

OCTOGEN

GEOFF COOK

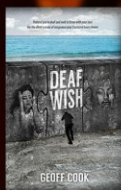


2065 – In the aftermath of the horrifying events of eleven/eleven, a new world order prevails. For political deputy, Jack Tirrand, the future holds promise but echoes from the past surface as he is confronted with the terrifying consequences of the project, codename - **OCTOGEN**

Thirty-five years have passed since the global attacks of eleven/eleven reduced the supply of fossil fuels to a trickle and curtailed economic activity for a century. As civilisation totters on the brink of disaster, an international coalition emerges out of the chaos and confusion. Hard lessons must be learned; personal liberties curtailed and national governance ceded to the new, collective authority known as INCOL.

For Deputy Jack Tirrand, a rising star in the London Assembly, the future of his family appears secure. But appearances are deceptive. As his wife, Rebecca and twin daughters, Harriet and Alison, wrestle with personal crises, Jack finds himself forced to confront his demons from the past and present alike. His life is under threat and time is running out for him to avert the terrifying consequences of the project – codename – OCTOGEN.

'A dystopian story of a future that feels all too real.'



OCTOGEN

Geoff Cook

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For Steve and Charly
Simon and Justin
Dan and Cobi
Miguel, Sol e Gaspar
"Today a reader, tomorrow a leader. "

GENESIS

BROADBENT – DERBYSHIRE - ENGLAND

Forty years and one week ago – November 2025

‘Hurry up. It’s Doctor Who. We’ll miss the last episode. She will never find out. Trust me.’

The younger of the two boys wriggled away from the hands gripping his shoulders, his face turned to avoid the pleading stare. ‘Mum says we mustn’t go this way. It’s dangerous. She made a rule.’

With his eleventh birthday just two weeks away, Aashif Firman was the elder of the two by almost three years. Seniority determined his will would prevail. ‘And what does Dad say?’ He winked. ‘Rules are for bending. What harm can it do? It will save us ten minutes. You want to see it too, don’t you?’

Jamil knew it was pointless to argue with his brother. Mum would find out and they would get into trouble. It didn’t matter if Aashif claimed total responsibility, Mum would tell Dad to cuff them both. Dad would shake his head sadly, as if to say none of us can defy her.

One last try. ‘I’m frightened,’ Jamil said. ‘It’s scary going that way.’

The quickest route from the mosque in Broadbent to their house was across the common, past Witches Oak, around the Roman Wells and along the track used by the mountain bikers until it re-joined the main road. The problem was it had been raining heavily; the ground was muddy and taking a shortcut would mean getting the bottom of their dishdashas wet and dirty. Their mother would be furious. She was proud of her sons’ upbringing, insisting they wore the long, embroidered gowns to the weekly children’s halaqah. Most of their friends wore jeans and would look at them with a smirk on their faces. Aashif had got into a fight after someone called them ‘Mummy’s boys’.

It was a week since the clocks went back an hour to GMT and dusk was fast approaching.

‘Let’s get a move on,’ Aashif said forcefully. ‘Remember, I’m your big brother.’ There was an unconvincing quiver in his voice. ‘You don’t need to feel scared when I’m around.’

As Jamil feared, the walk across the deserted common saturated the porous material, which stuck to his chapped legs. Although Aashif ordered him to pull up the dishdasha around his knees, Jamil found it impossible to match his brother’s stride and keep the gown above his ankles. He turned his head so his brother would not see the tears of shame flow down his cheeks. To make his sense of foreboding even worse, he could tell Aashif was regretting his decision.

As they passed Witches Oak and neared the old Roman Wells, Aashif stopped, his hand drawing Jamil to his side. They both heard the noises, giggling, shushing and then a forced laugh coming from within the thicket.

Aashif ran, pulling on Jamil to keep up, but the bikers were upon them before they cleared the trees. The two leading riders performed expert show-off wheelies, forcing the two brothers to stop as mud sprayed over the front of their dishdashas. The four remaining bikers, three more boys and a girl, formed a semi-circle behind them, blocking any means of escape. Aashif stood still, manoeuvring Jamil to stand shielded behind him.

Aashif recognised the gang members as second-year students from the comprehensive school he had recently joined. From classroom gossip, he knew the two ringleaders were from Middle-England Tower, the high-rise council block of flats he could see from his bedroom window. Both had been in trouble with the police on more than one occasion.

Heads turned as the last of the group made his way toward them. He was younger than the others, small and frail in stature. Aashif could not take his eyes off the metal calliper, which held in place a withered right leg, little wider than a stick of seaside rock. It was shorter than his left, causing the boy to lurch to one side as he approached.

The taller of the two ringleaders, the one with the unruly mop of blond hair, addressed the newcomer but looked at his captives as he did so. ‘Arrived just in time for some fun, Stanley. Let me introduce you to the “Furkin Firmans”. This one ‘ere is “Arsehole Aashif” and the little wanker hiding behind him is his little bruvver, “Jam Rag Jamil”. There were titters as the boy, emboldened by his sycophantic audience, held his palms together as if in

prayer. ‘They think they’re better than us, ‘cause they live in their posh houses and not on the Estate. As you can see, Mussies walk around in their nightdresses, always ready for a little sleep, so we won’t disappoint them.’

Aashif moved to protect Jamil as the boy darted to one side and then feigned a move to the other.

‘How would you like me to take Jam Rag . . .?’ He sprang to the left; a move countered by Aashif.

‘Austin. Help me.’

His sidekick, a shorter, stockier boy with tight ginger hair, pushed his bike to the ground in a violent gesture. He jumped to the right. Aashif countered by widening his stride and swaying from side to side to maintain cover for Jamil. The first boy lunged forward. Aashif reared backwards to counter the attack, digging his fingers hard into the arm as it reached to pull his brother to the ground. The blond-haired boy yelped in pain, loosening his grip and pitching forward to land unceremoniously on the muddy track.

It was their one chance to escape. Seeing the gap, Aashif yanked Jamil to his feet, screaming for him to run. They had taken only two strides when Jamil’s shoe caught in the loosened hem of his gown, causing him to pitch forward into his brother. Aashif stumbled headfirst into the mud with Jamil on top of him.

In an instant, the group was upon them, hands frisking, fists pummelling, and kicks aimed wildly at their torsos.

The blond boy was back on his feet, jeans caked in mud, his expression displaying both fury and resentment at the damage to his street cred. He reached into the inside pocket of a frayed denim jacket and withdrew a small kitchen knife. Sitting astride Aashif’s body, he wiggled the point under his eye. ‘Your lot know all about knives, don’t you, Mussie,’ he said. ‘It’s your lot likes to slit white people’s throats, you scummy bastards!’ He pricked Aashif’s cheek. A spot of blood welled into a trickle and fed into his mouth. ‘Think you deserve a little memento of our meeting today, a little something to remember us by. And don’t think you can rush home to mummy and tell her, ‘cause if you do, little Jam Rag ‘ere will wish he’d never been born.

