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Opening Extract from...

Where the Bodies are Buried

Written by Christopher Brookmyre

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LITTLE, BROWN

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This kind of job, Jim had explained to Jasmine, was precisely why he needed her on the firm.

'Guy like this is going to be skittish at the best of times,' he said. 'So he'll be hyper-suspicious of anybody asking questions while he's doing his invisible. He'll smell polis coming off me from a hundred yards out. Sees me through his window or the peephole in his front door and he's not even going to answer the bell. That's why Galt Linklater farmed it out: all their guys have ex-polis stamped on their foreheads. Fresh-faced young woman, on the other hand, different story.'

The logic was inarguably solid, but despite that, it just sounded to Jasmine all the more like he was taking pains to avoid admitting the real reason he'd taken her on.

'Delta . . . I mean Foxtrot Five. Subject is indicating right right right on to Great George Street but is blocked by oncoming traffic.'

Shit. She should have said 'offside indication, held due to oncoming traffic'. She was supposed to be practised at learning lines, for God's sake.

Strictly speaking, there was no need to keep confirming call signs on a two-man follow, but Jim had insisted upon it to get her into the habit. At this rate, she'd have it down by around this time next year.

'Delta Seven, yes yes. Making ground. I can take eyeball when he turns.'

Looking conspicuously unlike a cop or an ex-cop, and bearing no resemblance whatsoever to a private investigator (particularly in the way she practised her new-found profession of private investigation), it had been Jasmine's job on Monday to hit the front doors.

It had happened at the second address. The first address was a dud: the ex-girlfriend who was meant to be living there had sold up two years back. Jim had had his doubts about it in any case, but they'd given it a shot as it was en route to the place on which they had the soundest intel. Technically, the second address was actually addresses two through ten, as it was a three-storey tenement in Partick and they only had the number of the building, not the flat.

'Foxtrot Five. Subject vehicle has turned right right right and is proceeding west on Great George Street. Subject vehicle now indicating offside. Over to you, Delta Seven.'

'Delta Seven confirms the eyeball. Subject vehicle entering Lillybank Gardens, which is a one-way crescent. He's looking to park.'

‘Yes yes.’

As Jim had explained, you need a story when you’re going around knocking on strangers’ doors, asking after people who don’t want to be found. Most people will just tell you – truthfully – that they don’t know who you’re talking about, but occasionally they’ll want to know why you’re asking, because they *are* the subject, or because they know the subject personally. You need to keep it simple, avoid extraneous detail and extrapolation. It was much the same principle as something she’d been taught at drama school, regarding acting on film or television: never do anything you can’t repeat precisely for ten more takes.

Jim had fed her a solid, time-proven script that he assured her would serve her for most occasions. She was looking for someone who had served in the navy alongside her father. The old man had retired a few months back and was trying to organise a reunion among the old shipmates with whom he had lost touch. When she eyeballed the subject and he confirmed his name, her out was that she had the wrong Peter Harper, this one being evidently too young. Sorry to trouble you, then out the door with the establish committed to the hidden video camera’s electronic memory.

After a catalogue of screw-ups, Jasmine had been determined to get this establish right, particularly as it was a subcontract from the firm that provided so much of Jim’s business. She decided it would be wise to plan contingencies, and concocted a second, back-up story to be on the safe side.

‘Delta Seven. Subject vehicle turning left left left into the car park Ashton Lane. That’s a stop stop stop. I have one vehicle for cover. Foxtrot Five park and deploy.’

‘Foxtrot Five. Yes yes.’

The address given by the supplier had been number 315. There was a main-door flat at 313, occupying the whole of the ground floor, so the first three possibilities were on the level above it, accessed by the close next door. Jasmine had rung the doorbell on the left-hand flat, which was answered by a hunched old woman, eyeing her suspiciously through the narrow crack permitted by her security chain, a Westie yapping and panting excitedly at her ankles.

‘No, never heard of him,’ the old woman answered.

She got the same at the middle flat from a harassed-looking mum with a baby over one shoulder and a streak of fresh creamy sick across the other. There was no reply at the right-hand flat, so she climbed

the stairs and started again on the next landing, where she struck out for a response at the first two doors. She'd try them again on the way back down, just in case.

