

# Part One

## 1

Once upon a time, in a land too close for comfort, there lived a man. A young man who, even then, was on the run. He was a grease monkey – a mechanic – on his way to a new start; inching out through the snarl of city traffic, tapping a beat on the steering wheel of his pride and joy: a glossy black, 1972 E-Type Jag. His hands went tappety-tappety, tap-tap-tappety, and at his side was a rat called Polonius (sniffing the air) and a goldfish called Ophelia (swimming in circles). He'd given his little sister these pets as presents for her seventeenth birthday, and she'd named them and loved them as only she could. But his sister was dead – killed – and now they were his.

As for his name... well, a name's just a label, a tag, and signifies sweet nothing. It can't change who a person is, or where they've come from, or what they look like, or what they've seen, or the stories they know. It can't change any of that stuff. So, we'll know him as Nic. Nic the mechanic. And he was a fresh-faced, innocent-looking Nic back then; slow to anger, mostly amicable; an open book. His skin was olive brown, his close-cropped hair was black-bristled, and he was in his early-twenties. He was a grease monkey and panel beater extraordinaire.

With one foot hovering a whisper over the clutch and the other stroking the accelerator – inching through the snarl of city traffic – Nic was travelling towards a big, new beginning, seeking better fortune beyond a distant, brighter horizon. Polonius was in his cage, Ophelia in her half-empty tank, and he'd pulled the tan leather passenger seat forward to wedge both firmly in place on the floor pan. There was a long journey ahead, but when the traffic began thinning he'd tell himself he too might leave all congestion behind.

Everything that was stuffed up and couldn't be quickly sorted might be left behind. Let the passing of time do what it does best. If one path leads nowhere, try another. Wherever it was he was heading, he'd get there in the end.

Peering ahead beyond the crush of traffic to the slow drama of roadworks – temporary traffic lights, a generator puking exhaust fumes, two orange-jacketed Council workers with jackhammers and a third gripping a shovel – he mouthed his dad's motto at the windscreen. It wasn't something the old man chanted every day or anything like that. He never had it tattooed on his forehead or suggested it should be engraved over the fireplace. But it was a tenet his dad had lived by, more or less, and Nic wasn't sorry to adopt it as his own because the old fella had mostly given good advice.

“Look forwards, move forwards, never back.” It had sprouted into his mantra. *Look forwards, move forwards, never back.*

His dad was dead too, and so was his mum. Dead and buried. All he had left of his family were memories, trinkets, two pets and the proceeds of blood money – accident insurance, estate proceeds – their blood, his money. Life was no fucking fairytale, for sure, and it had been when things seemed their most beautiful best that it shat unfairly but squarely upon the four of them.

He looked across at the passenger seat, to the manila envelope perched on top of his jacket. It didn't hold much, but it did contain enough instructions to start a new life.

## 2

The manila envelope. He couldn't get over the way Mrs King had turned up the way she did, like some quaint fairy-godmother or the like, and he was surer than ever it was Siobhan's doing. She'd orchestrated it somehow. To try and make up for what he'd gone through, thanks to her.

It was more than just the chance to work again, of course. It was an offer with knobs on. It was the job of a lifetime. And the old dear, Mrs King, knew it. And yet it was even more than all this, because, when it came down to it, what she'd arrived at his apartment to offer (a mere couple of hours after kicking Siobhan out) was the chance to leave the stink of the past behind and the opportunity to move on with the rest of his life at last. *Look forwards, move forwards, never back.*

All the same, it was no easy call. This city was his home, the place he'd grown up in with his sister and his mum and dad; the setting for his best memories (as well as the worst). So, once Mrs King told him she'd return in twenty-four hours for an answer, he spent the morning, afternoon and evening pacing his apartment, teetering between acceptance and refusal, balancing as many reasons for and against as sprung to mind – juggling the pros and cons, the good and the bad, the happy and sad – in between trying to phone Siobhan to talk things through with her.

Peering out the window, across the park towards the roofline of the Central Gallery, the Performing Arts Centre and the restaurants that fringed the river, he was confronted instead by his own clownish reflection: a mop of tight corkscrews of hair that spiralled every which way; bloodshot, startled eyes, and a beard that looked too big for him now. Wild.