It was late, pitch black. The only sounds were the branches rustling in the wind and the low-pitched moaning coming from alongside him. Aashif

opened his eyes, unsure of his surroundings or of what had happened. He went to move, but someone had tied him to a tree. Then he remembered.

They had stripped the gowns from their bodies and bound him and Jamil with them. Reduced to their underwear, the bitter wind chafed their skin. Jamil was sobbing, the mucus from his nostrils coating his mouth and chin, his breathing shuddering as his eyes, wide open, followed his captors move in single file toward them.

‘Close your eyes,’ Aashif had said. ‘Don’t let them see your fear.’

One by one, with prompting from Austin and the blond leader, the four gang followers stopped in front of each brother, noisily collecting saliva in their mouths and closing to spit into their faces. Aashif looked at each one as they spat, a sneer on his lips as they turned away to avoid eye contact with him.

Austin lifted the disabled boy and whispered in his ear as he undid the fly on his short trousers. He held the boy out in front of him. ‘Let them have it, Stanley,’ he said. The boy held his tiny penis, directing a stream of urine into Jamil’s face, who, still crying, could not help ingesting some of the steaming waste. Austin wheeled the boy around toward Aashif, but the flow petered out before reaching its target.

‘Never mind,’ the blond boy crowed. ‘I have a special treat for Arsehole here.’

Aashif fainted as the knife scarred his back for the third time. How long had he been unconscious? He traced a finger against the streaks of congealed blood. His back stung, but to his relief, the blade had done little more than pierce the skin.

The realisation that Jamil needed help roused him from his stupor. He prised his arms free and stumbled toward the noise, fists clenched. The frail, half-naked body of his brother was slumped forward, restrained from collapsing by the robe binding him to the tree.

Jamil shivered in his brother’s arms; the sound was barely audible as he pleaded for his mother. Aashif looked up toward the starless sky. ‘By all that is holy, Allah will make you infidels pay for this.’

A week passed, and the brothers had long since suffered the consequences of their misadventure. With Jamil sworn to secrecy, Aashif took the heavy

beating his mother commanded her husband to exact for the state in which they returned home. Whether their parents believed the fabrication of slipping in the mud and falling down an incline into bushes and brambles, Aashif knew they would not probe for a fuller explanation. However cowardly and unfair the stance, their parents would not be prepared to seek a confrontation with a community that harboured suspicion and was prepared to display its prejudices. With illegal immigration a major political issue, public sentiment was turning against certain minority ethnic groups, more so a mixed-race family insisting the children prioritise a mother's Muslim doctrine over the father's Christian background. The boys must learn a lesson; their mother insisted. They had to keep out of harm's way.

Today, the boys, clothed in jumpers and jeans, crouched, hidden by the bushes around Witches Oak. Aashif clasped the baseball bat a friend had loaned him. Their classmates would be halfway through the halaqah by now. Aasif told the Imam his brother was feeling unwell. He would have to take him home.

It wasn't really a lie. Looking down at Jamil, his body shaking, his head turned so as not to catch his brother's eye, he didn't look good. Was it the cold or fear? Both, Aashif guessed. He put his arm around those bony shoulders. 'Don't worry, my brother,' he said. 'My name means bold and brave and those things we shall be. You, too.'

Jamil looked unconvinced. 'There's a lot of them.'

'We are early, and they won't all come together. This time, they will expect us to go home along the main road past Fisher's warehouse. If they are waiting for us, it will be there. Eventually, one or two will drift back this way and we'll be ready.'

Aashif reacted to the sound of a steady tapping on the path by crouching lower and holding his finger to his mouth. He glanced around the bush at the approaching figure, reached for the bat, and sprang forward.

The sudden appearance of someone jumping out from the shadows took the little boy, Stanley, by surprise. Startled, he stopped in his tracks and lurched to one side, placing his weight on his good leg. 'You scared the life out of me!' he shouted. 'Where are the others?'

As Jamil appeared from behind his brother, the little boy realised he was not addressing another gang member. ‘You!’ he snarled, holding his ground.

‘Yes, me!’ Aashif held the boy under his arms, dragging him into the undergrowth.

There was no concern in Stanley’s voice, just anger and contempt. ‘Let me go.’ He looked up at Aashif standing over him. ‘Terry is my brother. Do you know who he is? He’s a psycho. Touch me and I’ll swear he’ll kill both of you.’

‘Maybe, but he’s not here, is he, Stanley?’ Aashif stuffed a handkerchief into the boy’s mouth, dragging him to his feet and frogmarched him toward the smaller of the two Roman wells. The external fencing, designed to stop people from encroaching, had been partially trampled, providing easy access. Once inside, Aashif had no problem in prising the rusty wire netting cover away from the nails holding it in place. It provided a gap just big enough for what he had in mind.

Aashif turned to encourage Jamil forward, then back to Stanley. ‘That explains why the bunch of cowards you hang around with were being so nice to you last week, doesn’t it? Scared of your brother, are they?’

‘Just like you’ll be when I go home and tell him,’ he mumbled through the handkerchief.

‘We’ll see about that. Come here, Jamil. Undo your fly.’ Aashif grabbed the boy under his arms and lifted him. He was surprisingly light, even though he was of a slight build.

Ordering Jamil to join him, Aashif stood behind the boy on the parapet circling the well. It was wide enough for the three of them. Stanley shuffled to keep his balance, the calliper around his withered leg scraping against the masonry, dislodging small pieces of mortar which fell into the pitch black, lost in silence until the hollow plop echoed from the depths. The rustling of the rats, as they reacted to the disturbance, subsided as quickly as it began.

‘Our Imam tells us you Christians believe in an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Is that right?’

For the first time, fear registered in Stanley's eyes. Aashif grasped him around the shoulders, pushing his body forward so that his head dangled over the void. 'Jamil, move around and hold on to me.'

Stanley cried out, his predicament apparent.

Gingerly, Jamil edged around to stand next to his brother, his hand grasping a handful of T-shirt. 'Now, piss all over him,' Aashif ordered.

Jamil's hand shook as he fiddled with the buttons on his trousers. His eyes darted nervously between his brother and the boy, whose head and half his torso extended over the ledge, his face peering into the void. His bravado dissipated with the thought of what was to come. Loud sobs now competed with the screams of desperation.

Jamil's tiny penis hung flaccid just outside his fly. 'I can't,' he said. 'No wee.' As he spoke, a rat sprang from the inside of the well, leaping over Aashif's shoulder. Jamil screamed. The momentum sent Aashif backwards, releasing his hold on Stanley's midriff. Desperately, he held onto the boy's good leg and arrested the forward movement, stopping the falling body as it tottered on the edge of the parapet.

