

By the author of **Bleed for Me**

Michael ROBOTHAM

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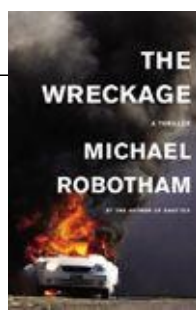
THE WRECKAGE

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Michael Robotham



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BOOK ONE

During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.

GEORGE ORWELL

Have you killed?"

"Many times."

"Were you scared?"

"No."

"Never?"

"It's not hard to take a life when a life has been taken from you. It is not about embracing revenge or nurturing hatred. And forget about taking an eye for an eye. Equality is for the weak and stupid. It's about pulling the trigger... simple as that. One finger, one movement..."

"Who was the first?"

"A schoolgirl."

"Why?"

"I can't remember, but I've never forgotten the warmth of the day, the blinding glare, the dust on the leaves of the apricot trees. It was apricot season. In that final instant everything slows down—the cars, the buses, voices on the street. Everything goes quiet and all you hear is your own heartbeat, the blood squeezing through smaller and smaller channels. There is no other moment like it."

"Why do they call you the Courier?"

"I deliver messages."

"You kill people?"

"People kill every day. Nurses push needles. Surgeons stop hearts. Butchers slay beasts. You're doing something good here. You and the others are going to be famous. You are going to create a date that will live forever, a date that doesn't need an explanation. History made. History changed. These things begin somewhere. They begin with an idea. They begin with faith."

"Why me?"

"The others will also be tested."

"Are you going to film it?"

"Yes. Here is the gun. It won't bite you. This is the safety. Pull back the slide and the bullet enters the chamber."

"Nobody will see my face?"

"No. Now walk through the door. He's waiting. Seated. He will hear you coming. He will beg. Don't listen to his words. Press the barrel to the back of his head and pull off the hood. Make him look at the camera's red light: the drop of electrified blood."

"Should I say something? A prayer?"

"It's not what you say—it's what you do."

BAGHDAD

The most important lesson Luca Terracini ever learned about being a foreign correspondent was to tell a story through the eyes of someone else. The second most important lesson was how to make spaghetti marinara with a can of tuna and a packet of ramen noodles.

There were others, of course, most of them to do with staying alive in a war zone: Do not make an appointment to see anyone you do not trust absolutely. Do not go out before checking whether any suspicious vehicles are loitering outside. Do not assume that a place that was safe yesterday will be safe today.

These security measures were followed by all western reporters in Baghdad, but Luca had added a few of his own over the years—advice that came down to possessing three vital tools for survival: natural cowardice; several US hundred-dollar bills sewn into his trouser cuffs; and a well-developed sense of the absurd.

The first call to prayer is sounding. Sunrise. Luca had been woken by the racket of washing machines, TV sets and air conditioners coming to life simultaneously. The government can only provide electricity during certain hours, which means the appliances trigger at random times, day or night, creating a strange symphony of music and metal.

Stripping off his T-shirt, he scoops water from a bucket with a ladle, pouring it over his head. Droplets pour from his short dark beard and down his chest over his genitals. It's already nearly nine degrees outside and not even the shutters can keep the heat out once the sun hits the side of the building.

Drying his hair, he chooses a thin cotton shirt, something plain, cheap. He dresses like an Iraqi and tries to sound like an Iraqi. His shoes are not western. His sunglasses are not too foreign looking.

Sliding his hand beneath the mattress, he pulls out a compact semi-automatic 9mm pistol and tucks it into a holster in the small of his back. In his office, he unplugs his mobile, grabs his camera gear and opens the front door of his apartment, checking the corridor and then taking the rear stairs.

A security guard dozes behind a desk in the foyer.

“Sabah al-khair, Ahmed.”

The guard jerks awake, reaching for his rifle. Luca holds up his hands in mock fear and the guard grins at him.

“Have you made the city safe, Ahmed?”

“I have defused two dozen bombs.”

“Excellent. Just don't recycle them.”

The guard laughs and gets to his feet. His belt is undone, his stomach bulging freely.

Luca opens his mobile and calls Jamal.

“Where are you?”

“Two minutes away.”

Glancing through the taped windows, the street view is shielded by concrete blast walls that are fifteen feet high. There are checkpoints at the two nearest intersections, giving the illusion of safety. Just like his rules for survival, Luca has developed his own conflict metabolism, attuned to the violence. His heart no longer punches through his chest when a mortar explodes and he doesn't duck when a round zings overhead.

Most of his colleagues reside in secure hotel compounds or in the International Zone (formerly the Green Zone), seeking safety in numbers, which is another illusion. Clean sheets, cold beer, wireless broadband and satellite TV—modern tools for the modern reporter.

The bombings a month ago had provided a salutary lesson. The first explosion targeted the Sheraton Ishtar, toppling the concrete blast walls and leaving a crater fifteen feet deep and thirty feet wide. Cars were torn apart by the spray of metal and glass, which littered the lawns and courtyards of the fish restaurants along the river.

Three minutes later, a bomb went off near the Babylon Hotel; and six minutes later at the al-Hamra, tearing off the façade. Fourteen people died at the Sheraton, seven at the Babylon and sixteen at the al-Hamra, including a policeman who once helped Luca find a new battery for his mobile.

Luca had arrived at the hotel when the plume of dust and smoke still drifted across the skyline and the scent of shorn eucalyptus trees mixed with the ugly, sweet stench of burning flesh. Two women were found beneath the rubble, one of them covered in dust with long streaks of blood running down her face. “May God kill the government,” she shouted as they pulled her free.

Another ordinary day in Baghdad.

A text message on Luca’s mobile: *Thirty seconds. Out front.*

Moments later a battered Skoda 130 pulls up outside the apartment block, a young man behind the wheel. A second vehicle is immediately behind—a Toyota HiLux—the “chase car.”