How did she find herself here, she'd asked herself, as she rang another bell and stood waiting for a response: knocking on doors to empty flats in search of a man she didn't know, who didn't want to be found? It was like something out of Beckett. Where along the road had she ended up in this lane and missed the turn-off for a place in a regional rep or even a half-decent touring company? Well, she knew the answer to that one, didn't she? No mystery there.

She was about to ascend to the next landing when her reverie was interrupted by the door being opened. Her surprise at this belated response was slightly jarring, but nothing like as jarring as being confronted by the subject. Pete Harper, despite being a slippery customer, was evidently no master of disguise, having gone to precisely no trouble to alter his appearance from the two-year-old photo the client had provided Galt Linklater with.

'Delta Seven. Subject is out out out of the vehicle and walking still walking towards Ashton Lane. Foxtrot Five confirm you are deployed on foot in a position to follow.'

'No. I mean: Foxtrot Five no no. Still trying to find a non-permit-holder space.'

'For God's sake, just pull in any . . . Radio silence.'

Jasmine pulled her hand away from the PTT button as if stung by it. Radio silence. Subject must be close to Jim. She wasn't going to push the button, wasn't going to forget procedure, wasn't going to screw up.

Harper had exhibited an agitated air that instantly put her in a state of unease: the demeanour of a man who had already given her two last warnings to stop annoying him. He seemed to be almost buzzing with latent aggression, and she felt as though he was staring right through her, able to read her purpose and intentions as clearly as though they were printed on cue cards in front of him. It struck her with full force that she wasn't just doorstepping a stranger under false pretences, but doorstepping a stranger of whom it could reasonably be inferred, from the very purpose of her visit, that he was a bit of a crook. The possibility that this bristling individual might do her physical harm seemed palpable; further upsetting him strongly contra-indicated.

'Can I help you?' he asked in a monotone grunt, Jasmine interpreting the enquiry as sincere only insofar as he was wondering

whether she might require assistance in being imminently strangled and buried.

‘Ehm, it’s, well, sorry to trouble you, I’m, ehm, I’m looking for a man . . .’

Harper’s eyes narrowed in deeper scrutiny and his nostrils flared. Jasmine’s knees started to feel wobbly.

‘He was, ehm, you see, my dad retired and, ehm, he was in the navy, and he was trying to get in touch with some of the guys he served with, but no, I can see that you’re too young, so you must just have the same name as the guy I’m—’

‘I haven’t told you my name. Who is it you think I am? Where did you get this address?’

Oh God oh God oh God oh God.

Jasmine remembered that the guy was lying low here, and the whole point was that nobody had him listed at this address. It suddenly seemed imperative to give him a different name, in order to allay his suspicions and extricate herself from the situation as quickly as possible.

‘I, ehm, the name I had was, ehm . . . Hayley,’ she said, the first name that came to mind. Then she realised it was a girl’s name. ‘William. William Hayley.’

‘That’s not me,’ Harper said.

He began to close the door again, which was when it body-slammed her that she had just completely blown the establish.

‘Oh no, wait, Peter Harper,’ she blurted.

‘What?’ he demanded, now looking as suspicious as he was annoyed.

‘I’m also looking for a Peter Harper.’

‘Also? A second ago it was William Hayley.’

‘That was the name . . . I mean, there’s more than one person I’m looking for . . .’

‘Aye, and you just said I’m too young to be who you’re looking for, so why are you patting more names at me? Who gave you this address?’

Jasmine was collapsing so completely inside that she feared for a moment she was about to just burst into tears. She had to hold it together. She thought of her back-up story and grabbed on to it like it was a branch in the rapids.

‘Well, you see, I’ve moved into this new flat and the girl there split up with her boyfriend, and there was mail for him and she doesn’t want to see him so she asked me to track him down to wherever he’s moved, and see, it’s his name that’s Peter Harper, so . . .’

'You're looking for your flatmate's ex-boyfriend *as well as* your dad's old shipmate?'

Jasmine felt her eyes widen involuntarily, perhaps to take in the full scale of the catastrophe that was unfolding before them.

'Yes, but I got mixed up, and the first one, Hayley Williams . . .'

