

PROLOGUE

It was a quiet suburban avenue. A few children might play in the street in the daytime, but as soon as night fell, curtains were drawn, doors bolted and living rooms filled with the sound of the television. Thus it was that there was no one to notice the girl when she appeared at the far end of the street.

She was running as fast as she could – but there was no real purpose behind the effort, no destination she was rushing to reach. She was, in so many ways, like a wounded animal which does not understand why it is in pain, but desperately clings to the belief that one more burst of speed might just enable it to leave that agony behind.

She was barefoot, but she didn't take the time to wonder where she had lost her shoes, not even when she stepped on a sharp stone which dug cruelly into her flesh.

She did not *wonder* about anything. She was feeling, not thinking – experiencing her nightmare again and again, on a constantly replaying loop of misery and despair.

Her lungs were on fire, and though her instinct screamed at her not to stop, her body was giving her no choice. She came to a sudden halt, and clutched the nearest lamppost for support.

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Her breaths started to grow more regular, and her brain slowly began to engage again.

She did not know the name of the street she had stopped on, but she was confident she'd have no difficulty in finding her way from there to one of those places which – until that night – had been the anchoring points of her life.

For a moment, she considered heading for her school, where she had been happy and felt confident of herself and her small world. But that was absurd, because her school would be bolted and barred – and anyway, it could never be the same again.

Home, then?

The very thought of going home filled her with dread.

Perhaps she would go down to the river. The gentle lapping of the waves against the bank might relax her.

And if it did not, then she could slip softly into the water, let it gently cover her, and wash away all her cares for ever.

She heard the sound of footsteps in the near distance. It had never occurred to her that she would be followed – but it would make perfect sense if she had been.

She gasped once – at the horror of it all – and then began running again.

ONE

It's a grey, depressing morning in Oxford – the sort of morning when even the enchanted River Isis has lost its magic for me. I'm sitting in my one-room office at the unfashionable end of Iffley Road. The calendar on the wall (provided free by the Gordon's Gin Co. Ltd, in recognition of my substantial contribution to the company's ever-growing profit margin) says it is 8 May 1974, and I have no reason to dispute that.

I'm hung-over – thank you, once again, Gordon's! – and as I look bleakly down at my imitation leather appointment book, the blank pages stare reproachfully back at me.

It's been a lean business quarter so far. True, I was highly praised for my undercover work in Taverner's Department Store (Q: How does a shop assistant manage to keep stealing expensive dresses when she is checked by security every time she leaves the building? A: Simple – she doesn't! All she has to do instead is make it easy for her mates to shoplift them during normal business hours), but that was in the middle of April, and since then there's been zilch. Still, like Charles Dickens's admirable Mr Micawber, I live in hopes of something turning up.

My office door is closed, but that doesn't prevent me from hearing the doorbell ring down at street level, because we at the

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unfashionable end of the Iffley Road don't set much store by sound insulation.

Next, I hear a click-click-click of almost-impossibly high stiletto heels, which tells me that the tarty secretary from the exotic (or should it be erotic?) goods import-export company on the ground floor has crossed the hallway and is about to open the front door.

Once inside, the bell-ringer says something in a mumbled voice, and the secretary – who could, if she so chose, seek part-time employment as a maritime foghorn – replies with just three words.

'She's up there!'

I can picture her in my mind, gesturing up the stairs with a thumb which is capped with a violently purple artificial thumbnail. It wouldn't have cost her anything to have been a little less abrupt, I think – to have said, for example, that the visitor would find Miss Redhead's office at the head of the stairs – but I don't pay her wages, so I suppose I'm in no position to complain.

The visitor begins to climb the stairs. I can tell from the sound of the footsteps that it's a woman wearing low heels, and that, given the rate of her ascent, she's probably somewhere between thirty and fifty.

And as always when I'm about to meet a potential client, I am now assailed by a wave of misgivings.

What will this potential client of mine – this woman who will be older than I am, but maybe not by that much – be expecting to see when she opens the door?

She'll already know I'm also a woman – it says that quite clearly in the Yellow Pages telephone directory, and in the small

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ads in the local newspaper – but, given the ‘profession’ I’m engaged in, hasn’t she the right to imagine a stocky woman with a butch haircut, who dresses in sensible tweed?

I hope not, because what she will be faced with instead is a slim woman with flaming red hair, who is fighting a desperate rearguard action to stave off the approach of her thirtieth birthday, wearing a black cotton trouser suit (my concession to seriousness) and a lilac blouse.