'Hold on to his other leg, Jamil. I need to pull him back.'

Jamil wrapped his hands around the calliper, gripping as hard as he could, his head buried against the boy's thigh. He saw nothing through the tears clouding his eyes.

Aashif released the boy's leg, leaning forward to grasp him around the waist. What he did not expect was an arm thrusting wildly upward and a finger poking him in the eye. It stopped him in his tracks, the reflex to use his hand to rub and cover the eye to ease the pain.

Jamil reacted to the heavier burden by clinging even harder onto the calliper. But as he did so, his hands slipped against the shiny metal surface. His thumb jammed against the catch which held the calliper in place. Neither brother would ever forget the events of the next ten seconds, nor the days ahead, which would change their young lives forever. As if a ship slowly launched from its moorings, Stanley slipped headfirst into the darkness, his withered leg the last thing to disappear. Jamil looked at his brother in disbelief, holding out the calliper in front of him. The scream echoed in his ears, faded and was gone. For Jamil, that scream would live on every night as he closed his eyes and prayed.

Aashif was the first to react, grabbing the calliper out of his brother's hand and tossing it into the well.

'He won't be able to find it to put it on,' Jamil said. 'We must call for help.'

Aashif pulled him from the parapet, his gaze fixed on his brother's eyes, willing him to obey. 'He's gone. Dead. Do you understand, Jamil? Nobody can help him. We must go. Now. We were never here. Do you understand? We were never here! This never happened. It was all just make-believe.'

Four days passed with no change to the normal routine of the neighbourhood. Aashif convinced himself the entire incident was some weird turn of his imagination or, on the occasions confronted by reality, how Stanley somehow climbed from the well and returned home unharmed.

It was only the silent, morose world into which Jamil had lapsed, uncommunicative and distant when spoken to, which prompted Aashif to focus on the stark reality of the chain of events he had instigated. Fortunately, their parents treated Jamil's mood swings as a function of his development, a phase in growing up about which they were knowledgeable, and he knew nothing.

Their mother worked as an auxiliary nurse at the local health centre. Aashif strained to listen behind the closed door later that night as she recounted to her husband the tragic revelation of the young boy who had fallen into one of the Roman wells. His elder brother reported him missing four days ago, but, as rumour had it, the child had only died during the last forty-eight hours. Can you imagine the horror of surviving for two days in such a place with no one to listen to your calls for help? May Allah comfort his soul.

The Council would have a lot to answer for, their father said. Allowing the safeguards around the place to fall into a state of disrepair was nothing short of criminal.

The next day, the news broke. The police suspected others were involved. They questioned eight students who attended a local comprehensive school. Two boys with a history of bullying were kept in the police station overnight.

It was the following Saturday. Aashif and Jamil, dressed in new dishdashas, returned home from the mosque to find their parents waiting for them in the lounge with three men in suits. Their mother had been crying. Their father told them to sit. 'We have welcomed these gentlemen into our home,' he said, his voice deeper than usual. 'They need to ask you both some questions. You will tell them everything you know.'

EXODUS

THREE RIVERS – TEXAS, USA

Thirty-five years and one week ago -

November 2030

Mary Jo Hammond drew long and hard on the cigarette wedged between her chapped lips.

As she looked out from the porch of their single-storey wood cabin, the tall leaves of the filler tobacco grown from Cuban seed swayed gently back and forth in the half-light as night approached. In happier days, before Bobby took ill, they had chosen the six-acre field for cultivation with just one aim in mind. When the plants were fully grown, they would hide the federal correction centre on Highway 72 from view. Out of sight, out of mind.

The signs on the entry roads into Three Rivers in Live Oak County described the township as the oil capital of Texas. It was an august boast. The guidebooks made only a passing reference to the penitentiary where many of the most dangerous redneck reactionaries, renegade murderers, and rapists in the Union were incarcerated.

On a still night, if she strained hard, Mary Jo could just make out the sound of the oil rigs humming some five miles away, alongside the refinery. She had been born and bred in Three Rivers and was mighty proud of her birthright.

The rasping, mucus-filled cough started up as she exhaled, forcing her to spit a ball of yellow phlegm onto the parched earth. It was ironic, she thought. That very plant, growing so high and strong just a stone's throw away, would consign her husband's body to the ground in a week or two and, most likely, see her lying in the soil next to him within the year. The thought caused her to laugh out loud, provoking another bout of coughing and spitting.

'You see this, Mother?' Bobby had called her 'Mother' ever since their only child was born some thirty-odd years ago. Millie survived until she was two when the consumption had taken her, but Bobby just went on calling Mary Jo 'Mother' until this very day.

'What is it, Bobby?'

Her husband was propped up on a make-do sofa bed in the lounge, his watery gaze fixed on the television. The sound was turned down because the noise hurt his ears. Nothing but skin and bones, cancer racked the body of this former fifteen-stone hard man and federal prison guard. Bones poked through the grey/blue skin of his skeletal frame. Pain and suffering were all he knew. Once, he inflicted these two ills: now, he had to endure them.

The image on the screen was like a scene from a science fiction movie. The sky above some desert location was full of drones, small, black-painted craft swarming incessantly like bees about a larger, torpedo-shaped drone with mechanical arms embracing a package the size of a small suitcase. From time to time, a smaller drone would explode into flames and fall to earth, causing the rest to realign to protect their queen.

An industrial complex came into view on the horizon. Within minutes, the drones were hovering over a series of circular metal towers, losing height and numbers as mid-air explosions sent many crashing to the ground. The larger unit came to a halt, the sound of its motor whirring as it hovered in position. The mechanical arms opened, and the package fell to the ground.

Spontaneously, a large red and orange mushroom cloud lit up the screen. As it expanded and dispersed, the camera trembled. The earth below creased in a ripple effect, as though some gigantic prehistoric monster was moving at breakneck speed just under the surface. Suddenly, the image froze and then disappeared before a visibly shaken announcer appeared in the studio, framed against a 'Breaking News' background.

'What's he saying?' Mary Jo asked.

Bobby half turned his head. 'I guess it's just another of those damn Arab killing Arab terrorist attacks, somewhere in the desert. I don't know why we don't drop a bomb on the whole fuckin' lot of 'em. He grimaced. The strain of talking sapped his energy. 'It's the third one they've shown.'

'More likely the same one the third time,' she retorted, losing interest and walking back onto the porch.

Thank God she lived in the good old US of A, the land of the free. She laughed to herself again as she reached into her housecoat pocket for another cigarette. Free, that is, if you're not on the other side of the six-acre field, banged up in a prison cell.

It was dusk. The only sounds to break the eerie silence were the flapping of the leaves of the tobacco plants, the occasional bark of a dog, and the swish of the rigs as they travelled the highway.

Today was Veterans' Day. She would pick up on the news after Bobby had taken his morphine and was asleep. She enjoyed the late shows.

