

Children of the Revolution

Also by Peter Robinson

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INSPECTOR BANKS NOVELS

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PETER ROBINSON

Children of the Revolution


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For Sheila



‘The past lies like a nightmare upon the present.’

Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*



I

As Detective Chief Inspector Alan Banks walked along the disused railway track, he couldn't help but imagine two young lovers kissing on the footbridge ahead, shrouded in smoke from a steam engine. All very *Brief Encounter*. But the Age of Steam was long gone, and it wasn't love he was walking towards; it was a suspicious death.

Banks made his way towards the group of white-suited crime scene investigators standing outside a tent, lit from inside, just beyond the bridge. Other CSIs were working on the bridge itself; its rusted metal sides were so high that Banks could see only their heads and shoulders.

The crime scene lay half a mile south of the village of Coverton, which stood at the very limits of the North Yorkshire county line, at the tip of the Yorkshire Dales National Park across the A66 from Barnard Castle. The only way to get to the body, Banks had been told over the phone, was to walk along the old railway tracks or through the woods that ran parallel to them about fifty yards to the east.

The railway ran dead straight, a narrow, shallow, U-shaped valley cut into the landscape. The embankments were steep and grassy on both sides, and while there were plenty of weeds growing in the unkempt grass, no one had dumped prams, bicycle frames or refrigerators there, as people did in the more urban areas. The rails and sleepers had been taken up long ago, and the track had been paved over, though many of the flagstones were broken or uneven, and hardy

weeds insinuated their way through the cracks. It seemed a long half mile to Banks, especially with the rain and wind whipping at him down the man-made valley. The only human dwelling Banks saw on his journey stood to his right, just before he got to the bridge: a small square cottage at the top of the embankment.

When Banks got to the outer cordon, he showed his warrant card to the officer on duty, who lifted the tape for him and handed him a hooded overall and shoe covers. Awkwardly, he took off his raincoat and put on the protective gear over his clothes. This area was where the CSIs and other officers not required at the immediate scene waited until they were needed. Only essential personnel were given access through the inner cordon to inside the tent itself, and as few people as possible were allowed there at a time.

Already, the CSIs were busy fixing up extra lights as the early November morning was overcast and dull. Banks poked his head inside the canvas flap and saw the Crime Scene Manager, Stefan Nowak, as immaculate as ever, and dry, along with Dr Burns, the police surgeon, and Detective Sergeant Winsome Jackman, all in their white coveralls. Peter Darby, the crime-scene photographer, crouched by the body taking photographs with his beat-up old Pentax, his state-of-the-art handycam in its waterproof case hanging over his shoulder. All except Darby turned to greet Banks. Suddenly, the tent seemed crowded, and its humid interior smelled like a wet dog.

Banks saw the crumpled body of an emaciated old man wearing a grey anorak and blue jeans lying on his back. His neck lay at an impossible angle, one arm was bent in the opposite way to which it should have been, and a sharp knife of bone protruded through the denim on his inner right thigh. His clothes were wet with rain. Banks wondered how long he had been there.

‘OK,’ Banks said to Winsome. ‘What happened? Run me through it.’

‘Dog walker found the body,’ Winsome said, without referring to her notebook. ‘Or rather, her dog did. Eight thirty-seven, to be precise.’

Banks checked his watch. It was five past ten. ‘That’s very precise.’

‘She’s a retired schoolteacher. Probably used to checking her watch every now and then to see when the lesson’s due to end.’

Banks laughed. ‘I never realised how the teachers might have hated classes as much as we did. I used to believe they existed just to bore and terrorise us.’

‘Children often take a very self-centred view of the world.’

‘Her name’s Margery Halton, sir,’ came a voice from just beyond the tent’s entrance flap. ‘Sorry for interrupting, but I’m PC Barry Kirwan, Coverton beat manager. I was first officer on the scene. Margery knows me. She came straight to my house, and I followed her up here and saw who it was, then I called it in.’

Banks walked back and ducked under the flap into the open. ‘Where is she now?’

‘One of the community support officers took her home, sir. Bit of a state.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Banks. ‘Who was he?’

‘Name’s Gavin Miller, sir.’

‘Local, then?’

PC Kirwan pointed. ‘Lived in that old signalman’s cottage just up there, other side of the bridge. You must have noticed it on your way here.’

Bank turned and looked at the squat cottage he had just passed. Bijou would be a kind description. ‘What do you know about him? What did he do for a living?’

‘Don’t know much about him at all, sir. Not much of a

mixer. Kept himself to himself. Bit of an odd duck, or so the locals thought. Reclusive. Didn't get out much. I don't know how he made his living.'

'Next of kin?'

'No idea, sir. I mean, he lived alone. I suppose there might be someone . . .'

'How long had he been living there?'

'He bought the place three or four years ago. It had been up for sale for quite a while. The market was very sluggish, and I think he got a good price. As you'll see, though, it's not very big.'

Banks glanced at the embankment and the paved track. 'So what's the story of this place, PC Kirwan? What's the lie of the land? How frequently is it used? What's access like?'