Luca stays low as he runs. The moment the car door closes, Jamal jams down on the accelerator, swerving around the flat-faced concrete barricades. The HiLux is close behind, ready to intervene in case of an ambush.

The Skoda is a classic Baghdadi car with a windshield crisscrossed with cracks and a dash covered in an old strip of carpet and faded pictures of Shia martyrs. Beneath the bonnet is a V8 engine from a Chrysler 340 and slabs of iron welded inside the doors, bullet-proofing Iraqi style.

Jamal drives like he’s at Le Mans and dresses like he’s a gay cowboy in plaid shirts and western-style jeans. He was studying to be a doctor before the invasion. In the chaos that followed, the university’s computers were stolen and the files destroyed by fire. Now he can’t prove he has a science degree or three years of medical training.

Jamal’s cousin Abu is driving the HiLux. He’s older and built like a battering ram, with a semi-automatic pistol beneath his shirt and a sawn-off shotgun on his lap. In the four years they have worked together, Luca has exchanged little more than a dozen words with Abu. Jamal does the talking. On a busy thoroughfare, the vehicles travel bumper to bumper, weaving between groaning trucks, vans, mopeds and cyclists.

“There was another robbery,” says Jamal.

“When?”

“Overnight. They set the bank on fire.”

“Where?”

“In Karrada.”

“I want to go there.”

“What about the media conference?”

“They still won’t have formed a government.” Luca mimics the voice of the former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. *“Today we are a step closer to agreement. Old hatreds are being put aside and we are talking in good faith. I am committed to the constitution and believe Iraq will get the government it deserves.”*

Jamal laughs. “One day they’re going to kick you out of Iraq.”

“Promises, promises.”

He calls Abu in the HiLux. “We’re going to Karrada.”

“What address?”

“Follow the smoke.”

The two vehicles circumnavigate Firdos Square and head south along the dusty dual carriageway past mud buildings and footpaths lined in places with drums and razor wire.

Baghdad used to feel foreign to Luca but he's no longer spooked by the strangeness of the place—the jangle of tongues, the confusion of smells and the thick honey-colored light. A bus has broken down. Passengers are standing on the pavement, arguing with the driver. The men draw on cigarettes forming wraiths of smoke that are whisked away on the breeze. The women are delicate, unknown creatures swathed in black, with non-descript bodies and dancing eyes.

Jamal takes a stick of chewing gum from his pocket and turns on the radio, beating out a rhythm on the steering wheel as he listens to a local pop song. He and Luca have become friends over the years but that friendship has boundaries. Luca has never been to Jamal's house, or met his wife or his two young sons. There are people who cannot know that Jamal and Abu are working for an American journalist. Sunnis. Shiites. Insurgents. That's where death lurks. Grudges are a national sport in Iraq.

A black plume of smoke rises into the white sky ahead of them. Normally Karrada is one of the city's havens, thrumming with street traders and gaudy shouts of greenery. Now police and fire engines have sealed off an intersection and hoses like black pythons twist across the asphalt, bulging and squirmin. Some are so perished and worn they are spraying the concrete instead of the smoldering building.

The Zewiya branch of the al-Rafidain Bank has been gutted and the windows are ringed with dark shadows of soot that leak like a beauty queen's tears down the pale walls.

Jamal parks the Skoda and Luca takes his camera from his rucksack. He signals Abu, who waits with the cars, keeping watch from a distance.

“How many is that?”

“Six in the past two months.”

“And this year?”

“Eighteen.”

“Soon there will be no banks left to rob.”

Across the street, a group of teenage boys are laughing and shoving each other, frantic to be noticed. They are admonished by older men and told to show some respect.

A siren. A convoy. Four military vehicles weave between the fire engines, escorting a white police car with blue doors. The car pulls on to the curb, scraping metal beneath the chassis. Luca recognizes the man in the passenger seat: General Khalid al-Uzri, Commander of the National Police. Two uniformed officers wrestle each other to reach his door.

Al-Uzri stands and stretches, cracking his vertebrae and rolling his head from side to side. Cigarette smoke hangs over him like a personal cloud. Dressed in black-and-blue camouflage with a beret and epaulettes of a crossed wreath and star, he waves dismissively at the offer of an umbrella and walks through the spray, pausing to appraise the bank building as though considering making an offer.

A senior fireman emerges from within. His uniform looks too large for him, like he's wearing his father's clothes. He shakes al-Uzri by the hand and kisses each cheek.

“What has been lost?” asks the general.

“Three dead.”

“The money?”

“Gone.”

The general brushes water from his jacket sleeve and glances at Luca.

“You're a photographer?”

“Yes, General,” he answers in Arabic.

“Today you work for the police.”

~~Luca exchanges a glance with Jamal, who shakes his head. Luca ignores him. He follows the~~ general and the fireman down the ramp, stepping through oily black puddles and around piles of smoldering debris.

The large roller door has buckled and twisted in the heat. Two bodies lie inside. Security guards. They look like discarded mannequins with melted and blackened flesh. The smell pries open Luca's senses. Vomit rises. He swallows hard, coffee chewing at his stomach.

Al-Uzri crouches beside the corpses. “It’s the protein,” he explains. “When it burns it sticks to your clothes and the inside of your lungs.”

Holding a skull, he turns it as if he’s testing the firmness of melons at a market stall.

One of his aides speaks. “There were six guards rostered on last night.”

“Where are the others?”

“We’re looking for them.”

“These men were shot. Take photographs of this.”

The general stands and walks onwards, wiping his hands on the coat of the nearest fireman.

