that end-of-day pillow talk we once had*

Andy's eyes remained on the letter a moment too long. He looked up. Ruth was watching him. She had the classified telephone directory in her hand.

'Why not read the rest?' Her voice was ice.

'Sorry, I didn't realise it was personal.' Andy knew there was no conviction in his voice.

Ruth carefully extracted the letter from the typewriter and laid it flat on the desk. 'If you like to read on, there's this bit where I talk about a dream I had last night. As you'll see, my lover - my ex-lover, that is - was a sultan and I was a harem slave.' Her beautifully manicured finger, trembling slightly, pointed to the paragraph.

'I said I'm sorry.' Andy carefully averted his eyes from the letter. 'I didn't mean to hurt you.'

'Your book's over there.' Ruth indicated the directory on the far corner of her desk.

'Thanks.' Andy thumbed through the pages seeking the heading *Solicitors*. He heard the tearing of paper, turned and saw Ruth tearing up the letter into tiny pieces. He said, 'There's no need to do that, is there?'

Ruth dropped the fragments into a used envelope. 'Can I get the call for you, Mr Fraser?'

As she spoke, the internal phone rang. She lifted the receiver, said, 'Yes, certainly,' to the caller, replaced the receiver and turned to Andy. 'Your sister says will you go back to her before you speak to another solicitor, please. Mr Mortimer has called.'

'Who?'

'One of the directors of Fairlawns Hotel.'

Andy put the directory back on the desk. At the door he paused. 'Look, I'm really very sorry.'

Ruth didn't answer. She selected a sheet of motel notepaper from a rack, took some copy paper and carbon, and started to type a business letter.

Hugh extended his hand to Andy as he entered the sitting room and said, 'Mortimer.'

Andy instinctively disliked men who introduced themselves by their surnames. He disliked Hugh's public school voice and the handsome looks that came from generations of upper-crust in-breeding. To

Andy, Hugh Mortimer was strictly 'officer material', one of the pigs.

'Glad to meet you,' said Andy. He looked to Meg: 'I didn't make the phone call yet.'

'Quite right,' said Hugh, 'because there's a simple solution to our little problem. If Sandy and his friends will return the money, we at Fairlawns will forget the whole thing. They've had a jolly good scare, and that should teach them a lesson for ever more.'

Andy looked to Meg for her reactions.

She said, 'It's the best thing, Andy. Could you get Sandy to say where the money is?'

Andy said, 'Just a moment. Aren't you both condemning Sandy without knowing the truth?' He swung round to face Hugh. 'Those boys only went into your hotel to play a practical joke. They didn't even break in. They found a door open.'

Hugh looked at him quizzically. 'The door wasn't locked and...'

Andy recounted Sandy's version of what happened. Before he finished Hugh started to laugh.

Andy said, 'It's not funny! It's damned serious if my nephew goes down on criminal records for the rest of his life!'

Hugh put a hand on Andy's shoulder. He was still laughing. 'My dear fellow, I can sort this out for you. And Meg, I want you to stop worrying. Leave everything to me.'

Andy watched Hugh go with a sense of humiliation and hate. In the end the pigs always kept command, and stayed laughing.

Hugh stopped his car outside the row of council houses on the outskirts of King's Oak. He called to some children playing near by, 'Where do the Brentons live?' The children pointed to one of the identical little houses. Hugh strode up the unkept garden path to the front door and looked for a bell-push or knocker. There was neither. He tapped on the frosted glass panel with his car keys. From the lane the children stared at him.

A man's voice came from the side of the house. 'Who's that?'

Hugh went to the corner of the house and looked down the side passageway. A man's head was poking out from the kitchen door.

Hugh said, 'May I see Mr or Mrs Brenton, please?'

'I'm down here,' said the man. 'What is it?' He made no move to come forward.

Hugh picked his way by a derelict pram, realising he

should have remembered that front doors in the council houses of King's Oak were only used for christenings, marriages, and funerals. He reached the kitchen door where Charlie Brenton, a tiny man in rough working clothes and a greasy cap, stood waiting.

'Are you the CID?' Charlie Brenton's first thought was his well-tailored visitor was an encyclopaedia salesman; then he realised Hugh must be a policeman.

Hugh introduced himself. 'I just want a little chat with your son, Mr Brenton.'

The name Hugh Mortimer brought an ingratiating smile to Brenton's small face. 'I've just beaten him, sir. You can beat him too, if you want. It's what the police should have done.'

'I only want to talk to him,' Hugh said, his nostrils reacting to the stench of cheap cooking fat that came from the kitchen. 'May I come in?'