'You mean William Hayley,' he said, almost helpfully.

'William Hayley, yes, I shouldn't have been asking about him here, because he lives in Hyndland and that's where I'm going next.'

'After you've tracked down your flatmate's boyfriend.'

Jasmine's throat went so dry, she couldn't even mumble a mortified 'yes'. It must have been the fierce heat radiating from her cheeks that parched her.

'Peter Harper, you said his name was?'

She nodded meekly.

'Never heard of him,' Harper said, then slammed the door.

Jasmine pulled over into a permit-holders-only space, figuring that a parking ticket constituted a low level of collateral damage compared to her track record.

'Delta Seven. Subject just walked past as I was getting out of my car and gave me a definite funny.'

'Are you burned?'

'Just a bit warm. I avoided eye contact, but I'll need to hang well back. Need you to get eyeball ASAP. Subject is walking still walking along Ruthven Lane in the direction of Great George Street.'

'Copy that.'

'You mean yes yes.'

'Sorry sorry,' she offered.

Jasmine felt her legs become heavier as she spoke, precipitately burdened by so much responsibility. The subject had looked at Jim, given him a 'funny', and they could not afford to let this guy know he was under surveillance. It was all on her now. Jim wasn't burned – the subject hadn't sussed that he was being tailed – but he would have to keep sufficient distance now that this was effectively a one-woman follow.

'It was a partial establish,' Jim had assured her on Monday as she blubbed in the passenger seat of his Peugeot, parked around the corner from the Partick tenement where she had so comprehensively failed to get Peter Harper to acknowledge his own name, while all but spelling out to him that he was under surveillance.

‘We’ve confirmed where he’s living, at least,’ he went on. ‘Albeit he’ll probably now only be living there for the time it’ll take to pack a bag and make a few phone calls.’

He gave her a smile, letting her know that he was saying this in good humour, although he wasn’t joking.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she told him.

She had fallen apart the moment Harper looked at her. It reminded her of the first time she got called upon by her teacher to answer a question in primary school. The establish hadn’t gone quite as badly as that, but it clearly wasn’t a great result when the best thing she could say about it was that at least this time she didn’t pee herself.

Didn’t say much for her acting aspirations either. For what was the job Jim had set her, if not acting? For goodness’ sake, it was one of the fig leaves he had given her in order that they could both pretend this wasn’t a charity gig: that he needed someone who could act. He’d even provided a script. Unfortunately, Pete Harper took about half a second to penetrate the fourth wall, and nothing she had learned in college was able to rescue her.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Jim assured her, handing her a bunch of paper hankies. ‘It’s early days. Nobody just clicks into this first time.’

Poor Jim. He was so kind, so generous and so fooling nobody. He kept claiming he needed her, but it was obvious that if he genuinely did need an assistant, he’d be better with a personnel deficit than with Jasmine on board. She was the one who needed him: since her mum died, she’d had nobody else.

‘Delta Seven. Subject is walking still walking, approaching Cresswell Lane, and I am struggling to maintain line of sight. Do you have eyeball?’

‘Yes yes,’ she confirmed, having just turned the corner back on to Great George Street.

Following her mother’s death, Jasmine had spent months living in a state of numb subsistence, losing track of the hours, the days and even the weeks. She barely left the house and ceased to function according to normal rhythms, finding herself staring into darkness on the living-room settee far into the night and sound asleep on it throughout the day. She gave no thought to the future, unable to visualise herself doing anything other than crying, sleeping and staring into the unanswering blackness.

At times she could barely remember being the girl who had once

known what she wanted to do with all the life that was in front of her. Or rather, she could recall the memories, but they felt like they had belonged to someone else. She felt utterly disconnected from that person, as though she had died too and now Jasmine was this other being who only shared her past, not her path to the future. In this respect, she believed bereavement must be easier if you had a job, a career, a husband and kids, as all those clichés about life going on would apply. There would be a template for how to spend your days: commitments and obligations to supersede the desire to pull the covers back over your head and stay in bed for ever. You'd know what to do, even if you didn't much feel like doing it.

She didn't have a life yet. There was no saddle for her to get back into.

Jasmine had just started her final year at drama college when Mum got her shocking, unreal diagnosis. Pancreatic cancer: late-presenting, fast-spreading.