The concrete vault has a heavy metal door that has barely been singed by the blaze. It opens easily. Nothing remains inside except a single aluminum case, smashed open. A handful of US banknotes are floating in a grimy puddle.

The general leaves the vault, moving towards the internal stairs. Firefighters have erected ladders to the upper floors.

“Is that going to take my weight?” asks al-Uzri.

“Yes, sir.”

He points at Luca. “You go first.”

The journalist climbs the ladder and steps over a collapsed section of the floor. A toilet has come through the ceiling and landed vertically across a doorway. Glancing past it, he can see a long corridor with offices on either side. The desktop computers have melted into modern sculptures.

The senior fireman stops at one of the offices. It takes a moment for Luca to realize what he is supposed to photograph. A blackened corpse is seated at a metal desk with stiffened half limbs reaching towards the blown-out window. Charred beyond recognition, the skin of the face is shrunken and leathery, gripping the skull, and the mouth is wide open in a scream. A swollen tongue protrudes from between teeth that seem unnaturally white.

Al-Uzri circles the body, examining it from all sides, his wet brown eyes full of wonder but no horror. Luca is taking short breaths through his mouth.

“This is one of the ignition points,” says the fireman. “Someone doused the body with petrol and poured a trail along the hallway to the door.”

Al-Uzri has moved behind the carbonized body. He pulls a small Swiss army knife from his coat, unsheathing the blade. His hand steady, he holds the sharp edge against the corpse’s neck and pulls something away, a wire thread embedded in the skin. A garrote.

He nods to Luca. More pictures are taken.

Closing the knife, he lights a cigarette, blowing smoke towards the ceiling.

Nothing shows in his eyes. Not surprise or sadness. Luca has seen that look before in soldiers who have witnessed such horrors that nothing is new under the sun or moon.

“A bad business,” says the fireman. “Have you seen enough?”

The general nods. He addresses Luca. “Deliver the photographs to my office. They are the property of the Iraqi police.”

Descending the ladders, he retraces his steps through the puddles and up the ramp, pausing only to blow cotton wool from his nostrils. Luca follows him outside where drivers scramble into cars.

preparing to depart.

“Excuse me, General, I have a question about the robbery.”

The commander turns.

“Your name?”

“Luca Terracini—I’m an American journalist.”

“Your Arabic is very proficient, Mr. Terracini.”

“My mother was Iraqi.”

Al-Uzri lights another cigarette, shielding it from the spray. He takes a moment to study the journalist.

“Most of your colleagues wear Kevlar vests and travel in numbers. Do you think having an Iraqi mother will protect you?”

“No, sir.”

“Perhaps you are very brave?”

“No, sir.”

Water trickles down Luca’s back. It might be sweat. “The bank manager was tortured.”

“It appears so.”

“Do you know how much money was taken?”

“No.”

“What happened to the other security guards?”

“Perhaps they chased after the robbers.”

“Perhaps they ran off with the money.”

The leaking hoses have doused the general’s cigarette. He stares at the soggy offering. “It is not a good idea to make accusations like that.”

“This is the eighteenth bank robbery in Baghdad this year. Does that concern you?”

The general smiles, but the corners of his mouth barely move. “I find it reassuring that someone is keeping count.”

His car door is being held open, the engine running. He slides into the passenger seat and waves the driver onwards with a flick of his hand. The convoy moves off, weaving between fire engines, adding one more siren to a city that sings with them.

LONDON

Being measured for a new suit was not something Vincent Ruiz expected to happen until he was lying cold and stiff on an undertaker's slab. And if that were the case, he didn't suppose he'd care about an effeminate stranger nudging a tape measure against his balls. Maybe he's weighing them. Every *other* measurement has been taken.

Emile drapes the tape measure around his neck and jots down another set of numbers.

"Does sir want the trousers to touch his uppers or the top of the soles?"

"Call me Vincent."

"Yes, sir."

He holds the tape measure against Ruiz's hip and lets it fall before tugging it tight again. "Has sir considered cuffs?"

"Are they extra?"

"No. You have the height to wear cuffs. Short men should avoid them. I'd recommend about one and a half inches."

"Fine."

Next the tape measure is wrapped around Ruiz's upper thigh. "Does sir dress to the left or the right?"

"I like to swing both ways."

Emile's eyebrows arch like inflection marks.

"Just give me loads of room," says Ruiz. "I want to be able to hide a hard-on. My ex-wife is coming to the wedding and she's a lot hotter since we divorced."

"Very good, sir."

Ruiz sighs and gives up trying to get a smile out of Emile. Instead he ponders his daughter's wedding. Claire is getting married in just under a week and he is supposed to walk her down the aisle and "give her away." She rang him last night and threatened to ask someone else if he didn't start following instructions.

"That's just it," he told her. "I don't want to give you away. I want to keep you."

"Very droll, Dad."

"I'm being serious."

"I'm getting married whether you like it or not."

"I could have Phillip arrested."

"He's a lawyer, Dad, not a criminal."

"Is there a difference?"

Emile picks up his brocade cushion and retreats from the fitting room. Ruiz pulls on his wool corduroy trousers and heavy cotton shirt. As he buttons the front, he catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Turning sideways and sucking in his stomach, he straightens his shoulders and examines his physique. Not bad for a man who has hurdled sixty. Some mileage on the clock, but that's to be expected. His doctor wouldn't agree, of course, but *his* doctor is the sort of idiot who thinks people should live to be a hundred and fifty.

Slipping on a jacket, he pats the pockets and takes out a metal tin of boiled sweets. Unscrewing the lid he pops one into his mouth where it rattles against his teeth. He gave up smoking six years ago.

Sugar is the substitute; calories as opposed to cancer.

~~As he steps out of the menswear shop, a hand slips through his left arm, pulling him close. He~~
accepts Claire's kiss on the cheek, bending slightly so she can reach.