From the distance came a low humming sound. The night sky lit up over Three Rivers as if dawn had broken. A pall of red and orange smoke, just like the one Bobby had pointed to on TV, rose in the sky, reaching out toward her, turning white as it moved. The sound came seconds later, an ear-shattering noise that pierced and burst her eardrums. She watched in horror as the earth vibrated beneath her feet, gradually at first and then violently as the tremors increased.

On the horizon, a curtain of water erupted from the ground. Her eyes stung. The federal correction centre, enveloped by the cloud a second ago was no longer there.

Mary Jo rushed into the cabin. Bobby dozed in the chair as she dug urgently at his arm. 'We're gonna die, baby. We're gonna see Millie.' She glanced down at the cigarette in her hand. Her last thought was how she had finally beaten the curse of tobacco.

The six-acre field vaporised a split second before she did.

ONE

SANDYS HALL -DEVON

14.30 – 11 November 2065

Could it be ten years since he stood in this same spot? It hardly seemed possible. So vivid were his memories of this place, it could have been yesterday. Then again, if he charted his achievements, a decade was no time at all to encompass his rapid rise through the political ranks. Jack Tirrand was a name to watch, destined for greater things if the talk bandied about in certain influential circles was to be believed. Not bad, he thought, for the boy from the humble origins of a foster home.

His nostrils flared as he breathed in the crisp autumn air and contemplated the reception he could expect beyond the sweeping driveway that led to the imposing manor house of Sandys Hall, the home of his wife's family.

The Fitzwilliams had witnessed the passage of time take its toll, much akin to the formidable wrought iron double gates marking the entrance to the estate. Ten years ago, these gates were freshly painted and closed, proudly defining the territorial integrity of the property. Now, they were open, pressed flat against the wall, the paint chipped and faded; the hinges rusted and broken. They were, he thought, a metaphor for the woman whose eightieth birthday he now came to celebrate: neither performed a useful function anymore.

At seventy, Verity had been the pragmatic and outspoken firebrand who ran her husband's family estate with an iron fist. In the intervening years, progressive dementia transformed her world into one of fantasy, the reversion to perpetual childhood as a pupil experiencing the emotions and responses of daily life in an all-girls boarding school.

He felt apprehensive about how he would react to Verity and to those around her who willingly took part in the charade that was now her life. Surely there would be periods of remission when she would remember she was Charles's wife. They had two children, a son, a man of the cloth – what a ridiculous term that was. It made him sound like a tailor – and a daughter, Rebecca, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. For Charles's sake, he

hoped so. It had always been Verity's strength of character that gave Charles the backbone he lacked. Jack dreaded to think of him trying to cope without her support.

The impatient neigh of one of the two horses, as it exhaled a cloud of hot air into the chill autumn afternoon, brought him back to the moment. 'Sorry, cabby. This place stirs a wealth of memories.'

'I reckon it does,' the old man said, patting the flank of the Norman cob. 'Must be on my way. Bringing these two out of retirement to ferry clients is a far cry from turning the key in the ignition.'

'Out of fuel credits?' Jack asked.

The old man nodded. 'Used the last one yesterday. Have to wait until tomorrow to put the taxi on the road and these stalwarts back in the field until needs must.' He hesitated. 'Forgive me for asking, but you're Jack Tirrand, aren't you? I recognise you from the bulletins.'

Jack nodded. 'You can leave me here,' he said, eager to avoid being sidetracked into a political to-and-fro he sensed was imminent. 'I'll walk the rest of the way. What's your VI?'

The cabby recited the vehicle identification number, which Jack tapped into his mobile, selecting the menu option of a short journey credit. As the phone beeped its confirmation, Jack asked for the FTS reference. The tip was generous, and the old man voiced his appreciation. 'Free To Spend' credits were prized for the little luxuries they provided alongside the necessities to which all citizens were entitled.

The cob tapped his rear hoof on the tarmac as if impatient to be on its way. The old man nodded toward the horses and smiled. 'I'll thank you on their behalf. They'll be grateful you haven't made them take you up to the Hall. They desperately need new shoes and the gravel gets wedged in the gaps.'

Jack waved as the ancient carriage with its two-horsepower momentum came to life and trundled onwards to its next fare.

'Sandys Hall', the plaque affixed to the gate read. 'An Ancestral Estate Controlled by The Tangible Heritage Trust.' Jack laughed to himself. 'An Ancestral Estate'? That was rich. Undoubtedly, a description insisted upon by Rebecca to describe the crumbling ruin. His wife was always determined to display her social status, even though the new order frowned

upon talk of class and breeding. His daughter, Alison, once voiced the opinion that her mother adopted a posher accent than normal whenever around her parents. Much to Alison's annoyance, he scoffed at the observation, but today's call confirmed just how perceptive his daughter had been.

Rebecca had put on her part pleading, part condescending tone as she reeled off a list of instructions that morning. It was her mother's special day, and he must not step out of line. He was to humour Verity by adopting whatever role she attributed to him, school inspector, janitor, or clandestine visitor from the adjacent, equally imaginary boys' school. On no account was he to recall actual instances from the past, become argumentative or short-tempered as was in his nature, or ignore her mother when she addressed him. The entire family was making enormous sacrifices to be with Verity over the weekend and the least he could do was spare a few hours away from his political masters to join the celebrations. He smiled to himself. As always, Rebecca's emotional blackmail was irresistible.

On the eleventh of November ten years ago, he recalled, it was raining, that fine drizzle that feels like nothing but ends up soaking you. Today, the sun was an hour from setting out of a watery blue sky. The air was still, the silence all around him broken only by the deafening sound of the gravel crunching under his shoes.

He felt a sense of peace, an illusion, he knew, as though nothing bad could ever happen. But it had. Thirty-five years ago, to this very day, the world changed forever. As if in sympathy with the sentiment, the sun faded, eclipsed by the canopy of foliage on the tall cedars in the copse, before reappearing to cast lengthening shadows on the driveway.

The scene was now of ploughed fields stretching as far as the brow, laying fallow, awaiting next year's crop of whatever the cooperative determined was desirable. Before eleven/eleven, one of the finest eighteen-hole golf courses in south-west England, designed by an American sporting legend of the time, occupied this rolling landscape. What an idle pastime, he mused, striking a little ball toward a distant hole set in a manicured lawn; so many simple pleasures sacrificed for the sake of survival. There must still be a few golf courses in existence around the world, links courses where the land was unsuitable for agriculture, but there were none he could recall. Golf was

now a virtual game, played against a screen by a fast-declining band of followers, humorously branded in the media as eccentrics from another era.

As the main building of Sandys Hall came into view, he heard the strain of children giggling and shouting long before he could see them. His grandchildren. ‘Twins ran in the family,’ Rebecca had laughingly told him when she announced her pregnancy. ‘The Fitzwilliams specialise in “double yokers”’. Two sets of twin girls in successive generations proved the point.