'We used to have a branch line here until Dr Beeching closed it in the early sixties. That was before my time, of course. Anyway, since then, it's just fallen into . . . well, you can see for yourself. We get a few walkers in season, when the weather's good – we're not too far from the Coast-to-Coast – and maybe a few railway buffs, but not so many in these sort of weather conditions. It's a pretty secluded spot, as you can see, and it doesn't really lead anywhere.' He pointed beyond the tent. 'Keep going south and you'll end up at a collapsed viaduct about a mile or so further on. Lark Woods are to the east, above the embankment, and there's a woodland footpath that winds through the woods by the river to the back of the village car park. You can't get a car within half a mile of here unless you really know the area. There are unsurfaced tracks and lanes, access to the signalman's cottage, for example, but they're not generally known, and none of them lead directly to or from Coverton, or anywhere else for that matter.'

'So he could have been lying there undiscovered for a while?'

'I suppose so, sir. But not for days, I wouldn't say.'

‘All night, though?’

‘Easily.’

Banks thanked PC Kirwan, went back into the tent and turned to Winsome. ‘What’s the story here?’

‘PC Kirwan phoned in to report a suspicious death and suggested we get some cover out here quickly, just in case there was any evidence left that needed preserving. When I got to the scene, it was pretty obvious that our man hadn’t just dropped dead from a heart attack while he was out jogging, so . . . well, guy, you can see for yourself.’

Peter Darby stood up. ‘Done for now,’ he said, and left the tent.

Banks turned to Dr Burns. ‘Any idea what we’re dealing with, Doc?’

Burns pointed beyond the open tent flap to the bridge. ‘It would seem from his injuries, and the position of the body, that he fell off the bridge. I don’t think he’s been moved, but I haven’t had a chance to examine him fully for post-mortem lividity yet. Dr Glendenning will be able to give you a more accurate answer later, when he performs the post-mortem. As you can see, the sides of the bridge are quite steep, most likely for the benefit of the farm animals that cross, or used to cross, so an accidental fall is extremely doubtful. It’s about a thirty-foot drop, quite enough to cause the kind of injuries his body has sustained on the paved track. Broke his neck and several other bones. He’d lost a lot of blood from a head wound, too. And from the leg fracture, of course.’

‘All caused by the fall?’

Dr Burns paused. ‘Possibly. Most.’

‘Ah-ha,’ said Banks. ‘Not committing yourself?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Is there any reason to suppose that someone pushed him?’ Banks asked. ‘Maybe hit him over the head first? Or are you leaning towards suicide?’

‘You mean, in which case why did I bring you all the way out here on such a miserable Monday morning?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Well, there’s nothing definite yet,’ Burns admitted. ‘All I’m saying is that I doubt it was an accident. If he didn’t jump, then someone had to have thrown him over the edge.’

‘Would it be a far enough drop for him, or someone else, to be sure that it would kill him?’

‘No,’ said Burns. ‘He could have got off lucky and simply broken a few minor bones. Falls are difficult to predict. We’ve all heard of someone who survived a long drop. But he landed in a very unfortunate manner. As I said, it was the broken neck and the fractured thigh that did for him. The femur severed the femoral artery. Very nasty. He bled out. It would have been quick, and in all likelihood, with the broken neck, he would have been unconscious, maybe even paralysed, by then. He probably wouldn’t have felt any pain, just a sort of growing numbness.’

Banks raised his voice so that PC Kirwan outside the tent could hear. ‘Is there any way to get down from the bridge to the tracks without jumping?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Kirwan. ‘It’s a bit steep, but you can scramble down the embankment on either side. In this weather you’d probably end up sliding most of the way on your arse, sir. And there’s a slightly better path to the cottage, a few steps cut into the earth.’

‘So, if it was deliberate, our killer probably knew that he could get down and finish off his victim if the fall didn’t do it for him? Even if he had to slide down on his arse?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Kirwan.

‘Any sign of a suicide note?’ Banks asked the doctor.

‘Nothing.’

‘Anyone checked out the cottage?’

‘Not yet, sir,’ said Winsome. ‘We were waiting for you.’

Banks glanced towards Nowak. 'What do you make of it, Stefan?'

'I don't know,' Nowak said in his impeccable and slightly pedantic English, the trace of a Polish accent discernible only now and then in certain cadences. 'This weather makes it rather difficult for us. We're working on it, but we've found no fingerprints or footprints on the bridge so far, as one might expect if he'd hauled himself over the side and jumped, but the rain could easily have washed them away. It was quite heavy at times overnight. But the sides are rusted metal, while the base is wooden planks, so in any case we'd be lucky to find anything after a night's rain.'

'How much do you reckon he weighs?' Banks asked.

'About eight stones at a guess,' Burns answered.

Banks thought for a moment, then asked Nowak, 'Any chance of collecting much trace evidence from the scene?'

'There's always a chance,' Nowak answered, 'even in this weather. But I'd say no to finger- or footprints, unless someone came by the woodland path. The trees might offer some protection from the rain there.'

'Tyre tracks?'