“Fuck off,” he said, and turned to stare elsewhere. At his bookshelves and the crooked stacks of paperbacks and each crazy stratum of spines (different colours, different fonts, different sizes), which, if nothing else, were a measure of having too

much time on his hands for too long. He ran a finger along the edge of one shelf and was confronted by a family photograph perched in the middle (burnished brass framing a pose in a once-ordered world): a portrait of his raven-haired mother, sister and father, huddled on a bench on the city ferry, with the river behind them. His mum, on the left, had an arm round his sister, and his dad, on the right, had an arm embracing them both.

"I deserve a slice of good luck," he told it. "Maybe I should take the job. Maybe I should rent out the apartment and take the damn job."

"Every journey begins with a single step," he made his father say.

"Too bloody right."

"Language," his mother warned him, but with a hint of smile.

"Risk nothing, gain nothing," the old man added.

His sister looked on. She was laughing and her hair was blowing in the wind, but she wouldn't speak. Why should she? She owed him less than nothing.

By the time he'd paced his way through to nightfall, he was clear about one thing: it was the fantastic – unbelievable really – chance to manage his own garage in the not-too-distant future that tempted him. It was one of the things he'd always wanted to do, ever since he got hooked on cars as a twelve-year-old. This alone could be a treasure worth travelling for.

Twenty-four hours after she first appeared, Mrs King stood in the centre of his living room again. In her tweed woollen suit and her shiny brogues, with her hat pinned to her tight bun of ice-white hair and a fresh rose in her left lapel, she may have appeared quaint, demure and diminutive, but was as sharp as any hat-pin. She didn't mince her words; her eyes were a piercing green.

"Well?" she said.

Nic glanced at the pictures on the walls, at his sofa, his books, his mementoes, at the arrangements of objects that represented

his past and who he'd become, and wondered what else he could do. What real choice did he have? Through the window, he caught sight of the elms and Moreton Bay fig trees that fringed the park; he caught sight of the bluestone church spires and the crystal-sharp skyscrapers of the city – the backdrop to childhood and family life – and doubted he'd ever be ready to leave it behind. Not ever. And then, for stark, shit-bitter contrast, he recalled the gut-wrenching abandonment that summed up the last few months and how no one would give him the time of day anymore, let alone the chance to work... except Siobhan, perhaps, his former lover (whose tidy wit and enchanting laugh and oh-so-pretty arse he'd kicked out of his life too damned well). Siobhan and this Mrs King.

“Yes,” he said, “I’ll take it. Might as well. There’s nothing to lose.”

She stood clutching her bag and a manila A4 envelope in front of her. “Hmm,” she nodded. “And everything to gain?”

“Too right.”

She dabbed the A4 envelope in the air and almost smiled for the first time.

Its contents were a disappointment. He'd expected a glossy brochure, detailed maps, background information on the company he'd be working for, fliers, brochures, leaflets from the local Tourist Information Office promoting the region he was moving to and selling the delights of Gimbley. But there was none of that. Instead, there was a basic contract to sign and a photocopied, hand-drawn map that approximated the town's location, with a couple of scrawled instructions on how not to miss the junction for the Gimbley road. That was all.

“Don't lose that,” this fairy-godmother told him. “It's not an easy place to find, what with the forests and the logging tracks. So many tracks which lead nowhere that's anywhere. There's a telephone number written at the bottom in case you get lost – not that you'd get much reception on your mobile.”

“Oh, I see,” he said, and ran a comb of fingers through his straggly hair, then smoothed the beard beneath his chin. He turned the map over, but it was blank on the back. A raven landed on the balcony table with a hasty flurry of wings, and immediately leaned forward to caw at the window. Nic watched it a moment, then placed the papers on the table and gnawed at the skin of one knuckle.

She pulled a pen from her handbag and tapped the air with it, and the raven hopped down onto the tiles and cawed again. “You’ll have to sign the contract while I’m here. I did explain.”

“Yeah.”

He looked for the small print, but there wasn’t any. It couldn’t have been more straightforward. And still he hesitated.

“Can I get you a drink?” he said. “Tea? Coffee? How about a glass of water?”

She let the offer pass and raised her voice over the nuisance bird. “The wage is better than you’ll get anywhere else. Guaranteed. You wouldn’t get this sort of money even in the city.”