The footsteps draw ever closer.

When I was first starting out in this business, I would blurt out my qualifications right at the start of an interview.

I have a degree from the University of Oxford itself, I would say, omitting the fact that it is in English literature, rather than criminology, and – alas – not a brilliant first but merely a competent upper second.

I worked for six years in the Thames Valley Police, first as a uniformed officer and then as a detective constable, I would add – and then move on quickly, before the potential client had the opportunity to ask why I wasn’t *still* working for Thames Valley Police.

I don’t do those things now. Now, I am myself, and if the clients don’t like it, that’s too bad for them (and, of course, for my overdraft).

The visitor knocks.

‘Come in,’ I say.

She opens the door and steps inside.

I was right about her age – not for nothing do I have the words ‘Private Investigator’ expensively engraved on the smoked-glass panel that forms most of the upper part of the office door.

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She is, in fact, a thirty-eight- or thirty-nine-year-old brunette. She is wearing a tan jacket (over the collar of which the loose curls of her perm hang effectively), and blue skirt. Both the skirt and the jacket come, I suspect, from Marks & Spencer's by-no-means-the-least-expensive-available-but-still-not-costing-you-an-arm-and-a-leg range. She has an attractive face, though, for the moment at least, it is overlaid with a mask of worry which does her no favours.

'Miss Redhead?' she asks uncertainly.

Of course I'm Miss Redhead! Who else could I possibly be, given that I'm in an office bearing her name, in which, furthermore, there is only one desk?

That's what my brain thinks, but my mouth, framed by an encouraging smile, says, 'Yes, I'm Jennifer Redhead. How can I help you, Mrs . . .?'

'Corbet,' she says. 'Mary Corbet.' She hesitates. 'It's about my daughter – she's gone missing.'

I feel my heart sink as I see any chance of making my bank manager a little happier slipping through my fingers, but I invite her to sit down anyway, and indicate the visitor's chair.

'If you'd just like to give me the details,' I say, taking a notepad and pen out of my desk drawer and sounding all crisp and businesslike.

She doesn't need any more encouragement than that.

'Linda's seventeen and a half,' she tells me, and names the school where her daughter is studying. 'It was last Friday night that she went missing. We were all out that night . . .'

'All?'

'The whole family – me, my husband . . . and Linda. I went

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to my regular meeting of the Oxford Garrick Players. That's an amateur dramatics society, you know. We're planning to put on Noel Coward's *Private Lives* sometime in the autumn, and there's a very good chance that I'll be cast as Amanda.' She comes to a sudden uncomfortable halt. 'Oh God, what am I doing? Why am I telling you all this? It's not as if it *mattered*, is it?'

'If we're to get anywhere, Mrs Corbet, then you really do need to relax,' I say. 'Just tell the story in your own words, and leave it to me to make a note of the details which matter.'

She nods gratefully, and takes a deep breath.

'Tom, that's my husband, is a Freemason, and he had a meeting at his lodge, and Linda was supposed to be going over to her friend Janet's house straight from school . . .'

'How far away from you does Janet live?'

'Not very far at all. We're all in Summertown. She's not more than a few streets away.'

'I see. Carry on.'

'I got home about ten. It didn't really bother me that Linda was still out, because it wasn't a school day the next day, and you know what girls are like when they get together, don't you?'

'Yes,' I agree, 'I do.'

'By the time Tom got home, at about a quarter past eleven, I was starting to get worried, and even though it was quite late, I rang Janet's house. Janet said she hadn't invited Linda round at all, and, in fact, she hadn't seen her since four o'clock, when they parted at the school gates. So then I rang all her other friends, and they hadn't seen her, either.'

'What was your husband doing while you were making all these telephone calls?'

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‘He’d got back in his car and was driving around, looking for her.’ Mrs Corbet reaches up, grabs one of her curls, and gives it a sharp tug. ‘I kept telling myself I must have got it wrong – that she’d gone to see some other friend, one she’d never told me about, and that she’d probably told me she was sleeping over, but it simply hadn’t registered with me.’ She gives the curl another tug. ‘I’ve been very distracted recently, you see, because that bitch Cynthia Roberts is determined, by fair means or foul, to pull the rug from under me, and get the part of Amanda for herself. But I’m sure now that I got it right about what Linda said. I’m sure she told me she was going to Janet’s house.’

I close my notepad as a way of signalling to her that it’s pointless to go any further with this.

‘It’s not me you should really be talking to,’ I say. ‘You should report it to the police.’