'Same. The rain would soften the ground, and some impression might remain, but it's been coming down pretty heavily all night, and the odds are that it will probably have washed away anything laid down from before. We'll be doing our best, though.'

'I don't doubt it. Blood? DNA?'

'Possibly. Diluted, difficult, but perhaps not washed away entirely.'

'I see you've already bagged his hands,' Banks said to the doctor. 'Anything there? Skin under a nail, perhaps?'

'Hard to say from a cursory glance,' said Dr Burns. 'He was a nail biter.'

Banks stood for a moment taking it all in, listening to the thrumming of rain on the canvas. The tent was leaking. A few

drops of water trickled down the back of his neck. He should have put his hood up, he realised too late.

The man *could* have jumped, of course. Murders were rare in this isolated part of the county. On the other hand, if he had been intent on suicide, why choose a method that, according to Dr Burns, could in no way guarantee success, and might very well involve a great deal of pain, even paralysis?

‘Any idea how long he’s been lying here?’ Banks asked. ‘How long he’s been dead?’

‘It was a chilly night,’ said Dr Burns, ‘and that would have slowed down the processes of rigor mortis and post-mortem decay in general. But from what I can see, the paving stones are quite dry under the body. And there are no obvious signs of animal activity. I’d estimate overnight, somewhere around twelve hours, give or take.’

‘When did it start raining here?’

‘Yesterday? About midnight, sir,’ said PC Kirwan from outside.

‘Let’s say for the sake of argument that he died between ten and midnight last night,’ Banks said. ‘If he didn’t come here to kill himself, what was he doing here on a lonely footbridge not so far from his front door with someone who wanted to kill him?’

‘Maybe he didn’t know the person wanted to kill him, sir,’ Winsome said. ‘They could have just had a disagreement and started fighting spontaneously. Or maybe he got waylaid. He had his anorak on. He was prepared for going out.’

‘Good point. But, the bridge is *south* of his cottage. Not far, admittedly, but why would he walk even just a few yards south to the bridge if he was going to the village? PC Kirwan said there was a definite path from the cottage down the embankment. That would obviously have been the route he’d use, unless he fancied a walk through the woods. And where might he have been going if he hadn’t been heading for Coverton?’

Banks turned to PC Kirwan. 'You said there's nothing further south except a ruined viaduct. Any ideas?'

'No, sir,' said Kirwan. 'It doesn't make sense. He should have no need to walk south and cross the bridge just to go north. And there's nothing but miles of open country. A few farms, of course.'

'What was he carrying in his pockets?' Banks asked.

'I was wondering when you'd get around to asking that,' Winsome answered. She picked up a plastic evidence bag from the bin beside her. 'Mostly, just the usual. It's all nicely bagged, sealed and signed. Wallet containing one credit card and driving licence, expired, in the name of Gavin Miller, along with one five-pound note and some receipts from the Spar grocery in Coverton and Bargain Booze in Eastvale. Mobile phone, keys, a small penknife, loose change, a packet of Silk Cut and a cheap butane lighter. Then there's this.' With a slight touch of theatricality, she pulled out a bulky envelope and showed its contents to Banks. From what he could see, it was a stack of fifty-pound notes, the new ones, with Boulton and Watt on the back. 'Cash,' Winsome went on. 'There's five thousand pounds here. I counted it. Not something you'd need for a walk in the woods, I'd say. And that's why we dragged you out here on a miserable Monday morning, sir.'

Banks whistled. 'Indeed. I suppose we can rule out a mugging, then?'

There was no garage attached to Gavin Miller's cottage, though there was a paved space beside it that was the right size and shape for a small car. But there was no car. Banks made a mental note to check whether Miller owned one. The bridge was too narrow for even the slimmest of sports cars to pass over, but the rough laneway widened in front of the cottage, and Banks assumed it probably joined up eventually with one of the local unfenced roads, as PC Kirwan had

suggested. It was the closest thing to a road out of there, at any rate. Anyone who used it to get to Gavin Miller's house would probably have had to know of its existence in advance, though, which would indicate that if it had been used, there was a chance the assailant had known Miller and had visited him there before. But such speculation was for the future, when the CSIs had given Banks more to work on, and when he knew for certain, one way or the other, whether Miller had committed suicide or whether another person was involved. At a quick glance, Banks could see no signs of a vehicle having travelled the track recently.

The postage-stamp garden had been given over to the growing of herbs. Banks had been cultivating a similar patch himself over the summer, and he recognised thyme, dill, parsley, rosemary and chives. The key turned easily in the lock, and it was a relief to get inside out of the rain. Banks and Winsome were still wearing their protective suits and gloves so they could make a quick search of Gavin Miller's house without contaminating the scene before the CSIs came to turn the place over.