Hugh was taken through the kitchen to a back room. There was cheap linoleum on the floor, a kitchen table, some very old armchairs and a 23-inch screen TV set that looked brand new. A very small boy was curled up in one of the armchairs, shoulders heaving as he sobbed. Brenton crossed to the boy and hit him savagely across the back of the head.

'Gentleman here wants to talk to you,' he said.

The boy remained where he was, unmoved by the blow. Brenton grabbed his son's hair and twisted his head round.

'Stand up you little git!'

Rodge made a gesture of defiance at his father, one very small flaying hand that failed to make contact.

Brenton stood back and unbuckled his thick leather belt. 'Right, you asked for it! It'll be the buckle this time.' He whipped off the belt and started to coil the tongue end round his hand.

'Perhaps you could leave us together,' said Hugh. 'I'd be most grateful.'

Brenton looked down at the huddled form of his son, the belt dangling from his right hand, the buckle scraping on the cheap linoleum. 'All right, sir, as you wish. But if he gives you any cheek, call us a shout and I'll make him wish he never got born.' The belt dangling from his hand, Brenton went into the kitchen.

Hugh knelt down by the arm chair and spoke softly. 'I want you to tell me what happened last night. It's very important.'

No sound or movement from the chair.

Hugh peered into the huddled mess of arms and dirty bare legs. He could just see Rodge's half hidden face. Rodge was sucking his thumb.

'You let down your friends, didn't you?' said Hugh

gently.

'That's the worst part of it really. Isn't that right?'

There was a faintly perceptible nod of Rodge's head.

'Well, that wasn't a very nice thing to do. But you might be able to help your friends if you tell me exactly what happened last night. I'll tell them you helped, and then they'll forgive you.'

Then the thumb was slowly withdrawn.

'We only went in to put salt where the sugar is.'

'That's a good start. How about sitting up now, and telling me more...'

Hugh flung open the door to Trumper's tiny room. The curtains were drawn, the windows shut, and the room stank of beer, tobacco, and human sweat. Trumper lay on his back, mouth open snoring deeply.

Hugh threw open the windows, then grabbed Trumper's shoulder. 'Where's the money?'

Trumper's eyes opened wide. 'Huh?' His heart was racing.

'The money,' said Hugh, almost conversationally, 'the twenty eight pounds that you took from the cash box last night? Where is it?'

Trumper wanted to sit up but the pains in his back made immediate movement impossible. He reached to the side of the metal bed frame, gripped hard and pulled himself up until he was leaning on one elbow. Normally, after a long sleep, it took up to twenty minutes to get his back flexible. 'Those boys,' he said, 'they took the money.' His heart was palpitating and he desperately wanted a drink and a cigarette.

'I'm going to search this room, Trumper. If I find the money, you will go to prison. But if you tell me where it is, you can pack your bags and go a free man.'

The old man looked wildly round the room. He knew that if he could move he might be able to get to the money and conceal it on himself, for surely Hugh Mortimer would not search him personally. But he was temporarily a prisoner on his bed.

Hugh said, 'Don't look demented. I know you've got it. Tell me where it is.'

In his years of experience Trumper had learnt that, if caught, it was always best finally to plead for mercy. Few hearts remained untouched by total submission.

He said, 'I don't know what made me take it, sir, not after how good you and Mr Cowley have been to me. Please don't send me to prison, Mr Mortimer, not at my age.'

Hugh cut in, 'Where's the money?'

Trumper raised a wavering finger and pointed to an old fashioned radio. 'In the back of that, sir.' He lay



back, a look of relief on his unshaven face. Fortunately he had hidden the two cigarette lighters stolen from guests, and the assistant cook's wrist watch, elsewhere among his decaying belongings.

Hugh ripped off the back of the radio and found four five pound notes and eight one pound notes. 'I want you out of here in the morning.'

'Yes, sir,' said Trumper, 'certainly, sir. Will you give me a reference, sir?' Sometimes under identical circumstances employers had given him references to show to future employers, either out of compassion or through fear of the law of libel.

Hugh said, 'Definitely not.'

From his bed Trumper gave a little salute. 'That is understood, sir. But may I ask something else, sir?'

Hugh paused at the door. 'What is it?'

'May I leave my things until I get fixed up somewhere else?'

Hugh looked round the room. 'Is all this junk yours?'

'Yes, sir. I may have to sleep rough for a while until I find somewhere.'