Mary Corbet shrugs, helplessly. ‘I’ve been to see the police. They’re simply not interested. They say that she’s probably run away. They say it happens all the time.’

Yes, they probably will have said that, I think – but, chances are, they won’t have said it without first making sure of their ground.

‘Are any of Linda’s clothes missing?’ I ask.

‘No.’

‘Has she been having problems at school?’

‘No, she loves school. She’s very popular. The other girls voted her house captain.’

‘How about at home?’

‘What do you mean?’

She *knows* what I mean!

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‘Has she been having problems at home?’ I amplify.

‘She’s our only child, Miss Redhead. Me and her dad both love her with all our hearts.’

‘That’s not what I asked,’ I say, sternly.

She shrugs again. ‘There’s been the odd bit of unpleasantness with her dad in the last few months.’

‘What kind of unpleasantness?’

‘They’ve not been getting on.’

‘I’m afraid you’ll really have to be a little more specific than that.’

‘Tom wants the best for her. He always has – right from the moment he first held her in the hospital.’

‘Go on.’

‘The thing is, you see, he’s always been a very serious person, even when he was younger. He wants Linda to be a doctor when she grows up.’

‘And what does Linda want?’

‘Oh, she wants the same as her dad, but she takes more after me, and she likes having her bit of fun, as well.’

I put the notebook and pen back in the drawer.

‘Listen, Mrs Corbet,’ I say, ‘the police have experience in these matters, and if they think—’

‘It’s just occurred to me how funny it is that you’re a redhead and you’re also called Redhead,’ Mrs Corbet interrupts. ‘I suppose there’s a lot of people say that to you.’

I know what she’s doing, of course. This is her attempt to establish a more personal relationship with me, in the hope that it will make me more empathetic, and hence more inclined to take her case. And if that doesn’t work, well, at least she’s

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managed to postpone the moment when she hears me turn her down.

And for the record, it *isn't* funny being called Redhead.

Just having red hair is a big enough cross for any little kid to bear. It apparently gives bus conductors free licence to call you 'Ginger Nut' and old ladies the right to accost you in the street and ask you if you eat a lot of carrots. But if, in addition, your name actually *is* Redhead – well, imagine what kind of target *that* makes you in the school playground. So it's no wonder, is it, that as soon as I was old enough to take karate lessons, I signed up straight away?

My dad knew what I was going through.

'I never set out to have a redheaded daughter,' he told me in one of our rare moments of intimacy, when I was six or seven. 'We didn't know about recessive genes when we got married, and your mum's hair was the most glorious shade of dark brown – almost like rich dark chocolate – back then.'

Yeah, right, Dad! I've seen the old photographs, and, at best, Mum's pale brown hair could have been compared to Cadbury's Milk Tray.

I smile at Mrs Corbet in a way which I hope conveys that, while I am sympathetic and understanding, I am also still determined not to waste either my time or hers.

'A lot of girls run away from home,' I say, 'and many of them have good reason to. But the ones who come from good, stable homes are usually back within the week.'

'My daughter hasn't run away,' Mrs Corbet says and, though there are tears in her eyes now, her voice is steady and determined.

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‘Then what has she done?’

‘My daughter is dead.’

‘Now what on earth would ever make you think that?’ I ask and, though I’ve not made a conscious decision on this, I can tell from the tone of my voice that I’m trying to jolly her out of this mood of black despair.

‘What makes me think it?’ Mrs Corbet repeats. ‘I’m her mother. She’s part of my very being. And now I can feel this great gaping hole inside me, so I know she’s dead.’

‘I have some good friends who work for the Thames Valley Police,’ I tell her. ‘If you’d like me to, I could talk to them and ask them to take another look at Linda’s disappearance.’

‘It wouldn’t do any good,’ Mrs Corbet says firmly. ‘No good at all. Your friends can’t bring her back to life. All I want is to know where her body is, so that I can give her a decent Christian burial. Is that too much to ask?’

She reaches into her handbag, and when she withdraws her hand again, it’s holding a large roll of five-pound notes wrapped up in a rubber band.

She places the money on my desk.

‘This is for you,’ she says.

‘That’s a lot of money, Mrs Corbet.’

‘I know it is. There’s over a thousand pounds there. Take it.’

‘I couldn’t possibly.’

‘Do you know how I got all that money?’

‘How could I?’