Banks fumbled for the light switch and found it to the right of the door. A shaded bulb in a ceiling fixture illuminated a small living room, with just enough space for a couple of well-worn maroon armchairs, a small bookcase, a fireplace complete with tiled hearth and mantelpiece, and a desk by the window, which looked out through grubby, moth-eaten lace curtains over the footpath and the fields to the south, with the railway embankment, woods and bridge just visible to the left. The cream wall-to-wall carpet was marked by two large wine or coffee stains in the shape of Australia and Africa, the wallpaper was peeling in places where it reached the ceiling, and a few abstract prints in cheap frames hung on the rose-patterned walls. No family photographs stood on the mantel or on the desk. The chilly room smelled of stale smoke, as if it

hadn't been aired or vacuumed in a while, and the layer of dust on the mantelpiece and desk bore this out. Banks remembered that Miller had a packet of Silk Cut in his pocket.

The desk had clearly been used recently, as the dust had been disturbed, and the computer that sat there wasn't dusty at all. The power light was on, screensaver showing a swirling pattern of psychedelic designs, and a squat black Wi-Fi hub stood on the window ledge, its blue lights steady. Beside it sat a green tin ashtray advertising John Smith's Bitter, in which were a number of stubbed-out cigarettes, the ends of the filters stained brown. Banks eyed the computer greedily. It might contain information that would help him find out what happened to Gavin Miller, but he knew better than to touch anything. When you find a computer at any scene connected with a possible crime, you don't check the user's browsing habits; you leave it for the experts.

Banks and Winsome searched through the desk drawers and found stationery, mini-USB drives, old backup CDs, chargers and various connecting wires. In one of the side drawers Banks found an envelope full of old photos: a pop festival of some kind, the stage way off in the distance; a picket-line scuffle, police in riot gear; a student demo; a city Banks didn't recognise, tall buildings glinting in the sun; a group of people standing outside a modern building; more groups at restaurants and on beaches; mountains and a sheltered bay; a deep blue lake reflecting the fir trees on the hills that surrounded it, snow-capped mountains in the background. That was it: some black and white, some colour, no portraits, no dates, no names, no indication whether Miller had taken them.

The books were mostly paperback British and European literary classics, from *Robinson Crusoe* to *L'Étranger*. There was also a shelf of literary criticism and general non-fiction: Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Kierkegaard's *The Sickness*

Unto Death, F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition*. Heavy reading, Banks thought.

A door with a broken handle led into the kitchen, beyond which was a tiny downstairs toilet and washbasin. The kitchen was surprisingly tidy, dishes washed and standing in the rack beside the sink, all surfaces wiped clean. There wasn't much food in the fridge except for some wilted broccoli and leftover chicken tikka masala in a plastic container. Still, Banks wasn't one to speak. Anyone who took the trouble to look would find the same in his fridge as often as not, except he didn't bother with the plastic container. The green box by the door was full of empty wine bottles – cheap wine, Banks noticed – mixed in with a few whisky bottles, also cheap brands often on sale at Bargain Booze. It looked as if Miller preferred to stop in to do his drinking. If he was as reclusive as PC Kirwan had suggested, he probably did it alone.

Up a flight of narrow, uncarpeted stairs were two bedrooms and a bathroom, complete with a small walk-in shower. A cursory inspection of the bathroom cabinet showed only the usual: razor, shaving cream, Elastoplast, and a selection of over-the-counter medications such as paracetamol, Alka Seltzer and acid reducers. There were also two prescription medications: an old bottle of heavy-duty painkillers, still half full, and a more recent one of Ativan, sublingual. Banks could see no signs of a toothbrush, toothpaste or deodorant. One bedroom was large enough to hold a double bed, wardrobe and dresser, and it was clearly where Miller had slept. The bed was unmade, strewn with discarded underwear, socks and shirts. An MP3 player lay on the bedside table next to a glass of water, in which a dead fly floated, and a digital clock radio. Banks turned on the radio. It was tuned to Radio Two.

Winsome shivered. 'A bit parky in here, isn't it?'

'The radiator's not turned on,' said Banks. 'He must have been counting his pennies.'

‘With five grand in his pocket?’

Banks shrugged.

The second bedroom seemed to be Miller’s den, similar in a way to Banks’s entertainment room at Newhope Cottage. There was a cheap laptop computer and the obligatory flat-screen TV hooked up to a fine surround-sound system, which was also connected to a turntable. Most of the equipment was fairly old, Banks noticed, at least three or four years, which is old for electronics. Gavin Miller’s music collection began and ended with the sixties and very early seventies, and most of it was on vinyl. There was plenty of Soft Machine, Pink Floyd and Jimi Hendrix, and a lot of Grateful Dead, some of the LPs still plastic-wrapped.

‘A Dead Head,’ Banks muttered.

‘Pardon?’ said Winsome.

Banks pointed to the rows of albums, CDs, DVDs and the blow-ups of the *American Beauty* and *Live Dead* album covers on the wall. ‘It’s what they call people who are fanatical about the Grateful Dead. It used to refer to people who followed the band around from gig to gig. How old was Miller? Did you check?’

‘Fifty-nine,’ Winsome said.

‘Jesus Christ!’ said Banks, shocked that Miller had turned out to be close to his own age. ‘He looked to be in his seventies.’

‘That’s what a hard life will do to you, sir.’

Banks gazed at her curiously, wondering if that was one of her cryptic warnings. ‘He’s about the right age, then,’ he said finally. ‘For the Grateful Dead and all that.’