Jasmine never knew her father. He had died when she was just a baby, and her mum had never married, never even lived with anyone else. They only had each other, and suddenly they only had months left together.

Jasmine dropped out. She had to move back in with Mum in Edinburgh, had to be close, had to be home. She didn't think about her education or her ambitions. They became instantly irrelevant, abandoned as unnecessary baggage she could not afford to carry on this most arduous of journeys.

When she contemplated them again, after Mum was gone, it was like happening upon a box of toys that had meant a world of pleasure and possibility to her as a child, but held no appeal to an adult harshly schooled in the realities of the world. The same strangeness had assailed her when she re-entered her flat back in Glasgow, the trappings of the existence she had suddenly suspended all still right where she left them: the *Mary Celeste* two flights up on Victoria Road.

Very gradually, however, she had begun to accept that, despite her devastation, she was nonetheless a twenty-year-old woman who needed to construct some kind of life for herself. As well as the long-term future, there were the immediate practical considerations of earning a wage and paying the rent. Mum wasn't there any more to hold her hand and wipe her tears. Even if she had been, this was the point

when she had to make her own way in the world, and it struck her harshly that her previous choices had left her in a position whereby there were very few things she was cut out or qualified to do. Acting, therefore, quickly recovered its lustre, though she ceased thinking in terms of vague, dreamy ambitions and more in terms of a purposeful way to fill her days and score a pay cheque at the end of them.

Good job for her nobody else had the same genius idea.

‘Foxtrot Five confirms the eyeball. Subject is walking still walking along Cresswell Lane in no apparent hurry. Stopping to look in a shop window ahead.’

‘He’s probably looking out for me. Overtake him if you have to, then pause for some window-shopping yourself.’

‘Foxtrot Five. Yes yes.’

She halted and stared into the window of a craft and jewellery shop, her focus on the reflections in the glass rather than the goods beyond it. She was angled so that she could see the subject, but caught a glimpse of herself, one of those sideways snapshots that reveals all the more for its brevity and obliqueness. She was attired as smartly as Jim insisted, in a jacket and trousers like some proper, grown-up professional, but all she could see was a little girl dressing up as something she was not, for play. Short, slight, a little underfed of late, the clothes wearing her rather than the other way around. Her hair was swept back by an Alice band for better peripheral vision, but at a cost of more starkly exposing her face, the myriad sun-prompted freckles upon it making her look about thirteen. She was twenty. When she *was* thirteen, she thought she’d be looking back at a woman’s face, something more like her mum’s: not this eternal teenager who was going to get carded in pubs until the year 2020.

The subject started moving again, albeit at a dawdling pace, Jasmine about fifteen yards behind. Walking down the street alone, ostensibly talking to herself, she was grateful for the advent of Bluetooth and hands-free kits, wondering how her predecessors remained inconspicuous on a follow while updating their colleagues over the radio.

Foxtrot Five: that was the call sign Jim had given her. It was in reference to her birthday, February fifth, but it had taken on a different significance for Jasmine. It made her think of *Fox Force Five*, the cancelled TV pilot mentioned by Uma Thurman’s character Mia in *Pulp Fiction*. It had been aspiring actress Mia’s one and only role: the big break that came to nothing.

The reality of finding work had nagged at the back of her mind at college, as it did everybody, but it was always a worry for the future, something she couldn't afford to dwell upon, otherwise what was the point of training?

Dropping out of the course hadn't done much to help her chances. Nonetheless, failing to finish a drama degree wasn't like dropping out of medical school: if somebody liked her audition, they weren't going to ask to see any certificates. The problem was, by dropping out of college she had also dropped off the radar, losing touch and losing contacts. People had heard what happened – yes, poor girl – but they didn't just think she had quit her course: they seemed to regard her as having dropped out of existence, given up for good.

It was slow going to even get auditions. You had to be animated beyond the point of pushy in your networking in order to know where the openings might be. So far she had notched up four callbacks but no jobs.