"Is it done?"

"It's done."

"That wasn't so hard?"

"A strange man has been weighing my balls."

"Emile is lovely."

"He's gayer than a handbag full of rainbows."

She giggles and skips to keep up with him. Dark-haired and pretty, she walks on her toes like a ballet dancer—her former career. Now she teaches at the Royal Academy, crippling prepubescent girls who look pregnant if they eat an apple.

"OK, now remember we have a dinner with Phillip's folks tomorrow night. They're catching the train from Brighton. Mr. Seidlitz has invited us to his club."

Ruiz's heart sinks. "What sort of club?"

"Don't worry, Daddy, he doesn't play golf."

Seidlitz is a Ukrainian name. Maybe golf isn't big in the Ukraine. Ruiz isn't looking forward to it—a table for six, small talk. Miranda will be his date. His ex-wife. Number three. She's the one who acts like they're still married. Ruiz knows there is something fundamentally amiss about this fact, but Miranda is the sort of ex-wife that most men dream about. Low maintenance. Self-sufficient. Classy. When they divorced she asked him for nothing except for a few souvenirs from the marriage and to be allowed to stay in touch with Michael and Claire. They still needed a mother, she said.

Over the past few years Ruiz and Miranda have periodically fallen into bed together—a perfectly satisfactory "friends with benefits" arrangement, offering companionship, a pinch of romance and the sort of sex that can fog the windows. Not love, it's true... not exactly—but closer to love than most relationships Ruiz had known.

Claire looks at her watch. "I'm meeting Phillip. He'll be early."

"Why?"

"He always is."

"That's another reason not to marry him."

"Oh, stop!"

Blowing him a kiss, she skips across the road, leaving him on the corner. He wants to call after her to hear her sweet voice again.

Married... in a week. She seems too young. Thirty-two on her last birthday, yet Ruiz can still picture her in pigtails and braces. Her fiancé is a lawyer who works for an investment bank. Does that make him a lawyer or a banker? He votes Tory, but everybody does these days.

Ruiz wishes Laura were here. She would have loved all this—preparing menus, choosing flowers, sending out invitations—weddings are about mothers and daughters. The father of the bride just has to turn up, walk down the aisle and hand his daughter over like she's part of a prisoner swap.

Ruiz isn't even expected to pick up the tab. Phillip has everything covered. He earns more in a month than Ruiz used to make in a year as a detective inspector. He didn't even melt a little during the global meltdown, while Ruiz's retirement funds have halved. His investment advisor isn't answering his calls, which is always a bad sign.

Office workers are spilling out of buildings, their day ending, the commute ahead. Ruiz tries to avoid public transport during the peak hours. Lust, greed, sloth, envy, pride... the full pathology of human behavior is played out on the tube every morning and evening. It's like an experiment in overcrowding using humans instead of rats. Ruiz prefers to conduct his own scientific study, which

involves a pint of Guinness and a table by the window where he can watch the office girls walk by their tight skirts and summer blouses. ~~Not a dirty old man but a lover of the feminine form.~~——

The Coach & Horses in Greek Street used to be one of his favorite pubs, back in the days when Norman “You’re Barred” Balon was still in charge. Norman was London’s grumpiest publican, famous for abusing patrons. He retired a few years back. Regulars gave him a standing ovation and three cheers. Norman told them to shut up and “spend more fucking money.”

Setting his pint on a table, Ruiz pulls out a notebook and reads over the sentences he wrote the morning. Stories. Anecdotes. Descriptions. Ever since he retired he’s been making notes and trying to remember things. He doesn’t see himself as a writer. He has no desire to be one. It’s about finding the right words and sorting out his memories, rather than justifying his actions or leaving something behind.

Forty-three years as a copper, thirty-five as a detective, all he has left are the stories: triumphs, tragedies, mistakes and missed opportunities. Some may be worth reading. Most are best left alone.

Ruiz misses the camaraderie of the Met, the sense of purpose, the smell of cigarette smoke and worn overcoats. It was an unreal world, yet it was more real than real, if that makes sense. Important. Frustrating. Over.

Three empty pint glasses are sitting in front of him. It’s growing dark outside, but the streets are still teeming with tourists and diners. London seems more foreign to him every summer—not just because of the influx of visitors, who are mainly Japanese, American and a generic kind of European. The city is changing. Old haunts disappear. Safe streets become less safe. The heart beats to a different rhythm.

Ruiz notices a girl sitting on her own at a corner table. Her eyes are faded, almost transparent blue like his own and somehow even worldlier. Sullen-faced and pretty, she’s wearing leopard-print leggings, lace-up boots and a white peasant blouse. Her coal-black hair is cut short and curled where it brushes her shoulders and swings when she turns her head, waiting for someone to arrive.

She’s reading a newspaper with a pen in her hand. It’s a copy of *The Stage*—the theater magazine—the auditions page, looking for work. Checking her watch, she folds the magazine and goes to the bar for another drink.

Her eyes, unnaturally wide, flick from face to face as if rapidly collecting details or assembling a jigsaw puzzle. There are two suits on stools at the bar, junior executive types with their ties at half mast. They offer to buy her a drink. She declines. One of them motions to her with his forefinger. She steps closer.

“You see that,” he says. “I just made you come with one finger—imagine what I can do with the rest of them.”

A flush of embarrassment colors her cheeks, quickly replaced by anger.

Back at her table, she tries to ignore them, but they follow.

“Why won’t you have a drink with us?”

“I’m waiting for a friend.”

“Is she as pretty as you?”

“No, but he’s *bigger* than you are.”

One of them snatches the magazine from her and holds it out of her reach. She knows they want to humiliate herself by trying to retrieve it but she simply waits until they grow bored and give it back to her.