‘Are you one, too, sir? A Dead Head?’

Banks laughed. ‘Me? No. I just like to listen to them sometimes. And don’t be cheeky. I’m not fifty-nine, either. It certainly doesn’t seem as if anyone has broken in here, does it? There weren’t any damage to the door, and the electronic

stuff is all intact. It's old, mind you, but it might fetch a few quid at a car boot sale. Some of these records are probably worth a bob or two to a collector.'

'How many burglars have you met who'd know a valuable LP from a hole in the ground?' said Winsome.

'Maybe they get a better class of burglar around Coverton?'

Winsome gave him a look. 'More likely, if anyone did break in, they were after something specific and not interested in a stack of old vinyl and posters. And they were clever enough to enter and leave the place as it was.'

Banks glanced at the DVDs and saw that Miller was a serious film buff. His shelves housed an extensive collection of foreign art-house films from such directors as Tarkovsky, Almodóvar, Fellini, Kurosawa, Truffaut, Ozu and Godard, along with a stack of *Sight & Sound* magazines, right up to the previous month's issue.

Winsome gestured towards the film collection. 'You know any of these, sir? You've watched them?'

'I've watched some of them, yes,' said Banks. 'I'm quite partial to a bit of Mizoguchi and Chabrol every now and then. Can't say I know them all, though.'

'But does any of it mean anything?' Winsome asked. 'I mean, as far as the investigation is concerned?'

'The films? I don't know,' said Banks. 'But I doubt it very much. They just happen to be the sort of thing that Gavin Miller liked, along with the books. He was clearly a bit of an artsy type. I suppose they could just as easily have been Rogers and Hammerstein musicals or Disney cartoons. I'm just trying to get a feel for him, really, Winsome, work out what sort of bloke he was, whether he was the type to commit suicide – if there is a type – where he might have got five thousand quid, what he might have been intending to do with it. Now the sixties vinyl, that might mean something. There could be a drug connection. The Grateful Dead were

involved in the early acid tests, and their followers are well known for taking psychedelics. LSD especially.'

'Maybe it was all about drugs, then,' Winsome said. 'The money in his pocket and all. I mean, there's no suicide note, not one that we've found yet anyway.'

'Not every suicide leaves a note. And if he was doing a drug deal, and if someone robbed him of his stash, why didn't the killer go down the embankment to the track and take back his money? Five grand's a fair whack of cash to just leave behind. I can't imagine any dealer, or buyer, doing that.'

'Dunno, sir. Maybe he thought he heard someone coming and scarpered? Or he saw that Miller was dead and didn't want to risk leaving any more forensic evidence?'

'Possible. Though PC Kirwan says the track is hardly ever used, especially at this time of year, and at night. Anyway, it's just an angle to consider.'

Banks poked through some of the drawers and found, behind a pile of cassette tapes, an old Golden Virginia tobacco tin. When he opened it, he saw a packet of red Rizla cigarette papers, some silver paper wrapped around about a quarter of an ounce of a sandy coloured, crumbly substance, which smelled suspiciously like hash. Also, in a plastic bag, were two small blue tablets, unmarked.

'It looks as if we've found the drugs,' Winsome said.

'OK,' Banks said, handing her the tin. 'I'm heading back to the station. Madame Gervaise will want an update. You stick with Stefan and his mob while they do a proper search of this place. Give them this to get analysed and let them know that drugs may be on the agenda. There may be more hidden away. They'll know the usual places to search. I'll set Gerry Master-son on finding out all she can about Mr Gavin Miller. I want his life story. Cradle to grave.'

* * *

‘So let me get this straight,’ Area Commander Catherine Gervaise said. ‘You don’t know whether Gavin Miller was a suicide, a perpetrator who ended up being a victim, or the intended victim from the start?’

‘No,’ Banks admitted. ‘How could we? We need to know a lot more about him, his background, what made him tick, any reasons he might have had for wanting to end it all. DC Masterson’s working on it now.’

‘But you don’t even know whether he was buying or selling drugs, whether any transaction had been carried out or not?’

‘That’s right. All we know is that he’s dead under suspicious circumstances, there were drugs in his house, and he had five thousand pounds in his pocket.’

‘And you don’t know whether he was deliberately killed or died as the result of a fight? Whether it was murder or manslaughter, in fact.’

‘The side of the bridge was too high for him to fall over without being lifted or jumping.’

‘Well, that’s something, I suppose. Let’s keep the five grand out of the media for the time being, if we can. I’ll take a press conference at the end of the day, if anybody’s interested, that is.’

‘Even with the possibility of suicide, there’s bound to be a few vultures already, surely? Anyway, we’ll keep the money under wraps. It shouldn’t be a problem.’ Banks scratched his temple. ‘I’d be the first to admit that we need a lot more to go on before we can even get started, but if drugs are involved, I’m sure it’ll be quickly and easily settled once we get a list of his mobile calls and the contents of his computers.’

‘I hope so. A quick result would go down nicely in these penny-pinching days. How’s DI Cabbot doing?’