His stride quickened. Nothing could lighten his mood more than seeing the innocent reverie of two six-year-old girls who derived so much pleasure from each other’s company. Enjoy the experience, girls, he said to himself. Regrettably, your trouble-free world will be short-lived.

They had seen him. Unsure of who was approaching, they stopped in their tracks like startled fawns. He sensed they were about to turn and run.

‘Faith. Felicity!’ he called out. ‘It’s me. Poppa Jack.’

They looked at each other, uncertain, seeking confirmation.

‘It’s Poppa Jack,’ he repeated as he closed the distance between them.

Recognition came in an instant. ‘It *is* Poppa Jack,’ Felicity shouted as they ran toward him and launched themselves into his outstretched arms.

‘How wonderful.’ He hugged them each in turn. ‘How are my most favourite little girls in the whole, wide world?’

Faith clung to him, her arms tight around his neck, her expression confused. ‘Grandma said you were dead.’ She hesitated as if pondering the obvious. ‘But you’re not.’

‘Dead? Grandma said I was dead?’

‘She did, didn’t she, Felicity?’

Felicity wagged a finger at him. ‘She did. We swear. She told Uncle Robert you would be late for your own funeral.’

‘And he is a rector,’ Faith added with a six-year-old’s idea of gravitas.

He laughed. ‘Grandma was only joking.’ He took each one by the hand. ‘Come on. Let’s go show everyone Poppa Jack is still alive.’

The girls hopped and skipped alongside him as they made their way through the rose garden to the front of the building. Behind the majesty of the facade, the exactly proportioned and spaced window frames, the uniform stonework, and the sturdy Palladian columns which marked the entrance, there were signs of terminal decay, of a lack of attention and maintenance.

Sandys Hall had once been an impressive example of Georgian architecture. It was now just a slowly crumbling monument.

There was no forewarning. As little hands squeezed his, an image, so intense, so terrifying, flashed through his mind and was gone before his brain could process the memory. His entire body shuddered. And then came the debilitating pain, the acrid sensation of burning flesh at the back of his nose, channelling into his throat and down into his lungs.

His grip on those tender hands loosened. He struggled for breath, feeling the panic well inside him as he fought to get air into his lungs. Unsteady on his feet, he leaned back against the front door to support his weight, his eyes pinched closed, unsure of his surroundings.

‘Are you all right, old man?’

As the first breath of air filtered past the bile scorching his parched throat, Jack opened his eyes. Robert was standing in front of him, a look of bewildered concern on his face. The twins ran off, reacting to their mother’s call and eager to confirm Poppa Jack was still in the land of the living.

‘I could do with a glass of water,’ Jack said. ‘God, it’s cold in here.’ His voice echoed around the great entrance gallery.

Robert thrust the bible he was clutching into Jack’s outstretched hand. ‘Here’s some spiritual comfort while I’m gone,’ he said with a laugh in his voice as he turned on his heels. ‘Be right back.’

Jack sat down on a step of the sweeping staircase leading to the bedrooms in the east wing of the building. His breathing became more regular as the sense of dread subsided and he focussed on his surroundings. A dozen pairs of eyes stared down at him from the walls with that ubiquitous, pursuing gaze associated with the Mona Lisa. Charles would claim the ornately framed portraits hung strategically on either side of the staircase were of Fitzwilliam nobility dating back six centuries, of a dynasty commanding powerful sway in the West Country since Tudor times. It was all bullshit, a fabrication which did not stand the test of public record. Jack learned the truth early in his relationship with Rebecca, following a fierce row with her parents over her choice of suitor. One of Charles’s great-greats won the estate at a game of cards in the early nineteenth century, stood accused of cheating and cemented his claim by emerging victorious from a duel to the death.

Most of the earlier portraits were of forebears of the unfortunate last Lord Sandys since re-dubbed by Charles to be a Fitzwilliam in all but name. There is a certain type of individual, Charles being one such, who, if they tell a lie long and often enough, comes to accept it as an immutable truth. Regrettably, Jack thought, Charles's tendency to dogma had rubbed off on his daughter, Alison.

Jack's gaze came to rest on the striking portrait of a dashing cavalier decked in a flowing white wig, brandished sword in hand as he sat astride a rearing black stallion. Replete with the King's standard, this Royalist was more than ready for the fray. Jack shook his head. The Sandys clan appeared to have been prone to making the wrong choices when life and death decisions were concerned.

'Why are you shaking your head? You look terrible. What's happened?' Rebecca glared at him.

'Nothing. Just some stress relief. I'm fine now.' He took the glass of water she held out toward him. 'Everybody around here thinks I'm dead or dying.'

Robert reappeared at his side. 'You gave me a shock, old man, and that's no word of a lie.' He reached for the bible Jack was still holding. 'Better give me that. If I leave it with you, you'll be tearing out the pages to light the fire.'

'And a damn sight more practical application than as a source for all those fairy stories you concoct every Sunday.' Jack started to feel better. The look on Robert's face told him the patronising smile and reprimanding tut-tut were simply stalling tactics as his brother-in-law searched for a witty retort.

When the eleven/even attacks came, Robert had just started university, set on a degree in humanities. Before the dust settled, he abandoned the course to seek a ministry in the Anglican church. Rebecca claimed the scale of the atrocities prompted him to embark on a stint of missionary work in the *favela* slums of Brazil. It cemented his attraction to the Country, especially Rio, and his love for the people. The experience both humbled him and strengthened his resolve to make a difference.

Of course, organised religion was now a declining influence in a changed world. Now there was a new order striving for survival by discarding the religious dogma and conflict of faiths that had plagued civilisation since

man climbed up onto two legs and contemplated his mortality. Political power was centred on strategic regional strongholds. Dictates were swiftly enacted, designed to neutralise religious influence and convert dog-collar devotees like Robert into little more than social workers, sounding off with platitudes to the masses and preaching to an ever-diminishing number of the converted. The guiding forces had been clever not to confuse religion with faith, trust and aspiration; careful not to ban or drive worship underground. That would have been dangerous, creating a subversive force with objectives incompatible with the common good. Dissent could not be tolerated.

Against a background branding organised religion as an irrelevance, Jack could only admire his brother-in-law. Robert fought to uphold his convictions, not with the fervour of a revolutionary but with a pragmatic stubbornness which endeared him to the members of his local congregation. Jack suspected Robert would not give up on him, biding his time until he detected a crack in Jack's armoury. Until then, their exchanges on all things biblical were reduced to mild insults and banter.

'I'll have you know, old man, my fairy stories, as you call them, put a fire in people's bellies when there's no heat in the grate.' He chuckled, convinced he had put Jack in his place.

'Listen, old man,' Jack fired back. 'You have the infuriating habit of putting "old man" in every sentence you utter. Do you do it to everybody?'