The only glimmer of light was a director called Charlotte Queen and her company, Fire Curtain. Jasmine had got a callback from Charlotte after auditioning for Fire Curtain's touring production of *Top Girls*. She didn't get the part, but Charlotte said she might be right for Miranda in the production of *The Tempest* that they were planning for the Edinburgh Fringe in a year's time. Okay, it would probably be in a converted garage in Newington, but it was more true of acting than any other job that it was easier to get work when you were in work. If she got the part, then as well as a pay packet, it was four weeks of exposure, increasing the chance that someone might see her and think she'd be right for another role.

Charlotte Queen was already something of a legend in Scottish theatre. She had dropped out of drama school too, though in her case it wasn't personal tragedy that precipitated her exit, but impatience, as she told interviewers. She felt restricted, she claimed, and decided to start her own company at the age of twenty-two. She was, by all accounts, a force of nature, though some observers noted that it didn't hurt that her dad was Hamish Queen, London West End director and impresario: meaning she was as connected as she was rich. That said, Charlotte had easier paths open to her that she decided not to take. She had partly grown up at her family's Highland retreat, where she saw touring shows by the RSC playing in local community centres and sports halls. She reasoned that the local

punters weren't simply turning out because it was the RSC. To an extent they were, but only because the brand guaranteed certain production values. Charlotte believed there was an untapped provincial audience for live theatre, and after a shaky start she was vindicated, as *Fire Curtain* became a popular and critically esteemed touring outfit.

Jasmine knew it was a big deal to have made any kind of impression on Charlotte. She was reputed to be flaky, capricious and egotistical, but if she took to you, she would draw out the best of your abilities and make you look brilliant on stage. It was said she truly valued her actors, made them feel magnificent, but that their job was always to be remarkable planets in orbit around her sun; that she had an indisputable eye for recognising talents, but only insofar as envisioning how they would augment her own. Jasmine didn't care. Getting an audition for *Fire Curtain* had been a boost, getting a callback massive, and the possibility of a part in their Fringe show so tantalising that she couldn't allow herself to think about it past ten at night or she would never get to sleep.

However, it was only a maybe, and it was a maybe for *next* August. She had to get real about the here and now, which was where Uncle Jim had stepped in.

Jim was her mum's cousin, so not strictly speaking Jasmine's uncle, but that was what she had called him since toddlerhood. He and Mum had always been close, but not exactly in each other's lives all the time. Nobody was in Jim's life, in fact, largely down to him letting it become consumed by work. His police career had contributed greatly to the break-up of his marriage, and when he got maudlin after a few whiskies, he would confess to having failed his wife and in particular his three kids by always being busy at work when he should have been there for them. He was a grandfather now, five times over, and had vowed to make himself more available to help out looking after the young ones, but the demands of running a one-man business had him breaking his promises all over again.

It was therefore a double-edged attempt to do the right thing that had led him to employ Jasmine. He knew she needed a job and he deeply wanted to help out in his cousin Beth's absence. If he could train her up, he explained, then once she got the stabilisers off, it would free him up more often to see his family.

It was an honourable sentiment, Jasmine thought, and a far more

convincing way of selling the job to her than his claim that an out-of-work actress with no experience was just what his business was lacking.

'Delta Seven. Look, I've just had a very important call about another job. I'm no use on this one with the subject giving me that funny. Can I leave this in your capable hands?'

Oh God, please, no, no.

'Yes yes.'

She remembered the things she had told herself when Jim first took her on, barely a couple of months back. He had explained that this wasn't a Saturday job for pocket money, and required commitment. He knew she was hoping to find work in acting but assured her that once she was trained up, it would be a good fallback when she was 'resting'. He was smart that way: he wasn't asking her to choose, not offering a 'real' job to help her get over her silly ideas.

It would do to tide her over, she decided. It was money in her pocket, and it was just for now. It was better than bar work: it paid more, and it involved a kind of acting. Valuable experience as well, good for the CV. Yeah: all the things every would-be actor probably told themselves when they started the job they ended up doing for life.

She wondered whether this fear – that before she knew it she'd be thirty and still doing this job 'just for now' – was what was causing her to screw up. Subconsciously, did she want to fail so that Jim would take the choice out of her hands?

No, she wouldn't deliberately do anything to let Jim down. She just sucked, was all, which meant she was in an impossible situation: landed with a job she couldn't do but couldn't do without.