‘Annie? She’s fine. She’s wrapping up another case. I’ll bring her in if it turns out I need her on this.’

But Banks didn’t think Annie was fine. She had changed since she had been shot over a year ago, become more

reckless, more secretive, harder, even. She was more difficult to talk to, and their conversations ended up as arguments, or at least minor quarrels, far more often than was healthy. He was worried about her, but she wouldn't let him close.

'DC Masterson working out all right?'

DC Geraldine Masterson was their latest detective constable, who had just come out of her probationary period. 'Gerry? Yes. She's doing well. She could do with a bit more confidence, but that often comes with experience. She's got a damn useful set of skills, but I don't think we let her out often enough to build her confidence. No problems to report, though.'

'Good.'

Enjoying the coffee from Gervaise's espresso machine, Banks figured that the penny-pinching hadn't yet reached as high as the chief super's budget for little luxuries. He felt a subtle shift of gear during one of Gervaise's lengthy pauses.

'Have you ever thought about retirement at all, Alan?' she asked after a few beats had passed.

Banks was taken aback. 'Retirement? Surely I've got a couple of years left yet, haven't I?'

'Yes, yes. Of course you have. But the way things are going, with budget cuts and all, who knows? It's something that's being encouraged in a lot of cases.'

'Including me?'

'Not specifically, no. Not yet. But I'm just letting you know that it's an option. You've done your thirty. Plus. You'd have a decent pension.'

'It's not a matter of pensions,' said Banks. 'You know that. What would I do?'

Gervaise smiled. 'Oh, I'm sure you'd find something, Alan. Bit of gardening, perhaps? Maybe take up a musical instrument? You like music, don't you? Learn to play the piano. Some charity work, helping out in a care home or a hospital,

feeding the poor in a church basement, something like that? Get a life?’

Banks shifted in his chair. ‘Am I missing something? You’re starting to make me nervous. Is this a roundabout way of telling me something I don’t want to hear?’

Gervaise’s smile was inscrutable. ‘Is that what you think? Does the subject of retirement make you uncomfortable, Alan?’

‘As a matter of fact, it does. It makes me cringe.’

Gervaise paused again. ‘More coffee?’

‘No, thanks. I’m jittery enough as it is. All this talk about retirement.’

‘That’s just one option. Have you ever thought about promotion?’

‘You must be joking? Me? Surely I’m unpromotable?’

‘You’d be surprised. You’ve made a few mistakes over the years, a few enemies, true enough, though many of them have moved on. You’ve got a lot of influential and powerful people on your side, too.’

‘Even since that business with MI5?’

‘Even since then. When did we ever dance to MI5’s tune?’

‘I didn’t exactly notice the cavalry hurrying around the bend to my rescue when they had me over a barrel.’

‘Well, you have only yourself to blame for that. You didn’t tell anyone what you were up to, did you? That’s your greatest failing. But despite your maverick tendencies, you’ve still got a lot of support where it counts.’

‘What exactly *are* you trying to say?’

‘It’s simple, really.’ Gervaise spread her hands in a gesture of openness. ‘Nature abhors a vacuum. Since I was made chief superintendent, there’s been a vacuum. It needs to be filled. Homicide and Major Crimes really needs a detective superintendent to run it. I can’t think of a better person than you for the job.’ Gervaise had recently been promoted, and

had also taken on the role of area commander for the Eastvale Local Policing Area.

‘*Detective superintendent!* Hang on. Wait a minute. You flatter me, but—’

‘It’s not flattery. Think about it, Alan. That’s all I ask. Yes, there’ll be more paperwork, more responsibility, more meetings, more crime stats and budgets to fret over, more of the sort of stuff you hate. And you’re going to have to tread a bit more carefully, avoid stepping on too many toes. But on the other hand, there’ll be more money and more holidays, and nobody’s going to stop you working the way you do, even if it means getting your hands dirty now and then. This wouldn’t be a move designed to stop you from doing your job the way you do it best. Some very high-up people have spent a lot of time discussing this.’

‘I thought my ears were burning a lot lately. You’re saying I would still be able to handle cases as I see fit?’

‘Within reason, same as always. If you mean can you get out there and work in the field, then the answer’s “yes”. It’ll just mean more unpaid overtime catching up with budgeting and reports and the rest of the paperwork.’

Banks thought for a moment. He had never been greedy, but more money meant more CDs and DVDs, maybe even a better sound system, and a good turntable like Miller’s to play the old vinyl he had recently brought up from his parents’ house in Peterborough. More money meant getting central heating installed in the cottage, maybe even a lick of paint here and there. More holidays would mean the occasional bargain weekend in Paris, Rome or Barcelona. But he knew better than to get carried away with himself. Nothing came without a price tag. He had a vision of himself so consumed by paperwork and budget meetings that he simply had no time left to get out and do the job he was best at.

‘What do you think?’ Gervaise asked.

'I honestly don't know what to say.'

Gervaise stood up and leaned forward, resting her palms flat on the desk. 'You don't have to make up your mind right at this very moment. Give it a few days. Remember, though, that as a superintendent, you wouldn't have to retire until sixty-five.'