Ruiz is watching, impressed. The little actress is a no-nonsense sort of girl.

Ordering another pint, he goes back to his notes and doesn’t look up again until much later. A man has arrived and is talking to the actress. Perhaps he’s her boyfriend. Tall and loosely strung, he’s wearing a frayed turtleneck, dirty jeans and boots.

They're arguing. He grabs her by the wrist and tries to make her stand. In the next instant, his fist swings into the side of her head. The blow is so short, sharp and unexpected that nobody in the bar reacts. The girl is holding her face. Wide-eyed. Shocked. The boyfriend is standing over her with his fist clenched, ready to hit her again. Ruiz doesn't let it happen. Grabbing the upraised hand, he wrenches it backwards, twisting it up the boyfriend's spine.

"Maybe you should pick on someone your own size."

"What's your fucking problem?"

"Honestly? If she weighed another hundred pounds I'd call it even and watch her kick your arse."

"Fuck you!"

Ruiz twists the arm higher. The boyfriend grunts and rises on to his toes. The main door is only three paces away. Cool air. A wet pavement. Ruiz shoves the boyfriend against a parked car and waits for him to spin, knowing he's going to fight. At that same moment, one of the barmen makes a sudden appearance, gripping a metal bar. The boyfriend steps aside. Mumbles something. A threat. An insult. Ruiz can't hear the words but he knows the odds have altered; the chemistry changed. The boyfriend points his finger at Ruiz as though marking him for future reference and then slinks off. Inside the pub, someone has filled a towel with ice, which the actress has pressed to the side of her face. Ruiz buys her a drink. Scotch. Neat.

"This will settle your nerves."

He watches her throat move as she swallows.

"My name is Vincent."

"Holly."

"You want to call the police, Holly?"

She shakes her head.

"Show me your cheek."

She lowers the towel. One side of her face is a little swollen. There'll be a bruise. Her eyes shift past him, searching the floor.

"My bag!"

"What did it look like?"

"It's black... with buckles."

Ruiz helps her search. "What did it have in it?"

"Money. My phone." She groans. "My keys."

"Does anyone have a spare set?"

"My boyfriend."

Ruiz makes her put the ice-towel back on her cheek.

"Is there someone you can call?"

"I don't have any numbers."

"Maybe your boyfriend has cooled off by now."

Holly borrows Ruiz's mobile. The call goes straight to voicemail. She leaves a message. Apologizing. She shouldn't *have* to apologize.

Ruiz gets her another drink. She pushes the hair off her face, hooking it behind her ears. Her accent is from the north.

"So you're an actress."

Holly eyes him nervously over the rim of her glass. "What makes you say that?"

"I saw you reading *The Stage*."

She shrugs. "Someone left it behind."

Ruiz wonders why she would lie to him.

"I've been all sorts of things—a waitress, a receptionist, a dishwasher, a barmaid—I was even

badger.”

“A badger?”

“I was supposed to be a beaver, but they couldn’t find a beaver costume. It was for a building company at a trade fair. Beavers make stuff in wood, you know, like dams.”

“I can see the connection.”

“Good. You can explain it to me.”

She smiles for the first time. Ruiz notices a small silver teddy bear on a chain around her neck; her piercings, one through her nose, more in her ears.

“Has your boyfriend ever hit you before?”

She shrugs ambivalently. “It’s what unites all men.”

“What does?”

“Violence.”

“Not all men are violent.”

She shrugs again and changes the subject.

“What happened to your finger?”

She points to his missing digit, severed just below the first knuckle on his ring finger, a pale stump where the flesh seems to have folded in on itself.

“It was bitten off by a crocodile.”

“You’re not a very good liar.”

“It was shot off.”

“How did it happen?”

“You believe me then?”

“Yes.”

“Is being shot more believable than being attacked by a crocodile?”

“We live in England. There aren’t many crocodiles.”

“It’s a long, boring story.”

“It doesn’t sound very boring.”

“It was a high-velocity bullet. I took one in the leg and one in the hand.”

“You were a soldier?”

“A detective.”

Concern flashes across her eyes and just as quickly disappears. She starts a new conversation jumping subjects. Ruiz feels as though he’s being dragged behind a speedboat bumping over the swells. It’s getting late. He has to make a decision.

“What are you going to do, Holly?”

She shakes her head.

“Do you have anywhere to stay?”

“No.”

“You could come back to my place. Make some calls.”

Holly ponders this for a moment. “You live alone?”

“Yes.”

“You’re divorced.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yes.”

Outside the temperature has dropped and a breeze sprung up. Holly pulls on a distinctive red jacket with wooden pegs as fasteners and a hood. Pulling it tight around herself, she waits while Ruiz hails a cab and then slides across the seat.

The driver is listening to the radio. Evening talkback with Brian Noble: “The Voice of the Lord.”

Mersey Fidelity today announced a record profit while the rest of the economy continues struggle. Isn't it nice to know that our banks are back in business again? We bailed them out, gave them half a trillion pounds in cash, loans, shares, lucre, dosh, quantitative easing—strings attached—and now they're making hay while the rest of us shovel horse manure.

Now I know that Mersey Fidelity weathered the storm better than most of our banks, but I ask you this: Why hasn't there been one court case, one prosecution, one political resignation, or one apology from a banker? Too big to fail, now they're cashing in. The lines are open. What advice would you give our banksters?

The cab navigates through Piccadilly, Knightsbridge and along Old Brompton Road. Holly holds on to the side strap as the cab corners, occasionally glancing behind her through the rear window.

Ruiz lives in a three-storey terrace, open plan on the ground floor, bedrooms above and narrow stairs to a loft with his study. The house is too big for him. He should have sold up and moved years ago, but wasn't willing to abandon the memories.