He nodded. “Relocation expenses, a rural living allowance, fringe benefits – you mentioned all that stuff.” It had to be a reputable business, surely; else they’d pay a basic wage to any local cowboy who could swing a spanner. And it remained a flattering offer, even though he saw the elegant hand and seductive, silver tongue of Siobhan behind it. He’d never been headhunted before.

If only he could talk it through with her – ask what she knew about the place – but he’d told her to get lost and she had. She’d vanished yet again, as only she could. For all he knew, she might be flying to the farthest ends of the earth at that very moment.

She wasn’t answering her phone and had turned MessageBank off, which was her way of saying, “You too, Nic. Get stuffed. I can live without you too.” Maybe he’d never see her again; not ever.

“Remember, it’s a three month contract to start with,” Mrs King added. “Not too long, not too short. To see whether you like us and whether we like you. To see whether your face fits, as it were.”

“I understand.”

A second raven landed, except it had a chunk of bread gripped in its beak. It dropped the bread and croaked once, twice, three times, and the first one took a sideways step towards the glass of the sliding door.

She talked over the birds. “It’ll get you back on your feet again.”

“I know,” he said, and smiled at the raucousness coming from the balcony. Two days in a row. They were giving her a hard time. “I appreciate that. Thanks.”

“So we’ll see you in a few days?”

He took the pen and signed the contract, and then she was gone.

Left to his own devices, but with a sense of direction now – a destination – he tugged at his wild tufts of hair again, went to the bathroom mirror and examined the image.

“Time to find a pair of scissors,” he said to his reflection. “Time for a new start.”

Look forwards, move forwards, never back.

### 3

Nic tapped on the steering wheel and snatched a glance in the rearview mirror of the diminishing city: a landscape of glass, chrome, concrete, iron, crafted stone and timber; of structures that reflected the movement of water or slices of an ever-changing sky. He felt privileged to have inherited the old man’s affinity for the diverse shapes of the place and for its resilient (if

unforgiving) textures, because these were the designs and materials his dad had devoted his life to, and would always remain a part of his story even though he'd gone. Just as its shapes and textures, pavements and streets, parks and schools, alleyways and arcades, pubs and clubs, would remain part of Nic's story, wherever he was. It was who he was. It'd always be his home.

With a flash of lights and the flick of a wave, he let a delivery van pull out from the kerb and take a place in front of him. Then accelerated a tad too hard before a soccer mum in her gleaming Bimmer X5 cut in from a side street.

This was still his belonging-place, even if he had to leave a while. In a year or so he'd be back – maybe sooner – and then all would be sweet again. For one thing, he'd no longer be lugging a suspended sentence around his neck.

He'd had a narrow shave, but that was behind him now. Best not dwell on it. Even so, if he ever saw that Chris bastard again, he'd... well, he didn't know what he'd do. Only what he'd like to.

“Look forwards, move forwards, never back,” he reminded himself once more, running a hand over his head. Wasn't used to the lack of hair, nor to so many bristles, but he thought the close-cropped look suited him – tougher, meaner, less of a walk-over – as if a new image could change who he was.

Lyrics to a song from the radio washed over him, and then the song faded and a string of commercials began. Selecting a CD, he slid it into the player. Bob Marley and the Wailers: *No Woman, No Cry*.

Spot on.

Like any orphaned beggar boy or any knight errant in any fairytale, all he was looking for was his own happiness. Ever-after happiness.

The traffic shuffled down stretches of suburban high street, crawling in small steps from one harness of traffic lights to the next. Cracked pavements edged by dying plane trees, against



which padlocked bikes and shop signs leant, and dogs pissed. Beyond the cobweb of tram cables and powerlines, two aeroplanes sliced a hazy sky, flying east, north, wherever, and he thought of Siobhan. Of course. Wondered where she was. Didn't want to, but couldn't help it. Always.

Siobhan.

The traffic picked up pace until it was trotting past parade after parade of scruffy, narrow, shop facades; then gained more speed as the road widened into a semi-industrialised zone of small factories, over-advertised car yards, Mr Friendly Garden Centres and grey warehouses. From burbs to urban fringe, the traffic galloped from point to point.

When the city began petering out and Nic arrived at the spaghetti of overpasses and underpasses and the roundabouts of ring roads (a couple of hitchhikers holding up rough, cardboard signs), he took a moment to pause, relax and draw a longer breath. Ignoring the exhaust fumes from the convoy of carnival trucks in front, he imagined he could already get a faint sniff of a different, distant landscape – fresh air, fresh prospects – and he cracked a smile.