Robert sniggered and gripped his arm. 'I only do it to you because I know how much you hate it.'

'I don't know if I believe you.'

'Stop it, you two!' Rebecca interrupted. 'You are like overgrown schoolboys with your silly point scoring.' She linked arms with her husband, leaving Robert to look on as they walked toward the study. 'I thought you were never coming. Father keeps asking after you. I'm sick of making excuses for an absentee husband making it obvious he is trying to avoid his in-laws.'

'Not guilty. The journey was horrendous. A collective, two trains, both late with no food, rounded off by a bone-shaking, twenty-minute ride in some strange stagecoach contraption the taxi driver is obliged to use when he has no fuel credits left.'

Rebecca ignored his attempt at an excuse, pulling his head closer to whisper. 'Alison is being prickly today. See if you can get her out of this mood. I don't want her upsetting mother.'

'Alison is always prickly, as you call it. So, what's new?'

Rebecca shook her head. 'The atmosphere at lunch was impossible. Such a shame you weren't here to distract her. My parents did not comment, but everybody else picked up on it. She kept attacking Harriet, criticising her domesticity, lack of ambition and deriding her for having no interest in any subject outside of family issues. You would not have tolerated her behaviour.' She paused to take a deep breath. 'I found several of her remarks spiteful and out of order. I took her to one side after lunch. She didn't take kindly to my rebuke and went off in a sulk.'

'Do you think your parents realised?'

They stopped outside the study door. There was no sound from inside. 'I think Daddy did, although he made no mention afterwards.' Jack strained to hear her conspiratorial whisper. 'Poor Mummy. She was still revelling in the euphoria of a school assembly. The local rector, alias Robert, was taking prayers and reading a scripture from the bible. She's having a bad day; doesn't recognise any of us; addresses Daddy as the headmaster and calls him "Sir" all the time.' She opened the door and pulled at his sleeve. 'Keep your eye on Alison.'

Jack sighed. Their daughters, officially Harriet One and Alison Two were twins. As with most of their character traits, they had little in common and were unrecognisable as sisters, let alone twins.

Harriet arrived in this world thirteen minutes earlier than her sister, entitling her to firstborn status and the obligatory suffix of 'One' following her first Christian name. Alison's birth certificate registered her as 'Two' and established the limit to which the birth quota legislation restricted the family size. Thereafter, many couples chose for one of them to be sterilised, a choice encouraged by the authorities with the award of additional family credits. Should Rebecca have fallen pregnant again, legislation required the baby be put up for adoption by a couple on the 'Infertiles Register'.

Throughout the world, the controlling union of INCOL, the acronym for the International Coalition Legislative to Preserve the Human Race, was attempting to ensure population levels gradually declined to achieve the

delicate balance between the availability of resources and the requirements necessary to feed and clothe every citizen. The goal was still a long way off.

The study was crowded and decidedly chilly, a couple of degrees less cold than the rest of the building, but still unpleasant. Charles and Verity, wrapped in blankets, occupied the two winged leather armchairs facing each other. Charles appeared relieved to note Jack's arrival.

'How gracious of you to come, Deputy,' he said. 'You missed a wonderful lunch, all credit to the ladies present.'

Jack acknowledged the comment with a smile. Protocol was served. Addressing his son-in-law by his political rank was deliberate, intended to illicit a courtesy in return. Jack had no desire to disappoint his host. 'Glad I could make it, your Grace. Only sorry I couldn't get here earlier.'

Charles's chest expanded, head erect, at the sound of the reference to his hereditary title. The satisfaction he once derived from being known as Lord Fitzwilliam when he took his seat in the House of Lords was short-lived. In the interlude between assuming the title upon his father's death and the enactment of the INCOL Articles of Existence, which abolished both the upper and lower houses of Parliament, there had been precious little time to enjoy his status.

Although he paid lip service to the provisions of the new legislation which forbade any recognition of or allegiance to class distinction, Charles insisted, within the confines of Sandys Hall, that family and retainers dutifully respected his hereditary title. The fact his son-in-law, an up-and-coming member of the UK Assembly, deferred to him was a recognition of the esteem in which Charles was held. He would have been least impressed had he known Jack's concession to him was only intended to humour the old man's caprice.

Robert entered the study, closing the door firmly and rubbed his hands together aggressively as he acknowledged the assembled group.

'Sorry we cannot offer you the comfort of a little warmth,' Charles said. He glanced over at the open fireplace where once a dozen logs would have been blazing away, now given over to a lonely-looking gas fire which was turned off. 'We used the last of today's heating credits to keep the fire going over lunch.' His arm waved in the air, his finger pointed at the high, wood-panelled ceiling and the large single-glazed panel window overlooking

the rose garden and the grounds beyond. 'Like a sieve this place. Impossible to heat. Needs three times the allowance your lot gives us just to be bearable.'

Jack avoided Rebecca's censorious glare. 'I thought the THT was supposed to look after the place since you conceded the property rights? Haven't you asked them for a concessionary heating grant?'

Charles's cheeks flushed. 'Don't talk to me about your precious Tangible Heritage Trust. They do bugger all except use their informers to spy on me and make sure I don't cut down any trees. And what do you mean by "ceded"?' His voice became shriller. 'It was hardly a voluntary act. They expropriated the estate citing a historical and cultural preservation enactment coming from Berlin, of all places. I ask you, what do the bloody Krauts know about the culture of English stately homes?'

Rebecca placed a restraining hand on her father's shoulder, at the same time as giving her husband a withering look which said seek appeasement.

Charles was a dumpy, but well-built man with those same piercing blue eyes Rebecca had inherited. His pronounced chin sported a snow-white goatee beard. Jack recognised the Charles of old as his cheeks took on the red glow of passion, his chin lifted from his chest and his eyes, vital and charged, ready for the challenge.

Jack went to speak, change the subject, but Charles, brooking no interruption, frustrated the opportunity. 'Did you see the grounds on the way in?' He did not wait for an answer. 'I ask you, call themselves landscape gardeners. They are an affront to the job description; taken at random off the available to work register. Skills – zero; intelligence – zero; willingness and application – non-existent. Look over at the rose garden. It's more like the Amazon jungle! Your people in charge of INCOL have no idea what is happening in the outside world.'

The twins playing quietly in the corner now reacted to the charged atmosphere by clambering onto the sofa next to their mother, tugging at her knitted skirt and jumper and pleading to be allowed back out to play. Jack smiled inwardly at what must be a well-rehearsed scenario, a persistent coercion which tender Harriet could not resist. The searching look toward her husband must have only convinced her that further resistance was pointless. With his knees tucked up under his chin, Mac was lost to the world, absorbed

in one of Charles's leather-bound compendia of forty-year-old motorsport magazines.

'Go on then,' she conceded. 'But stay in view. It will be dark soon and we will have to light the candles together. You like that.'