‘I’ve been saving it out of my housekeeping for years and years. I’ve denied myself all the little luxuries I might have had, and I’ve done it gladly, because that money was for Linda, when

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she went to college. And now it's no use to her.' Mrs Corbet takes out a handkerchief and brushes away her tears. 'Please just give me one day of your time, Miss Redhead, and that money is yours.'

'All right, if you insist, then I'll give you one day,' I say, finally worn down and defeated by the heartbroken woman who is sitting opposite me.

'Thank you, Miss Redhead, thank you.'

'But I'm not going to take a thousand pounds for one day's work,' I tell her. 'I'll charge you my normal rates, which are . . .'

'I don't care what they are.'

I quote the figure anyway, then add – though it seems a pointless thing to say in this situation – 'And, of course, my expenses will be on top of that.'

Mary Corbet stands up. 'If you don't want the money yourself, then give it away to your favourite charity,' she says. 'Or burn it if you like – I don't care. I don't want it myself, because even touching it is a reminder that all hope is gone.'

TWO

In normal lunchtime traffic, it should take me six minutes to cycle from my office on the Iffley Road to St Aldate's, but, as I dismount in front of the Bulldog pub, I see from a quick glance at my wristwatch that it has taken me all of seven minutes and twenty-eight seconds.

Now that's a warning I'd better heed – because an action woman like me simply can't afford to go soft.

The Bulldog is one of my favourite Oxford pubs, due, in no small part, to the painted sign which projects (from above the main door) over the pavement. On one side of the sign is a typical jowly bulldog, glaring challengingly at the world. On the other is a man with a bowler hat and wearing a no less ferocious expression. Visitors wonder about the sign, but it does not take newly arrived undergraduates long to learn that there are two kinds of bulldogs in Oxford – and it is the bowler-hatted ones they should be more wary of.

DS George Hobson is waiting for me in the pub doorway. He is a big man, with broad shoulders and a square jaw, and some people might even, without too much exaggeration, call him handsome.

Once, back in the almost-forgotten mists of time, George and

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I were lovers. Now when we meet, our interactions mainly take the form of jokey, affectionate aggression – he treats me as the smart-arsed university girl, I talk to him as if he was no more than a ponderous, slow-witted copper. We tell ourselves (though we certainly don't tell each other!) that this is the best way in which two people who have painfully broken up – but are still quite fond of each other – *can* relate. But the real truth, I suspect, is that by sticking to the superficial, we avoid the painful process of analysing what went wrong between us.

As I securely chain the front wheel and frame of my machine to a low iron hitching post which was originally intended to tether gentlemen-farmers' horses, George says, 'Still riding that old bike, I see! That's the trouble with you university types – you spend your whole lives pretending you're the people you were at eighteen.'

And we're off on our routine!

I look down, and feign surprise that I'm holding my machine.

'Gosh, that was well spotted,' I say. 'I *am* still riding that old bike. What an eye you have, George – and what a brain! With talents like yours, you should be a detective.'

He's right about us university types, though. Almost everyone connected with Oxford University – from professors of the most obscure branches of moral philosophy, down through graduates like me to the very newest undergraduates – travels around the city by bicycle. We tell ourselves that we do it because, as a mode of transport, the bike is both quick and convenient, but there's something in all of us that imagines it gives us a cavalier – or perhaps bohemian – air.

The downside – as the double locking of my machine has

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already hinted at – is that riding a bike also furnishes us with the opportunity of gaining first-hand experience of petty crime.

‘You find a seat, and I’ll go to the bar and get the drinks,’ I tell George, as we enter the pub.

I make this offer partly because I’m a conviction feminist (though that conviction does not extend to leaving the clumps of ginger hair that sprout relentlessly from my armpits unshaven), but mainly because we both know George is doing me a favour.

I buy the drinks (a gin and tonic for me, a pint of Courage Directors for him) and take them over to the table he has selected. As I pass the door, I glance quickly at the street to make sure my bike is still there.

George notices the gesture – and grins.

‘We can be justly proud of the fact that, relative to its size, Oxford has just got to be the bicycle-theft centre of the world,’ he says.

I return his grin. ‘One theory is that there’s a single bike-theft ring, with branches in both Oxford and Cambridge, and the bikes stolen in Oxford are sold second-hand in Cambridge, and vice versa,’ I say.

‘But you don’t believe it?’

‘I used to – until I joined the police, and saw for myself just how many bikes are regularly hauled out of the river.’

‘So what’s your theory now?’

‘I’m not sure I have one.’

George grins again. ‘You’ll have a theory, Jennie,’ he says confidently. ‘You have a theory about *everything*.’