The E-Type Jag was jam-packed with luggage: clothes, CDs, a few books, a photo album, a rat, a goldfish, a toolbox, a recorder, a tin whistle... but as little emotional baggage as he could possibly escape with. Long after the music stopped playing, the words and rhythm of *No Woman, No Cry* remained in his head.

## 4

The first time Nic met Siobhan was at the bum end of a gruelling week in early autumn. It was Friday afternoon and he was sweaty and smelly and stale. For five days in a row, the sun blistered the

bitumen, scorched the concrete, sizzled the city and left him parched. He'd been on his own for a week while the boss took a holiday, but had grown sick of his own company within forty-eight hours. He had another week to go. It made all the difference in a day, he came to realise, having someone around to turn to once in a while, even if they said bugger-all. The crucial thing was knowing somebody else was there. And too much had gone pear-shaped that week. The engine parts he'd ordered arrived late and turned out to be for a newer, altered model. To top it off, instead of soothing a difficult customer who wanted an expensive job finished on the cheap and wouldn't take no for an answer, he refused to bite his tongue any longer. The city wilted and his patience shrivelled with it.

"Do it yourself if you're the expert," he told the prick, "or take it someplace where they'll give you labour and parts for nothing. Either way, it'll cost you for the work I've done, plus materials. You've done sweet F.A. but mess me around since you booked it in." What he wanted to add was: "Fuck off, numskull; crawl back to your hole."

The customer – a self-important plonker who probably reckoned he was an expert because he'd changed the spark plugs on his car once – blinked, reddened, but then recovered. "Should've known better than come here in the first place. Just give me my bloody keys and I'll take my business elsewhere. Thought you'd know what you were doing. Where's your boss? I wanna talk to the owner. Nah, forget that – just give me my keys."

In the background, the buzz of traffic might have been the buzz of agitated bees.

Nic happened to be holding an adjustable wrench in his right hand and there was a large spanner tucked into the leg pocket of his oily overalls; there were two grease tracks across his forehead and another below one eye. He leaned towards the little prick, but relaxed when the guy danced a quick, backward two-step. He tried not to smile. The boss wouldn't have handled it

this way – could be a bit soft at times – but maybe he'd still be proud of him. He liked a good story and he'd certainly laugh when he was told about it.

“When you've settled the bill, I'll return your keys.”

The customer huffed and puffed, but then dug deep and dragged out a credit card, slapped it on the workbench. “I want a receipt and an itemised invoice. I won't be coming back here again.”

“Suits me fine,” he said. “We're not a fucking charity, you know.”

The boss would back him on that.

Snatching his keys, the man strode towards his car spewing a litany of mumbled complaints. But not mumbled enough. “Bloody amateurs. Cheap-skate wog bastard. Fucking dago.”

Nic grabbed the adjustable wrench and stepped out. “What? What did you call me?”

The buzz of traffic changed tone. It paused, as movement became suspended between one intersection of lights and another. Somewhere a swarm of cars was revving to race into a higher gear – waiting. And then it began again: a moment of heightened frenzy followed by the normal hubbub.

“Nothing. Nothing at all, mate. Was talking to myself. Said I'll be glad to see the back of this fucking place.”

“The feeling's mutual.”

In the last blistering half-hour of that working week, as he lay on an inspection trolley and eased himself under a mud-baked ute, he licked his lips at the thought of sculling an icy cold beer at the pub on his short walk home. One frosty beer would refresh him, two might cool him, three would start to slake his thirst. Could've rolled straight into one of two-dozen beer commercials at that moment: Hot, thirsty man meets crate of ice-packed beer.

Several beads of sweat tracked between the grit and grease on his forehead and ran into the corner of one eye, stinging and half-blinding him. Lifting an arm to mop himself with the sleeve of

his overalls, he knocked the muffler and copped a face-full of dirt and rust-flakes.

“Shit,” he said. And because there was no one to answer him, he said it again, but louder. “SHIT.” His hands were clammy and the spanner slipped in his grip.

All the same, what better way of earning a crust than scratching about with a motor? For sure, every job had shitty days, but there was little to beat the pleasure of tuning a machine to its peak, until it purred. Making a broken vehicle come alive again – sleek and fast and powerful. Taking a car apart and rebuilding it so it was better than before.