As the twins scurried out of the study, Jack moved to lighten the mood with his father-in-law. 'Listen, Charles. I understand these frustrations, especially for somebody who has lived over half his life in the world of plenty before eleven/eleven, but you must accept the conditions in which we exist have changed, perhaps forever.'

'For the worse.'

'Of course, for the worse. The experts say it will be at least another thirty years before the contaminated oilfields start to come back on stream. And that's assuming the new breed of climate do-gooders don't get their way. Until then, it's the responsibility of us all to do everything in our power to preserve humanity from a path of self-destruction.'

Charles shook his head. 'I've heard all this claptrap a million times.' He wheeled in his armchair to face Jack, ignoring the blanket slipping from his knees onto the floor. 'It strikes me, whilst ninety-nine per cent of the population are living in squalor to make the sacrifice possible, there are elitist cliques in Berlin, New York, Moscow and God knows where else living the good life under INCOL's protective umbrella.'

'I agree.' The rejoinder came from the slender, boyish figure sitting in an armchair three sizes too large for her. Jack had waved to Alison as he entered the study, but they had not spoken. 'It's a disgrace. And it pains me to see my father as part of it.'

In retrospect, Jack knew the mature reaction would have been to use his political skills to sideline the topic and not meet their criticism head-on. His need to rebuff the allegation was both a response to the anger surging inside him and the constant fear someone was monitoring careless talk and foolhardy assertions to undermine his position.

The election of deputies in the London Assembly division of the Senate was always hotly contested and peppered with invasive, personal attacks and wild innuendos intended to defame the candidate. As a relative newcomer to the political classes with a non-white strain in his heritage,

Jack's opponents aggressively contested his nomination and election with distasteful racial undertones.

The public conception was of elected deputies enjoying a favoured lifestyle and a status enviously sought by the politically motivated. It was far from the truth, perpetuated on hearsay and rumour, but nobody would lament his passing if a chink in the family armour could bring about his downfall.

'Can't you see the two of you are condemning the system there to protect you? It may have its failings. It's run by humans, after all.'

'I can certainly see it's there to protect *you*,' Charles retorted, plainly buoyed by the support of Alison.

Rebecca tut-tutted. 'Now, come on, Daddy. Be fair. Jack never takes advantage of his position. He was well within his rights to use his deputy's six-monthly travel concession and requisition a pool car and driver to bring him to join us. But no. He chose a collective and public transport to show he wants no favours from his position.'

Jack groaned inside. By speaking out in his defence, Rebecca simply amplified the objection raised by her father—time for Jack to play hardball.

'That's where you're wrong, Charles. You harbour a belief the world you live in today must embrace the outdated twentieth-century concept of a democratic society where free speech, human rights and expressing dissent are all solid building blocks to some open-minded utopia.'

'It's an aspiration; certainly not a reality.' His cheeks flushed. 'You find my view amusing?'

'I'm sorry.' The condescending smile and sardonic twist of the mouth were reflexes Jack consciously sought to suppress. It was an unfortunate habit he found he adopted when an argument irritated him. 'No, of course not. Though I must say, I find your naivety disturbing. The values you crave are those which spawned an army of disillusioned, fanatical individuals who thought they had the one-time solution to realign the direction in which civilization was travelling. And they were allowed, some would say encouraged, by a largely passive response from a political class resigned to fighting talk rather than direct action, to take up arms to maim and destroy in the name of some ill-matched, warped environmental and religious doctrines. *That* is the reason we are shivering in the cold today.'

The room fell silent. Jack fully expected his brother-in-law to react at the mention of religion, but Robert was having an intense, whispered conversation with his sister.

Charles's face almost glowed incandescent in the half-light. 'Are you suggesting I . . . my generation somehow encouraged or provoked the terrorists and degenerates responsible for eleven/eleven into doing so? If this is your belief, you are plainly deranged, Deputy.'

Again, Jack knew he should close the exchange with some placatory remark, but he could not. It was not to Charles he needed to press home his argument, but to the younger audience present, who looked on with hostility borne out of confusion. It would be the responsibility of this new generation to steer the world out of its mess and into an era of opportunity and recovery. No easy task, he thought to himself.

Whatever provoked the hostilities three decades ago was a lesson for historians to analyse. In the following months, the world tottered on the brink of self-destruction. Overnight, feast turned to famine and famine to death.

At the eleventh hour, calculating, wise heads, the founding fathers of their day, established order. Collective sanity prevailed, out of which INCOL was born. In a move of worldwide solidarity, every sovereign nation coalesced and empowered the organisation to save the planet. Its charter demanded powers to steer humanity through the rigours of realigning private gain to the common interest. Where there had been greed and consumption, there were now shortages, hardship and suffering. The challenge was to convert mentalities from personal gratification toward striving for society as a whole. Such a seismic shift of attitude would never come about by popular consensus.

The rules had to change. The rights of the individual were curtailed. Tough enactments on birth control, religious freedoms, crimes against society and rationing were introduced and gradually assimilated into the public psyche. Above all, personal liberties and privacy, once cherished as basic rights, were severely curtailed. Initially, the resentment was fierce, laws flouted, and social upheaval widespread. It took hardship, brutal enforcement and the imposition of a virtual dictatorship based on necessity, but INCOL survived and thrived. Today, a new generation knows of no other world, its hopes and ambitions fuelled by the prospect of a brighter future. It was only

the cynics of Charles's era, and the hot-headed revolutionaries to succeed it, who practised dissent. These citizens, who would never accept the status quo, must be dealt with.

'Of course, I'm not accusing you,' Jack said. 'Listen. INCOL is not some demonic force. It comprises representatives from every corner of the globe, ordinary people like us . . . like me. It's as benign as it can be under the circumstances but still a minority criticise and are determined to flout the rules.'

'Benign! I don't know how you have the nerve to use the word. We live in a police state akin to any other in history where those prepared to express an alternative opinion are censored and often removed, lost without a trace.'

Jack could see Alison nodding her head out of the corner of his eye, but the hand pressing on her shoulder appeared to restrain her from interrupting.

Again, Jack realised they needed to move on. It was futile trying to appeal to Charles, whose viewpoint was ingrained and, without fear of retribution, available to all who were prepared to listen. The trouble was that elements within the security service could well learn of Charles's reckless remarks and put the rest of the family, including Jack, under suspicion.

As much as he knew Rebecca's constant stare was willing him to change the subject, he needed to avoid any future accusation that he did not react to Charles's defamatory statement. 'The security services are empowered to ensure compliance with the law, no more, no less. Collectively, we are all obliged to obey the rules. We cannot afford the luxury of dissent. Look at the facts and stop seeing the injustice in rumour and speculation.' He shook his head to preface an admonishment. 'We have established regulations for your own good yet, in this room, you ignore one of the most important security enactments.'