'I'll think about it, I promise,' said Banks.

'Good man,' beamed Gervaise. 'I knew you would. Let's give it until this Miller case is settled and take it from there, shall we? By then, with any luck, you'll have yet another feather in your cap. If you keep your nose clean, that is.'

Banks put his espresso cup back in its saucer and stood up to leave. 'Whatever you say, ma'am.'

As usual these days, it was dark by late afternoon. As there were no other developments, and Winsome and the CSIs were still at the scene, Banks took the file Gerry Masterson had prepared on Gavin Miller home with him shortly before six o'clock and picked up some fish and chips from Helmthorpe High Street on his way. He hung up his raincoat on the rack by the door and carried his briefcase and dinner down the hall to the kitchen, where he made a pot of tea and sat down to eat and watch the evening news on the TV above the breakfast nook. It was the usual depressing mix of weather, politics and financial doom.

After he had put the dishes in the dishwasher – in a few days he would have enough to make it worthwhile running the damn thing – he poured himself a glass of Layers, an Aussie red blend he had come to enjoy lately, then he went into the entertainment room to select the music.

As he searched through his collection, he found himself drawn to the Grateful Dead. He hadn't played any of their CDs in a long time. He had listened to the Dead a lot more when he was younger, and had even seen them live once at the

Empire Pool, Wembley, in 1972. He remembered being impressed by Jerry Garcia's guitar playing. More recently, he had been enjoying Norma Waterson's version of 'Black Muddy River'. No doubt their music would make an appropriate soundtrack for his reading. He didn't have much to choose from, as it turned out, so he picked *American Beauty*.

Banks liked the sound of rain on the conservatory roof, so he decided he would sit out there to read over Gerry Masterson's preliminary notes on Gavin Miller. She had been most embarrassed and apologetic that she had so little to show him when he had dropped by the squad room to see her. The whole business was going far too slowly, she said, and the notes she had were very sketchy and rough. Usually, she would have much more information by now. Banks told her not to worry and to stick at it.

He took his wine and briefcase through and settled back in his favourite wicker chair. With the reading light on, he couldn't see a thing in the darkness beyond the windows except his own reflection and that of the spines of the books on the shelves behind him. The rain was softer now, a gentle hiss rather than a heavy drumming. He remembered reading, or seeing in a film somewhere, that W.C. Fields couldn't sleep unless it was raining, and that he lay dying for some time, until the rain started. Then he died. Banks thought he might like to die to the sound of rain, not in the icy shackles of winter or the bright warmth of a summer's day, or with the coloured autumn leaves drifting down, but in spring, perhaps, an April shower falling on the glass roof and windows of his conservatory. It wasn't a morbid thought, but quite a comforting one, as was the sound. He sipped some wine and, with 'Box of Rain' playing softly in the background, began to read the few pages of the hastily written preliminary notes that DC Masterson had been kind enough to photocopy for him to take home.

DC Masterson's account was very bare bones, though it covered a lot of ground, Banks noticed, and as he read, his imagination filled in some of the blanks. Gavin Miller had been born near Banbury, Oxfordshire, on 29 November 1953, almost sixty years ago. His father had been a teacher at a local comprehensive school, which Miller had attended, and his mother a housewife. Miller was an only child and grew up in a cottage at the end of a long leafy lane on the edge of town, with no close neighbours.

Miller had shown some academic promise at school, though he didn't quite get the qualifications necessary for Oxford or Cambridge. He did well in his A-levels, however, and ended up reading English at the University of Essex, which he attended from 1971 to 1974, leaving with a second-class honours degree. After a period spent working to save up as much money as he could, Miller disappeared to Canada in 1977 to study film and literature at Simon Fraser University near Vancouver. From what Gerry Masterson could work out, Miller seemed to have remained over there for the next six years. That would explain some of the photos of cityscapes and mountain landscapes they had found in Miller's drawer, Banks thought. He had seen similar images of Canada before.

Gerry admitted that she had lost track of his movements during the four-year period after he graduated from Simon Fraser from 1979 to 1983 – the 'lost years' – and she needed to contact consulates and immigration sources, registrars and administrative assistants. It was a time-consuming job, even if you were looking for fresh information. Miller turned up again at home in Banbury in 1983. He would have been pushing thirty by then, Banks calculated, and this was not an era when the children stayed at home as long as they do these days.

So far, Gavin Miller seemed like so many others, a young man who had not quite fulfilled his potential, or hadn't had as

much potential to fulfil as he thought he did. He also didn't seem to have grown up, in some ways, but remained stuck in the interests and tastes of his youth. Even though he was fifty-nine, his small cottage was full of existentialist philosophy books and shelves of psychedelic vinyl from an earlier time.

The rain had stopped now, though it still streaked the windows. A fine day was promised for the start of tomorrow, but you could never trust the weather forecasts these days. The only thing you could be certain of was that rain would come again, sooner rather than later.