The subject stopped again. She didn't figure him for a window-shopper, particularly in a lane specialising largely in interior furnishings and decidedly girly knick-knacks, so there was a strong possibility that he was checking his six. The likelihood was that he was on the lookout for Jim, but with his suspicion piqued, she couldn't afford to be noticed. Without a back-up to take over the follow, the procedure was to walk past and stop to look in another window, waiting for him to overtake again. She kept her head down as she passed him, but in her need for reassurance that she wasn't being noticed, she stole a glance to see where he was looking – just as he turned to check back along the lane. Their eyes met. She kept walking, feeling her cheeks

burn and her stomach leaden with that familiar feeling of having blown it.

Jim had this sun-yellowed cartoon on the wall of his cluttered and poky little office in Arden on the south side. It showed a geeky-looking guy standing in his place as part of an orchestra. He was holding a cymbal in his right hand, and in a thought bubble he was saying to himself: 'This time I won't screw up, I won't screw up, I won't screw up.' It was only when you looked more closely that you noticed that in his left hand he was holding nothing at all. It was captioned: 'Roger screws up.'

That was how Jasmine felt every day on the job. It felt like the harder she tried, the more she found new ways to blunder. Even now, as she coached herself to stay focused, as she determined not to screw up, she feared that simply by doing so she was diverting her own attention from the fact that she was missing a cymbal.

She had to rationalise, though. Their eyes had met, but it wasn't strictly speaking a funny. She wasn't burned, but she was on a yellow card. She had been noticed, so he'd recognise her if he found her looking again, but right now she was just a girl who'd caught his eye, and he hers. He was kind of leery anyway: he probably got clocked eyeing girls every time he walked down a street.

She crossed the lane and looked in a window of her own, her pulse rising as she waited, hoping, to see him pass in the reflection, all the more desperate to get a result because Jim had been forced to leave it in her 'capable' hands.

They were running out of time and running out of chances on this particular case, and it wouldn't only be Jim she'd be letting down if she dropped the ball today.

'The subject's name is Robert Croft,' Jim had explained to her. 'He's a thirty-seven-year-old plasterer from Clarkston. The client is Hayden-Murray Solicitors on behalf of Mrs Dorothy Muldoon, a retired widow from Giffnock. In December last year, Mrs Muldoon runs into the back of Croft's Escort van at a roundabout in Pollokshaws. Minimal damage, she accepts it's her fault, expects to pay the excess on a wee bit of panel-beating and a skoosh of spray paint. Unfortunately the observant Mr Croft has noted that Mrs Muldoon has run into him in a Lexus, and the cogs have started to turn inside his grasping weehid.

'Couple of weeks later, she gets a notice saying she's being sued for

long-term loss of earnings because Mr Croft sustained an injury in the accident and can no longer wield his trowel. The letter is from a company called Scotiacclaim.'

'Is that the ones that have that tacky advert on the telly? The personal injury mob?'

'Aye. And this shower would give ambulance-chasers a bad name. They advertise on daytime TV partly because it's cheaper but mainly because their target market is shiftless bastards who believe something's owing to them despite sitting on their fat arses all day when other folk are busy at work. Soon as I heard that's who was representing him, it told me all I needed to know. Suffice to say, Hayden-Murray are sceptical as to the veracity of Mr Croft's claim, especially as they have learned he has successfully made a similar claim before. Unfortunately, that's not admissible in court, but it tells us plenty.'

'What about doctors? Doesn't he need a medical report?'

'Oh, dodgy lawyers often have pals who are dodgy doctors. They can always source a diagnosis favourable to their position. But even if Hayden-Murray are able to secure an independent examination, Croft will have been made aware – if he wasnae aware already – of how to cite some conveniently non-specific and non-testable symptoms.'

The court date was fast approaching, and so far they had nothing. They had tailed him twice before: once being the occasion Jasmine lost the subject in that cinema car park in Paisley. On the other, he had raised their hopes by going into a health club: some footage of him swimming or working the weights would be all they needed. It turned out he was seeing a physiotherapist, most likely as another witness who could testify to having treated his nebulous injury. The only plus was that up until now he didn't appear to be aware that he was under surveillance, though he was bound to have been informed by Scotiacclaim that it was a possibility. As it stood, there was still a chance, albeit slim, that they could catch him doing something he shouldn't be.