Charles raised his eyebrows as he searched for an explanation. It was Alison who picked up on her father's comment. 'He's talking about the television, grandpa,' she said wryly. 'We haven't got the bloody thing switched on.'

Jack turned to face his daughter. 'Quite right. The requirement was introduced to protect you. The television must be always online when

individuals are in residence.’ He was quoting verbatim from memory. ‘How do you expect to keep up to date with breaking news, the release of civil edicts if, as you call it, the bloody thing is switched off? Compliance means TV indoors, mobile ohn outside. Does that simple requirement warrant dissent?’

‘For Christ’s sake, somebody put me out to graze.’ Charles leaned over to squeeze Verity’s hand as the bile rose in his throat. ‘If life has been reduced to a mandatory blank screen or watching endless sports programmes, fifty-year-old situation comedies or a court scene as they condemn some poor wretch to the cells . . . I’d rather slit my throat.’

Alison stood up, a finger waving at her father. ‘Don’t worry, Grandpa. His lot will do it for you.’

The exchange charged the atmosphere. Jack feared they were heading for a full-blooded confrontation with neither able nor willing to back off.

‘You’ve changed, Jack, you know that?’ Charles adopted a softer tone. ‘You used to have opinions and respect other people’s points of view. Now, you spout the party line.’

Jack gritted his teeth, his fists clenched. He was ready to explode. God Almighty! Charles was one of the breed who selfishly took advantage of the spoils, ostracised and disenfranchised all who got in their way and, unthinkingly, left succeeding generations to clear up the mess. It was no wonder an unholy alliance between religious extremists and environmentalists obsessed with revolutionary change sought a solution through violence. To excuse Charles now, on the grounds of age, would be to patronise him, and Jack was not prepared to accept that compromise.

A hand pinched at the sleeve of his jacket. It was down to Rebecca to avert the train crash. She knew her father and husband too well to let a full-blown argument develop. ‘Let’s not forget why we’re here,’ she whispered in Jack’s ear before leaning forward to tap Verity on the knee. ‘Mummy, look who has come just to wish you a happy birthday. We thought he would never get here, didn’t we? But he’s finally arrived. Look. It’s Jack.’

If Rebecca hoped for a lucid reaction to the announcement, she was to be disappointed. Verity raised unseeing eyes to stare in front of her before returning her gaze downward to study whatever she believed was couched in her lap.

Rebecca repeated his name.

‘Jack, be nimble; Jack, be quick; Jack, jump over the candlestick.’ The nursery rhyme erupted in an emotionless monotone. Verity laughed to herself, a smirk which was transformed into a stern glance as she focussed on the new arrival. ‘This Jack is neither nimble nor quick,’ she said. Her eyes fixed on his. ‘I will have him know I am the milk monitor this month and I distinctly remember ordering a third of a pint for every girl, plus three pints for the staff room and whatever the kitchen ladies require. He’s late again, as usual.’ She gave a cursory wave of her hand. ‘Now, put the crates down there and be off with you.’

Jack took a step back, at a loss for words.

‘What are you waiting for? Don’t stand there gawping!’ The look she gave him put him in the food chain somewhere between rodent and viper. He recognised the look of unspoken rebuke passed on from mother to daughter. ‘Are you deaf or something?’

‘If I may butt in,’ Charles whispered.

Verity reacted by sitting bolt upright, her hands pressed flat against her thighs, palms turned inwards. ‘Yes, Sir,’ she shouted at the top of her voice.

The collection of compendia on Mac’s lap slid to the floor. ‘Jesus wept,’ he said in a soft Scottish brogue.

Charles stretched forward to pat Verity on the hand. ‘It’s today we have to pay the milk bill,’ he said tenderly. ‘I’ve asked the secretary to draw a cheque, so he will have to wait until it’s ready.’

‘Yes, Sir!’ in an even more strident tone.

Rebecca linked arms with her husband, a nonchalant smile on her face as if the last passage of conversation was nothing out of the usual. She led him across the room. ‘Alison has invited a chum from Uni to stay for the weekend. Say hello to Rolf.’ She acknowledged the tall, athletic young man with the crop of untidy, ultra-black hair, standing behind the winged armchair in which Alison was sitting. ‘This is my husband, the Deputy, you’ve been so longing to talk to.’

Jack reacted to the cue and extended his arm for a firm, uncompromising handshake. Rolf remained planted behind the chair in a pose reminiscent of a formal, studied Victorian photo portrait. A restraining hand remained on Alison’s shoulder, suggesting the young man was aware of the

fiery temper his girlfriend possessed. The fact she responded to the gesture suggested a degree of intimacy and respect, which took them well beyond the mere ‘chums’ level.

‘Pleased to meet you, Sir,’ Rolf said, a broad deferential smile on his face. ‘I have heard a great deal about you.’

‘None of it complimentary, I guess, if it came from Alison. Where’s the accent from, Germany?’

‘Blackpool, actually,’ he replied, much to Alison’s amusement.

Jack smiled. Seeing Alison look so radiant and happy was a rare and comforting experience. ‘When did they start talking like that in Blackpool?’

‘Apologies. It sounded facetious. It is German. My father is retired and lives near Stuttgart, but I am on the Dweller’s Register at my mother’s address in Lytham Saint Anne.’ He hesitated. ‘She is English – separated from my father.’

Jack curbed the urge to enquire further. At worst, it would seem like an interrogation; at best, an assessment of his suitability as his daughter’s suitor. ‘What are you studying?’

Rolf exchanged a complicit smile with Alison. ‘I’m glad you asked, Sir. I have just enrolled in the mature student programme, a degree course in social mobility for all non-CR actives.’

‘Very worthwhile,’

‘To be honest, Sir, when Alison invited me to join the family for the weekend, I jumped at the opportunity. I was hoping . . .’ He glanced at Alison, seeking support.

‘Spit it out, Rolf,’ Alison prompted. ‘He doesn’t bite unless he’s wearing someone else’s teeth and do stop calling him “Sir”. It’s a title reserved for seniority.’

Jack ignored the barb, prompting the young man to continue.

‘Well, as you are an Assembly deputy with special responsibility for the care of the elderly and those excused from the Cooperative Register, an appreciation of your insight would be invaluable for my coursework. I was hoping you might give me a moment to discuss the challenges.’

Rebecca gave a knowing shake of the head. ‘You don’t know what you’re asking for, Rolf,’ she cautioned light-heartedly. ‘Once you get him

started, the floodgates will open, and he will not stop banging on about work. I've suffered years of it.'

'I'll second that,' Alison said.

'Sorry to interrupt everybody.' The sense of alarm in the demure voice stilled the various conversations taking place. Harriet sat on her own next to the picture window, a thick blanket decked around her shoulders.

'The girls were playing on the lawn a minute ago. I turned around for a second and when I looked back, they'd disappeared.'