Hugh looked at the old man and fought down a desire to say that Trumper could remain until he had found another job. 'All right, you can leave your things for the time being. But you've got to take yourself out of here.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Alone, Trumper reached under the bed for the bottle of whisky he had acquired two days ago from the bar. By getting Hugh to let him leave his things at the hotel, Trumper felt he had scored a small victory in the face of almost utter defeat.

Meg sat on the side of Sandy's bed while he sat up and drank steaming hot cocoa. 'Was it your idea or one of the other boys?'

'Mine. I heard Ruth say Fairlawns was taking your business.'

Sandy's face, gleaming after a hot bath, had something of the look of Charles Richardson tonight. Meg smiled and put her hand through Sandy's still damp hair.

'Ruth only said there wasn't enough passing traffic for a hotel and a motel. When the new road's built that will change.' The extension of the M I Motorway, now under construction, was likely to funnel a far greater volume of traffic into the King's Oak area. 'I think you did it for fun.'

Sandy giggled. 'Well, partly.' He had this day seen inside the village police house, then later inside the police station at Heathbury where Hugh Mortimer had

arrived with Meg to collect him. 'Is Mr Mortimer very angry?'

Idon't think so. But P.C. Robinson's never going to forgive you so you'd better watch out for him. Are you going to forgive Rodger?'

'He gave us away.'

'Perhaps Mr Robinson frightened him. I want you to make friends with him again, Sandy. Will you promise?'

Sandy nodded.

Meg got up, taking Sandy's empty cup. 'If you're going to become a journalist you'll have to learn shorthand. I've heard Miss Tatum could teach you.'

'With the dog and the cats?' Sandy might also have mentioned the rumour about Black Masses and witchcraft, but decided against it. 'Could you ask her?'

'First thing tomorrow.' Meg looked down at her son, wondering if she dared kiss him goodnight. 'It's only another month and you'll have finished school.'

'I know.' The prospect of never going to school again had only recently started to invade Sandy's thinking. 'I'll have to behave like a grown up.'

'Yes, so you will.' Meg quickly kissed Sandy on the forehead.

Meg went down the corridor of the private suite to Jill's room. Dr Derek Maynard was closing his black leather bag. 'How is she?'

'All right,' said Derek. 'I've just sedated her. Let her sleep as long as she wants. I'll be slipping off now.' He closed the door behind him softly.

Meg took Jill's hand in hers. 'How are you feeling, darling?'

Jill's eyes were heavy-lidded. 'Doped.' She gave a tiny smile. 'Are you angry because I went to Auntie Kitty first?'

'Of course not. That's what families are for, Jill.'

Jill looked down the bedclothes, and with her free hand rubbed her stomach. 'Don't talk to me about families.' She closed her eyes enjoying her own joke. 'That stuff Dr Maynard shoved into me must be doing some good. I've stopped worrying.'

Tomorrow, Meg thought, the fear of pregnancy would return, but tonight it helped if Jill was too light headed to care. 'There isn't going to be anything to worry about, darling. You must believe that.'

Jill squeezed her mother's hand. 'Yes, I suppose I do.' She took a deep, sleepy breath. 'If I don't present you with a grandchild, mum, I do want to go to London.'

Meg knew this had been on Jill's mind for a long time. 'All right, my dear, I won't raise any objections.'

A single tear suddenly spilt down Jill's cheek. 'I can't believe that I'll never see Philip again. I just can't believe it.' Her hand clung on to Meg's.

'Try to sleep, Jill. Just let sleep come to you.'

Meg stayed for a long time by Jill's side. Finally Jill's hand relaxed, and her breathing became deeper. Meg bent down and kissed her daughter good night, put out the light and left the room.

Too many things had happened to make sleep likely for Meg for sometime to come. She went downstairs to her sitting-room, poured herself a stiff drink, and sat down in a chair facing Charles's photograph. 'Thanks,' she said, raising her glass to the photograph, 'for giving me two children.' Then she laughed and added, 'Even if one may be pregnant and the other almost went to jail!' She knew Charles would have appreciated the joke. There had been no tension in their marriage, only laughter. She always remembered it like that.

The private phone rang. It was almost midnight.

'Hello?'

'Meg Richardson?'

'Speaking. Who is that?'

'Hugh Mortimer. How's Sandy?'

'Safe in bed. Can I do something about the damage he caused?'

'He didn't do any damage,' said Hugh. 'I just wanted to know if everything is all right.'

Meg said, 'Thanks. It was good of you to phone.'

After the call Meg poured another drink for herself, and considered how fortunate she was to have such good friends and neighbours. She particularly appreciated Hugh's late-night phone call.

She raised her glass again to Charles's photograph. 'Perhaps it wasn't such a bad day after all.'