The Grateful Dead were singing 'Ripple', which Banks thought might be the kind of song he would like to have played at his funeral. Its airy mysticism rather appealed to him, the idea of life as a ripple in still water, when no pebble has been tossed into it. And the melody and harmonies were beautiful. He sighed. Enough thoughts of death and rain and ripples in undisturbed water. What was it about today that had sent his mind spinning in such a direction?

He realised that it was probably something to do with the similarities between himself and Gavin Miller. But just how alike were they? True, they had shared some tastes in music and films, much of it the same as they had enjoyed in their youth, but was that so strange? They were close to the same age, had grown up in with the same pop culture – the Beatles, James Bond, the Saint, Bob Dylan, and so on. Banks's dad still listened to Henry Hall, Nat Gonella and Glenn Miller, music he had first heard during the war. There was nothing odd about a taste for the past. Some people still enjoyed Abba and the Bay City Rollers.

Banks also had to admit that he often preferred stopping in, drinking wine and listening to music alone to going down to the local on a Saturday night. So what did that make him?

Newhope Cottage might be bigger and better furnished than the signalman's cottage Miller had lived in, Banks

thought, but it was just as isolated, and Banks had deliberately chosen to live there after his divorce from Sandra. Had Miller been running away from something, too, and had it caught up with him? He could have simply been running away from himself, of course, and when he found he couldn't, had committed suicide. But Banks doubted it. Something didn't sit right about his choice of method, not when there were more than enough pills in his bathroom cabinet to do the job, and five thousand pounds in his pocket when he died.

Banks returned to what little remained of DC Masterson's notes. Almost a year after he had returned from Canada, Miller had begun a series of jobs in local colleges, where he had toiled away in obscurity for twenty years or more, teaching general arts, media studies, film and English literature in such places as Exeter, Grantham and Barrow-in-Furness, never staying in any one place for any length of time, until he arrived at Eastvale College in 2006.

Miller left the college in 2009, gave up his rented flat in Eastvale and made a down payment on the signalman's cottage near Coverton. It didn't appear that he had attempted to find another job. Gerry had noted that the person she talked to on the telephone at the college, Trevor Lomax, head of the department in which Miller had taught, seemed a little cagey when he found out who she wanted to talk about. He made a mental note to get someone to go out there and talk to Lomax the following morning.

Miller had married only once, as far as Gerry could discover, and that had lasted six years and had ended in 1996. His wife had remarried two years later and gone to live in New Zealand. Gavin's father had died three years ago, and his mother had entered a private care home near Oxford, which took up the money from the sale of the cottage outside Banbury, and more or less all the savings that the Millers had accumulated over the years. When Miller died, he had been unable to meet his

last two mortgage payments, the utility companies had been hammering at his door and his credit card was maxed out to the limit.

The desperate financial straits Gavin Miller had been in towards the end of his life also made Banks think there might be something more to the drugs angle. People often saw drugs as a quick way of making a big return on an investment. Someone so desperate for money might turn to crime. Five thousand pounds was a lot of money to a man in Miller's position, and it would have got him out of the immediate hole he was in, at the very least, with even a little left over.

Blackmail was another possibility, of course, but most victims don't kill their blackmailers, who have usually set things up in such a way that if anything happens to them, the cat gets let out of the bag anyway. No one had broken into Miller's house, for example, to see if there was anything incriminating left behind there. If Miller had been blackmailing someone, it was hardly likely that he would hand over all his evidence for five thousand pounds. Blackmailers always have something in hand, and they always come back for more.

Putting the file aside, Banks massaged his temples and rubbed his eyes. It was getting late. *American Beauty* had finished some time ago, and the silence was all-embracing. Once in a while, he heard a light breeze sough through the trees, or a distant car on the Helmthorpe road, but apart from that, nothing. He topped up his glass, went into the entertainment room to put on *Live Dead*, and went outside. There was a little bulge in the wall beside the beck, and he enjoyed standing there, or even sitting on the wall when it was dry, to contemplate the night and enjoy his last drink of the evening. In the old days, he used to love having a smoke out there, too, but those days were long gone.

Already there were stars showing between the grey rags of cloud, and the air was full of that lovely fresh earth smell you

get after a good country rainfall. It was still a little chilly, but he wouldn't be staying out for long. He walked over to the wall beside Gratly Beck and leaned at his usual spot overlooking the terraced falls, all the way down the daleside to the slate roofs of Helmthorpe High Street and the church tower below the old mill, the fields and the cemetery. The water was high, and the beck had turned into quite a torrent after the rains. The falls were fast and noisy, filling the air with a fine cool spray. Banks often enjoyed falling asleep to the sound of the rushing water as he lay in bed.

To his left stretched the dark woods, raindrops dropping from leaves as the wind shook them, and tapping on the leaves below. The River Swain was a silvery squiggle along the flat valley bottom about a mile away. The strains of Garcia's lyrical guitar playing on 'Dark Star' wove into the sounds of the beck and the dripping leaves as Banks leaned there thinking how much he loved the place, and how retirement might be not such a bad idea after all.

He thought about Gavin Miller for a while longer, the haggard and broken body that looked like that of an old man, then tossed down the rest of his wine, shivered and went back inside.