There is a bicycle partially blocking the hallway. Brand new. Unused. His birthday present from Miranda. She expected him to keep fit by riding along the river. Good luck with that.

"You want a tea or coffee?"

"Anything stronger?"

He opens a bottle of wine and lets Holly do the pouring. He gives her the phone to use.

"I don't have any numbers," she says.

"What about your parents?"

"Dead."

"Friends?"

"I don't really know anybody in London."

Ruiz sits on the sofa. Holly prefers the floor. She nurses her wine glass in both hands.

"When you got shot—did you think you were going to die?"

"Yes."

"Is that why you limp when you walk?"

"It is."

"What would it take for you to kill yourself?"

"What sort of question is that?"

"It's just a question."

"I've seen too many suicides."

"What if you were in awful pain, dying of a terrible disease?"

"There are painkillers."

"What if your mind was failing? You had dementia and couldn't remember your own name?"

"If I had dementia it wouldn't matter."

"What if you were being tortured for top secret information?"

"I don't have any top secret information."

"What if someone had a grenade on a bus and they were going to blow it to the sky? Would you throw your body on the grenade?"

"Where do you get these questions?"

"I think about stuff all the time; how one decision, even a small one, can change your life. I have really weird dreams. I once dreamed I had a penis. Does that make me bisexual?"

“I have no idea.”

She tops up Ruiz’s wine and begins looking through his collection of DVDs stacked on a shelf. Old films.

“Oooh, I love this one.” She holds up *Philadelphia Story*. “Katherine Hepburn.”

“And Cary Grant.”

“I loved him in *To Catch a Thief*.”

“Favorite old-time actor?”

“Alec Guinness.”

“Mine is Peter O’Toole.”

“Typical.”

“What does that mean?”

She shakes her head. “Favorite old-time actress?”

“Ingrid Berman.”

“I thought you’d say Grace Kelly. Men seem to prefer blondes.”

“Not this one.”

The room has warmed up. Holly unbuttons her jacket, letting it slip off her arms. Her blouse edged with silver thread and beads. The fabric pushes out over her breasts and she looks more like a woman than a girl.

If Miranda could see him now, what would she say? She’d tell him to go to bed and to stop embarrassing himself.

Holly has poured him another glass of wine. How much has he had to drink? Four pints. A scotch. Three glasses of wine...

Ruiz is trying to shake the fuzziness out of his head.

“I could make a bed for you,” he says, feeling his thoughts drifting. Sliding. Spilling down the mountainside, settling in the hollows. His legs are so heavy he can’t move them.

Holly sits next to him on the sofa and puts a pillow beneath his head. He’s watching her lips move. What is she saying? It might be goodbye. It might be sorry.

LONDON

Sunshine crashes through the lace curtains. Ruiz opens one eye. The ceiling comes into focus, dead moths in the domed light fitting. His right nostril is grouted closed. His mouth tastes like a small animal has crawled inside and died.

Rolling on to his knees, he groans and feels his stomach lurch and gurgle. The rug has a pattern. He hasn't noticed it before. Perhaps he's forgotten. Another convulsion and he stumbles to the toilet, holding on to the side of the bowl.

His stomach empty, he sits against the tiled wall. Shaking. Sweating.

The events of last night—the girl, the trip home, the bottle of wine—what's the last thing he remembers? She put a pillow beneath his head. She said she was sorry. What did she slip him?

Rinsing his mouth out under the tap, he scoops water on to his face, eyes stinging, the coffee machine working. Looking in the mirror, he blinks through bloodshot eyes. The foul taste is in his mouth, the toxins in his system. The smell of urine in his hair, on his clothes... Someone pissed on him. The boyfriend wanted some payback.

He walks up the stairs. Drawers have been pulled out, up-ended, searched. The contents lie on the floor.

What's missing? His camera, a police medal, an iPod Claire gave him (still in its box), some euros, his passport... He flicks through his checkbook. Two blank checks are torn from the middle. The drawers were clever. Practiced.

He should make a list. Not touch anything. Call the police. Then what? They'll send a car around sometime in the next two days. He'll have to make a statement. He can hear them laughing already. The jokes. The ribbing. Detective Inspector Vincent Ruiz, taken in by a girl he invited home. They suspect she was a hooker or a call girl. Ruiz is paying for sex now, they'll say, like some sad old pervert.

Another thought occurs to him. He climbs the stairs to the study. The desk has been swept clean. The pages of the manuscript are scattered on the floor. He didn't number them.

The drawers have been forced open. One of them had been swollen shut for twenty years. Ruiz remembers what it contained—Laura's jewelry, her engagement ring and an antique hair-comb that had been passed down through her family. When Laura knew she was dying, when disease swam in her veins and grew in her chest, she wrote a series of letters to the twins—to be opened when they turned eighteen, or when they married, or when they had children of their own...

One of the letters was for Claire on her wedding day. It contained the rings and the hair-comb. Now the torn envelope lies discarded on the floor. The letter screwed into a ball. The small drawstring bag with the jewelry has gone.

Ruiz picks up the crumpled letter and tries to smooth out the creases. Laura's handwriting has grown spidery as the chemo robbed her of energy, but none of her sentences are crossed out or corrected. Perhaps a person knows exactly what to write when the sand is trickling away.

Ruiz stops himself reading. The letter is meant for Claire. His eyes drift to the bottom of the page where Laura finished with hugs and kisses. A small circular stain has marked the porous paper—a fallen tear as a punctuation mark.

Anger rises. Burns. Most of the missing items can be replaced—the camera, the iPod and the

money—but not the jewelry. He wanted Claire to wear the hair-comb on her wedding day. It was the “something old” to go with something new and borrowed and blue—just like the rhyme says. But it was more than that. The hair-comb is something that Ruiz has cherished. Laura was wearing it when they first met at a twilight ball in Hertfordshire in 1968. She looked like a proverbial sixties flower child with her hair braided and pinned high on her head.