He’s right again, of course – I do have a theory about everything. I don’t particularly like the fact, but there’s nothing

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I can do about it – like my red hair, it's a curse I must carry through life.

I glance through the window at the impressive frontage of Christchurch College, the only university college in the world (as far as I know) to have a cathedral *within* its walls.

'My theory is that it's not so much an act of theft as a gesture of defiance,' I say.

'Go on,' George says, giving the smart-arsed university graduate the opportunity to say something stupid, and thus feed him with the material he needs for his next foray into taking the piss out of her.

'There are quite a lot of unemployed young men in this beautiful city of ours,' I say.

'Yes, there are,' George agrees.

'They sit in bars like this one – nursing their half-pints, because it's all they can afford – and they watch other young men in tails (and young women in shot-silk gowns) swan in for a quick drink on the way to their expensive May Balls. Then, a month or so later, they're walking along the High – probably having been to the dole office to draw the pittance which has to last them a week – and they pass the Examination Schools, where these same young men and women, in mortar boards and gowns, are opening bottles of genuine French champagne and toasting the brilliant future they are all absolutely certain lies ahead of them. And these young men with no prospects at all look at those young men who have more prospects than you could shake a stick at – and they resent them.'

'Yes, I think they do,' George agrees heavily, having found nothing in my words to mock. 'I'm in a good job, one that I

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enjoy, but there are times when even I catch myself resenting it.’

‘So they steal the bikes belonging to these privileged “shit-heads”, and dump them in the river. It’s only a minor inconvenience for the bikes’ owners – the thieves know that – but it is an inconvenience of some kind, and that has to be worth *something*.’

‘And it’s a whole lot better than them deciding to beat the crap out of the students,’ George says.

This is suddenly getting far too serious and philosophical for my purposes. I decide I’d better lighten the mood before applying the mental thumbscrews of manipulation.

‘The town did experiment with rioting and beating the crap out of the students once, but it didn’t really work out,’ I say. ‘Oh, it’s true that *some* of the students and their professors did panic, run away and establish a new university, but most of the university people just stayed put – because they knew that the establishment, which holds all the power, was very firmly on their side.’

‘Hang about, Jennie,’ George says. ‘Did you just tell me that some of the students and professors ran away and established a new university?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t remember that.’

‘It was probably a little bit before your time on the force, though I can’t be entirely sure about that.’

‘I think it must have been,’ George agrees. ‘In fact, since I’ve never even heard any of the old-timers at the station go on about it, I’d guess it was pre-war. Am I right?’

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‘You are. Perhaps I should have mentioned that the university the runaways established was Cambridge . . .’

‘Cambridge! Then it must have been—’

‘And the year was 1209.’

George laughs. ‘You really suckered me into that one,’ he admits. He looks down at his glass. ‘This appears – by some magical process that I don’t quite understand – to be empty.’

‘Would you like another?’ I ask.

‘Not really,’ George says. He pauses – though not for long enough to give me time to say anything. ‘But, do you know, if I refuse your kind offer, I’m guessing you’ll be offended.’ He sighs. ‘All right then, for the sake of our friendship, I’ll just have to force another one down.’

I go up to the bar and buy him another pint. When I return with it, he takes a generous slug, then assumes his business face and says, ‘So what can I do for you, Jennie?’

‘I want to ask you about a girl called Linda Corbet. I know the name probably means nothing to you, so if you need to slip down to the station—’

‘That won’t be necessary,’ George interrupts. ‘What do you want to know about her?’

‘She was reported missing, wasn’t she?’

‘That’s right.’

‘When I was on the job, if a girl of her age was reported missing, the force dropped everything else so it could concentrate all its resources on that one operation. Leave was cancelled, search parties were formed, and there were appeals on the television. So why didn’t that happen this time?’

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‘That kind of full-scale operation only occurs when there’s no plausible explanation for the girl going missing.’

‘And there was a plausible explanation in Linda’s case?’

‘Yes. Her father was convinced that she’d done a runner. He said he’d been worrying it might happen for some time.’

‘And you were prepared to take the father’s word for it?’ I ask – only a little short of horrified. ‘Just like that?’

‘Yes, he’s a very level-headed sort of bloke and—’

‘Even though the mother was convinced Linda would never do anything like that?’

‘Have you met the mother?’ George asks.

‘As a matter of fact, I have.’

‘Is she your client?’

I take a sip of my G&T. ‘You know I’m not allowed to say who I’m representing.’