'It's Last Chance Saloon now,' Jim had confessed. 'With a very strong possibility that he's playing it canny and we won't get a thing.'

'Do you still get paid?'

'Aye, but it burns to see a guy like this get away with it. Plus, if you don't get results, the lawyers will say they understand, but the likelihood is you won't get hired again.'

Jasmine watched Croft's reflection pass across the window, this time

resisting the temptation to look at his face for assurance that he wasn't looking back. She turned her head slightly, enough to keep him in her peripheral vision until it was safe to commence walking again. She allowed him a longer lead than before, conscious of having had that almost-funny.

'Subject is turning left left left on to Cresswell Street.' She kept up the commentary even though Jim was off the follow. She was recording her progress on the bodycam, so it was partly for the benefit of the tape (or rather, memory card) and partly just for practice.

Jasmine felt anxiety seize her as she approached the end of the pedestrianised lane, in anticipation of what she might see – or more pertinently not see – when she turned on to Cresswell Street. It must be a documented phenomenon, she thought: the foot-follower's fear of the corner. It was so piercingly acute that in recent days she'd been experiencing it even when she wasn't on a follow, turns on busy streets becoming a Pavlovian trigger for a tightness in her chest.

When she turned this particular corner, the sight that met her truly was grounds for dismay. It wasn't that she'd lost the subject: Croft was visible twenty yards ahead, approaching the junction with Byres Road. It was what else she could see. Charlotte Queen was sitting at a table outside a deli-café on Cresswell Street, she and two friends enjoying the atypically summery weather by sipping their coffees al fresco, and she was looking Jasmine's way. Their eyes met: only fleetingly, and at a distance, but it was definitely reciprocal.

Croft was almost at Byres Road, a T-junction, and by some distance the busiest street in the West End. The lead she had given him was acceptable on back streets, but very risky on a bustling main drag. Making ground was strongly advisable; allowing him to gain any more seconds potentially calamitous. She had to hurry, but she couldn't do anything conspicuous like run.

She increased her walking pace and locked her gaze on Croft, acting as though she had barely registered the group outside the café. Charlotte had only glanced at her for a moment, so there was every chance that she didn't recognise her, or didn't remember her out of context.

She was five yards from the table. Brisk and purposeful, come on, focused and in a hurry, mind *obviously* elsewhere, *clearly* not ignoring the brilliant but flaky, capricious and egotistical . . .

'Jasmine? Jasmine Sharp?'

It felt like time stood still. Jasmine was suddenly presented, in one

precipitate moment, with making a decision that could lay down a path before her for the rest of her life.

She knew she could not stop to talk. Nor did she have time to explain, even with the utmost brevity, precisely *why* she couldn't stop to talk. A quick 'oh, hi' as she walked on by would also look unacceptably dismissive when she was being personally hailed by someone well used to having people in her thrall.

It was a stark, unavoidable choice between losing the subject, leaving Jim with nothing to give Hayden-Murray, and blanking – in front of her friends, no less – the one person who could yet offer Jasmine an acting break.

Jasmine looked deep into herself in that moment, asking not merely what she really wanted, but what she truly believed she could be.

She continued – walking still walking – saying nothing as she passed Charlotte's table, so close she could smell the fumes from their espressos, all the time keeping her eyes on the corner. There were tears forming in them by the time she had turned right on to Byres Road. It took her a moment through the throng and the mist of tears, but she could see Croft ahead, passing the bollards at Vinicombe Street. She picked up the pace.

'Making ground,' she reported, swallowing. 'Subject walking still walking towards Great Western Road.'

This job was real. It was paying a wage. She couldn't be a little girl any more. Mum was gone. Dreams were gone.

She kept walking.

Croft was approaching the junction of Byres and Great Western Roads, where Oran Mor looked across at the Botanics; Oran Mor, where, when she could afford it, she spent lunchtime enjoying A Play, A Pie and A Pint for a tenner, telling herself that one day she'd be the one on stage.

Croft glanced back before reaching the corner, just a casual look but potentially suspicious. Jasmine not only got her head down but checked her pace and stepped out of sight behind a gangling art student toting a big black portfolio. She was already envying him his aspirations, the fact that he still had them.