Early in the evening she danced with him but then Ruiz lost her in the crowd and spent four hours trying to find her. It was after midnight. People were starting to leave. Buses were waiting to ferry them back to London. Ruiz saw Laura standing near the entrance. She pointed to him and summoned him with her finger. Ruiz looked over his shoulder to make sure she wanted him.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Vincent.”

“I’m Laura. This is my phone number. If you don’t call me within two days, Vincent, you lose your chance. I’m a good girl. I don’t sleep with men on the first date or the second or the third. You have to woo me, but I’m worth the effort.”

Then she kissed him on the cheek and was gone. He called her within two hours. The rest is, as the saying is...

Picking up a notebook, Ruiz makes a list. First he contacts his bank and reports his cards stolen. The recorded messages give him six options and then another six. Eventually, a girl with an Indian accent takes the details. Checks his account. There was a cash withdrawal just before midnight and another one just after; a thousand pounds in total. There were two other online purchases. She won’t give him the details.

“Someone from our fraud department will call you, sir.”

Sunlight makes his head throb. He considers his options. How can he find the girl? The actress. The boyfriend either followed them home or Holly must have called him. Maybe both.

Ruiz picks up his phone and hits redial. The last number she dialed was a mobile—the boyfriend’s perhaps.

A man answers with a grunt.

“Listen, I don’t know who you are. I don’t care. But you took something of mine last night—something of great sentimental value. You can have the rest of my stuff. I don’t care about that. But I need the jewelry—the rings and the hair-comb—they belonged to my wife. Give them back to me and I won’t come looking for you. You have my word on that. If you don’t give them back, I will find you and I will punish you. You have my word on that too.”

He pauses. Listens to the breathing. The boyfriend clears his throat.

“Fuck off!”

Ruiz listens to the dead air.

“Who was that, babe?”

“Nobody.”

Holly Knight is awake now. She won’t go back to sleep.

“He sounded angry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Zac rolls over and squashes a pillow beneath his head. Within half a minute he’s asleep again, his nostrils barely moving as he breathes.

Holly examines his sleeping face, the angular jaw line, darkened with growth, his heavy lids hiding

blue-green eyes. There were no nightmares last night. No silent screams or sobs.

Running her fingers across his exposed back, the scars look like ripples on a dried-up lake bed, pink and grey and dead looking. When she touches them in the dark it feels as though his skin has been eaten away by acid or dissolved by some sort of flesh-eating bug.

Slipping out of bed, she goes to the bathroom and sits on the toilet, staring at the discolored tiles and the rust stains in the bath. Finishing, she pulls her jeans over her panties, buttoning them on the flatness of her stomach.

Looking in the mirror, she touches the bruise on her face. Zac hit her too hard last night. Sometimes he forgets his own strength. She will say something to him when he wakes and is in a good mood.

The flat has peeling walls, mismatched furniture and different floor coverings in every room. Poverty in progress. An old armchair sits in the middle of the kitchen floor, because Zac likes to watch Holly cooking and doesn't like to be alone.

Smearing butter on the inside of a frying pan, she cracks two eggs. The smell of breakfast wakes Zac, who comes out of the bedroom in his boxers, scratching the line of dark hair below his navel.

Self-conscious about his scars, he pulls on a T-shirt, and brushes a finger across Holly's cheek.

"You hit me too hard last night."

"Didn't mean to."

"You might break me if you're not careful."

"I'm sorry, babe."

Holly sets his plate on the table.

"Do we have any... any... you know?"

"We didn't have any bacon."

"No, do we have any, ah, any...?" He begins shaking his hand up and down. "Brown stuff."

"Sauce?"

"Yeah."

Holly finds the bottle in the fridge. Zac eats with his head low and one arm curled around his plate. Yesterday he forgot the word for petrol. He kept saying he needed to get "stuff" for the bike, "to make it go." And before that he drove himself into a rage because he couldn't remember who played left back for Spurs in the League Cup final in 2008. That's one of the reasons he gets so angry—he can't remember things.

According to the doctors there was no sign of brain damage, but something got rewired in Zac's head when he was in Afghanistan. Now he forgets things. Not the big stuff, but small details—names and words.

There was a fire. Seven men were trapped inside a troop carrier, according to the commendation they gave Zac with his gallantry medal. He pulled three men from inside the carrier while it was under attack. That's when he got burned. That's when he started forgetting things.

Zac turns on the telly. A girl in a raincoat is giving the weather report, pointing to a map with cartoon clouds.

"How pointless is that," says Zac. "Look out the window and you can see the sun is shining."

Next comes a report on the stock market, the Dow Jones. Is that a person, wonders Holly; is there someone called Mr. Jones?

Zac picks up the near-empty bottle of Scotch.

"It's too early," she says.

"Hair of the dog."

He pours two fingers into a glass.

Holly leaves him to get changed.

“I’ve got to go and see Bernie,” she yells from the bedroom.

“Why?”

“We owe the rent.”

“Again?”

“Comes round every month. We don’t have enough to pay Floyd.”

Floyd is their landlord on the estate and also a local crack dealer.

“I’m going to sell that stuff we got last night.”

“Don’t let Bernie rip you off.”

“I won’t.”

“And don’t let him touch you. He’s always trying to touch you.”

“Bernie is pretty harmless.”

“You want me to come?”

“No it’s OK. I want you to fill out the form from the DSS. You need to get your pension sorted.”

Holly has changed into her nicest clothes. She rinses Zac’s plate in the sink.