He was a grease monkey and a panel beater too; a doctor in mechanical parts – carburetors, CV joints, gaskets, distributors – and a cosmetic surgeon in panels and paint. Sleek, powerful cars were his passion, but every vehicle fascinated him. Hadn't found one yet which he didn't enjoy working on. Like a skilled piano tuner, he could identify the make and age of most idling engines, and how their music might be improved, just by listening, eyes shut. How he loved the velvet softness of warm oil trickling between his fingers: smooth, juicy lube.

One day he'd run his own garage, and he'd slap up a sign and shut up shop early on a stinking hot day like this, high-tailing it to the beach if he felt like it. At other times he'd work flat-out through the night if he wanted to. He'd be his own boss and specialise in exotic, fast cars... one day.

“I wish, I wish, I wish.” Three wishes.

“Our best achievements begin with a dream and a wish,” his dad would've beamed.

“Be careful what you wish for,” his mum would've cautioned. A stock reply.

The car entered the work bay at lightning speed. He flinched, winced, pulled his legs in, swore again. “Fuck.” If the driver had misjudged the distance, he couldn't have slid out the way fast enough: one car would've slammed into the other and he'd be

crushed to a pulp. Minced meat. Life could be a fragile thread, casually snapped. He knew this too well.

The car braked, reversed and straightened, creating a piercing screech of tyres on the painted cement. The engine was turned off. A Porsche 911, from the thrum of it.

Rolling out from the ute, he opened his mouth to give the driver a piece, but took a breath instead. One argument in a day, in a month, was more than enough. Besides, the week was all but over and nothing should spoil the sweetness of that. But he was curious too. Who'd bring a Porsche here when there was a dealership down the road?

Standing, he dragged the rag from the back pocket of his overalls, wiped his hands, then tucked it back in place and wiped a sleeve across his brow. Rubbed at his eye; tried blinking out whatever speck had fallen in.

The Porsche was metallic Midnight Blue – a favourite colour – and shimmered with newness; sparked with sophistication, sensuality, energy. As the driver climbed out, she removed a pair of sunglasses and, in one brief glance, seemed to take stock of the work bays, tool racks, the counter, the back office, before returning her focus to the mechanic.

“Hello,” she said.

“Got problems with your brakes, have you?” he said.

She let the door fall closed, then reached through the open window to drop her sunnies on the dashboard. “No, I don't think so.”

“Good. That's a relief.”

She had the grace to smile at that. “Sorry. It needs some work on this panel though.”

He nodded, stood back to admire the lines of the car; crouched down to focus on the damage; drew the tips of two fingers along its bruise to gauge the contours of the dent.

“Ouch,” he said. At the centre of the dent, a fingernail of paint had chipped away. “Someone put the boot in, did they?”

"It's possible." She had the light build of a ballerina and possessed the self-assured, agile step of a dancer too.

"You wouldn't rather take it to a Porsche dealer? There's one just down the road. You might still catch them open."

"I heard you were good – very good. You come highly recommended."

"Who from?"

When she didn't answer, he turned round. She was wandering round the garage as if it was the most fascinating place she'd ever been; as though she couldn't resist exploring it, but also as if something might jump out and bite her. He watched her peer tentatively beneath the hydraulic lift at the underside of the car perched there, then glance quickly in the direction of the spray room and back at the office again.

When she realised he was watching her, she span around to face him and stood still. "Sorry again. I was being nosy." She bit her lip and walked back towards him. "Can you make my car new again? As good as new? I've only had it a fortnight."

Beyond her calm self-assurance, every now and then a ripple of something less certain. Once he'd noticed this, he looked for it and wondered who she was, what she was doing here.

"The dealership's not two blocks away," he said, and with that decided he wasn't going to do the job. Once she thought about it, she'd realise it didn't make sense for the dealership not to do it. "It's not far. I won't get it done any quicker than them. And they might already have the paint in stock, whereas I'll have to order it."

She reached for the door handle, a scent that held the suggestion of vanilla brushing against him. "I know that, but if you can't manage it, don't worry." She opened the driver's door, obliging him to move aside, but made no effort to climb in. Instead, she looked him in the eye and screwed her nose up in an impish smile, and it left a pause between one moment and what-ever followed.