The traffic on Great Western Road bustled left and right across her path directly ahead. Another corner, another pang of anxiety about what was around it, the dread possibilities of which had just been given a whole new depth of scope back on Cresswell Street. Everything

was simpler now, though: she only had one thing left to lose. Around this corner, as long as she saw Croft, then she could live with that.

Unless, of course, it was his face she saw, coming straight towards her.

Shit.

He had performed a reciprocal, doubled back: always a sure sign that the subject suspects he's being tailed. He was looking right at her too; an unqualified funny, which she promptly escalated into direct eye contact: as in can't-look-away, rabbit-in-the-headlights eye contact.

She was burned liked a vampire on a sunlounger. At noon. In the desert.

Verbal challenge coming too, by the looks of it. Oh God, what if he got violent? Jim was miles away by now.

As he opened his mouth to speak, Jasmine got in ahead of him.

'You're a plasterer, aren't you?' she blurted in her panic: the only thing she could think to say.

It set him on the back foot for a moment, but only in a manner sufficient to prompt the obvious question.

'How do *you* know?' he demanded.

Jesus, why not tell him it's because she's working for a private investigator hired by Dorothy Muldoon's lawyers: she'd already given him everything else. How *would* she know?

Then inspiration struck.

'You did my auntie's kitchen. Don't know if you remember? It was on the south side, a wee semi. Used to be Artex on the ceiling and you smoothed it away.'

His brow wrinkled in concentration, searching his memory as she sold him a tale from her own. She didn't leave him to search long.

'I'm not stalking you or anything,' she added with a nervous laugh. 'It's just, when I saw you back there, it took me a minute to place you and then you were away. The thing is, I've moved into this flat with my boyfriend, up in Hyndland, and there was this damp problem, but thank God that's all sorted, fingers crossed.'

Suspicion was replaced on his face by confusion as she babbled away.

'Anyway, the living room's a state, so's the bedroom, they both need a whole new . . . I don't know what you call it.'

'A skim,' he prompted.

'Yeah. A new skim. But we just can't *get* anybody. They say they'll

do it and then they don't turn up. I mean, they're quoting like a thousand pounds because it's two big rooms, high ceilings, and my boyfriend's happy to pay it just to get it done, but they still end up leaving you hanging. When I realised who you were back there, I just wondered if it was worth asking whether maybe you could do it? It would be cash in hand. Michael withdrew it to pay this other guy who let us down.'

Croft was already nodding. She saw his eyes flash when she mentioned the price quoted, and if there was any question of him squirming on the hook, it evaporated with the words 'cash in hand'.

'Aye, I could manage that.'

'Could you do it for the same money?'

'Sure, aye. Sounds fair enough. Unless it's like a mansion or something.'

'I wish. But see, the other thing is when. After all this time, as you can imagine, we're just sick looking at it, so the sooner the better. I don't suppose you could manage next week?'

He glanced away a moment, calculating. He wasn't much of an actor.

'I'd have to move something, but I could manage next Monday.'

'Oh, thank you, so much,' she gushed, with not entirely fake sincerity. 'You've really bailed me out of a hole.'

They traded mobile numbers and she gave him the address. What she had from the bodycam was probably plenty, but if that wasn't enough, it would definitely sink him to turn up with all his kit next Monday at Jim's flat in Hyndland.

As she watched him walk away, continuing as he had originally intended along Great Western Road, she felt this almighty endorphin rush, which combined with everything else that had flooded her system over the past five minutes made her whole body thrum. Suddenly, everything seemed possible. She could do this job. Not only that, she could act: she could play a part under pressure, she could improvise, anything.

She found herself hurrying back along Byres Road. She would join Charlotte and her pals at their table and explain. Charlotte would lap it up too: it was an amazing – and true – story, one that showed what a colourful character Jasmine was, someone with background and depth, someone who was acting on a razor's edge like none of them had ever experienced.

She broke into a jog, then almost a sprint, slaloming pedestrians, giggling to herself as she turned the corner on to Cresswell Street.

The table was empty. Charlotte and her friends had gone.

Of course.

Jasmine screws up.