“I’m going to sell Bernie the laptop and other stuff. Then I thought I might take the jewelry Hatton Garden.”

“Don’t let them rip you off.”

“I won’t. I have my audition today.”

“Can I come?”

“You know I get nervous when you’re there.”

He nods and goes back to watching an infomercial for a hair-straightening wand that features women with perfect teeth and lottery-winning smiles.

BAGHDAD

The queue outside the Ministry of Finance stretches more than a hundred yards, snaking between concrete blast walls that are decorated with political posters and daubed with anti-American graffiti.

Checkpoints are always dangerous. Anyone can approach—beggars, vendors, teenagers selling soft drinks or newspapers; fuel sellers carrying jerrycans and rubber hoses that are swung through the air making a whooshing sound. Any one of them could be carrying a grenade or wearing a suicide vest.

Luca produces his accreditation. The Iraqi soldier looks at both sides of the media pass, studying the English and Arabic versions. Then he consults a visitor's book in the plasterboard kiosk.

"Your name is not on the list."

"I made the appointment only an hour ago."

The soldier taps the pass against his cheek and slowly circles the Skoda, as one of his colleagues checks the boot and passes a mirror beneath the chassis.

They are waved through. Jamal pulls up outside the Ministry. Engine running. Luca opens the door.

"Are you going to wait?"

Jamal taps the dashboard. "I have to get petrol. The queues are long today."

"I'll give you money for black market fuel."

"I should queue like everyone else."

Luca smiles. "You're the only person in Iraq who doesn't buy on the black."

Jamal looks a little sad. "It won't always be this way."

The two men slap their palms together and their shoulders touch.

"Give my love to Nadia and the boys."

Luca jogs up the stairs, zipping up his jacket. There are more checkpoints inside, along with metal detectors and bag searches. He surrenders his pistol, which is placed in a strongbox, and asks for Judge Ahmed Kuther, the Commissioner of Public Integrity. The receptionist points to a row of a dozen plastic chairs, all of them taken.

Luca waits.

A cleaner is polishing the marble floor, running an ancient machine across the smooth slab. Elsewhere workmen are peeling blast tape from the windows. Wishful thinking.

It has been more than a year since the Coalition Provisional Authority handed over control of Iraq to the Iraqis, but independence is still mostly a state of mind. The parliamentary elections were five months ago but no single party emerged with a clear majority. The level of violence has increased since then as various groups have tried to influence the outcome or scupper the talks completely. Uncertainty is the only constant in Iraq apart from the petrol queues and power outages.

One of the security guards begins telling a joke. Luca has heard it before. A young boy runs to his mother, sobbing, because his father has touched a live wire and been electrocuted. Throwing up her hands, she says, "Allah be praised—there is electricity!"

A convoy of four SUVs has pulled up outside, doors opening in unison. Six men in black body armor emerge from the vehicles, setting up a perimeter guard. Two others jog quickly up the stairs and scan the foyer before giving the signal.

Four passengers climb from the SUVs and are ushered up the stairs. Heads down. Moving quickly. The guards are civilian contractors. The passengers are westerners, dressed casually apart from the

Kevlar vests.

~~One of them is a woman with a baseball cap pulled low over her eyes. Pretty. Hair bunched up in ponytail, poking through the back of the cap. Dressed in a loose white shirt and cargo pants, she's wheeling a pull-along bag, looking like an off-duty airline hostess or a film star checking into the Betty Ford clinic.~~

Half the security team escorts her across the foyer, while the rest stay behind, making sure they're not being followed. Luca recognizes one of them. Shaun Porter runs one of the smaller American security companies. Big and bulked up, he looks like a surfer with his sun-bleached hair and brightly colored Hawaiian shirt beneath a Kevlar vest, but he was born and raised in New Jersey.

Shaun slings his weapon over his shoulder and gives Luca a high-five.

"Yo, my man, my man! Long time no see. How's it hanging?"

"I'm good. I'm good. How about you?"

"Same old shit—babysitting some IT geeks."

"Americans?"

"UN auditors—they're installing new software."

Luca watches the woman enter the lift. She turns and peers between the shoulders of her bodyguards. Their eyes meet for a moment and she glances away, taking in everything.

Shaun punches his shoulder. "Hey! What you doing tonight? It's my birthday. We're having a few drinks at the al-Hamra. Come along."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-nine."

"You were thirty-nine last year."

"Fuck off!"

Shaun punches him harder. Luca tries not to grimace.

Most of the contractors are good old boys, former soldiers with shaved heads and softening bodies who couldn't cut it in civvies. They have nicknames like "Spider," "Whopper" and "Coyote." Luca met Shaun when the latter was still a Marine and came walking into the bar of the al-Hamra one night asking journalists if they had any books they wanted to exchange. He and Shaun had been swapping novels ever since—mainly crime stories: McDermid, Connelly and James Lee Burke.

"You still living outside the wire?"

"Yeah."

"And you think *I'm* crazy!"

"Maybe just a little."

Shaun scratches his unshaven chin. "I lost money on you."

"How so?"

"Some of your colleagues in the pool ran a book on how long you'd survive outside the wire."

"I heard about that."

"Some guy had you down for six days. I gave you six weeks. Thought I was being generous."

"Bummer."

"You're one lucky SOB." Shaun looks at his wristwatch, which is big and silver with lots of buttons. "I got an airport run. Some new blood coming in."

"Don't let them shoot anyone on their first day."

"I'll try not to."

"How is the Irish route?"

"Safer than it used to be, but I miss the old days—we could fire first and ask questions later."

Luca shakes his head and Shaun laughs. "Got a mate coming in. Dave Edgar. 'Edge.' You'll like him. Edge was Third Infantry Division Armour, first into Baghdad in '03. Toppled Saddam all on his own."

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