George nods his head in a knowing – and, I have to say, rather maddening – way.

‘So she’s your client,’ he says confidently. ‘She’s a bit over-emotional, isn’t she? A bit unstable?’

Up until this point, I’d have said exactly the same thing myself, but now – perversely – I find myself going in to bat for Mary Corbet.

‘She’s not so much over-emotional or unstable as distressed,’ I hear myself say. ‘Who wouldn’t be if they found themselves in her situation? But you don’t see it that way in St Aldate’s – the last bastion of male chauvinism. The father shows much less feeling, which, of course, makes him easier to handle, so you prefer to take his word rather than hers on whether or not—’

‘And then there’s the canvas holdall,’ George interrupts.

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‘What canvas holdall?’

‘From the photographs I’ve been shown, I’d say it’s about yea big.’ He holds his hands three feet apart to indicate the size. ‘It’s the sort that has a zip along the top and two handles. There are three or four stalls in the market that sell something similar. You know the kind of thing I’m talking about, don’t you?’

‘Yes, I know,’ I agree. ‘So what about it?’

‘It’s missing – and so are some of Linda’s clothes.’ George smiles. ‘Your client didn’t tell you about that, did she?’

No, she bloody well didn’t!

So if her bag’s gone, the girl really has done a runner – that much is plain. And all I can do now – all I’m *able* to do now – is persuade Mary Corbet of the fact. And to do that successfully, I need more information.

So where do I start?

Part of Mary’s argument is that Linda would never run away from home, because not only is she perfectly happy, but she’s pretty near perfect herself. But how true is that?

‘To your knowledge, has Linda Corbet ever been in any trouble with the police?’ I ask.

‘As a matter of fact, she has,’ George replies. ‘About three months ago, she was arrested in the company of several students from St Luke’s.’ He pauses, and shakes his head in mock disapproval. ‘Still, I suppose we should expect that kind of behaviour from lads from St Luke’s.’ Another pause – just two beats. ‘That’s your old college, isn’t it, Jennie?’

‘What were they doing – these students from my old college?’ I ask, ignoring the heavy implication.

‘They were on Beaumont Street, near the Playhouse. They

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were drunk and shouting abuse at passers-by. Then they got bored with that, and turned their attention to damaging several of the cars parked along the street.'

'What sort of damage are we talking about?'

'It was the usual mindless vandalism – breaking aerials, scraping coins or keys along the sides of the cars in order to damage the paintwork.'

'So were they charged?'

'No.'

'If they'd been a bunch of local working-class lads they would have been,' I say, switching – in the flickering of an eyelash – from Jennie Redhead, member of the intellectual elite, to Red Jennie, working-class lass and true champion of the proletariat.

'You're probably right,' George agrees.

'So *why* weren't they charged?' I ask, starting to get angry, as I always do when privilege raises its ugly head.

'The students denied they'd done the damage . . .'

'Well, they would, wouldn't they?'

'But that notwithstanding, they agreed to pay for the cost of repairing the cars anyway.'

'You're side-stepping the question, George,' I tell him. 'A criminal act had been committed, and they should have been charged, whether or not they paid for the damage. So why weren't they? Was it perhaps because one of them had a rich, important daddy?'

'It's certainly true that one of the "daddies" did intervene personally,' George says.

'Ah!'

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‘But if you’re thinking it was some rich moneybags or politician from London, then you’re wrong.’

‘So who was it?’

‘It was Linda Corbet’s dad.’

‘And how come Linda’s dad’s got so much influence with the cop shop?’ I demand.

The question seems to take George by surprise.

‘Well, because he’s . . .’ He stops mid-sentence, as if he’s suddenly understood where the confusion has arisen. ‘You don’t know who Tom Corbet actually is, do you?’

‘Is there any reason I should?’

‘No, not when I stop for a minute and think about it, there isn’t. How long ago did you hand in your papers?’

‘It was nearly two years ago now – June 1972.’

‘And Tom Corbet didn’t arrive until – I think I’m right about this – August ’72.’

‘For God’s sake, get to the point, George,’ I say exasperatedly. ‘Where was it that Corbet didn’t arrive until August? Oxford?’

‘Well, yes – but, more specifically, the St Aldate’s nick.’

‘You surely don’t mean . . .’ I begin.

‘Yes I do – Tom Corbet’s an inspector in the uniformed branch.’

Which was another interesting fact that Mary Corbet hadn’t bothered to mention when she’d come to see me.