

I

*I hear that he means to enlarge . . . that he is looking for
a competent assistant.*

Henrik Ibsen, *Rosmersholm*

Such is the universal desire for fame that those who achieve it accidentally or unwillingly will wait in vain for pity.

For many weeks after the capture of the Shacklewell Ripper, Strike had feared that his greatest detective triumph might have dealt his career a fatal blow. The smatterings of publicity his agency had hitherto attracted seemed now like the two submersions of the drowning man before his final descent to the depths. The business for which he had sacrificed so much, and worked so hard, relied largely on his ability to pass unrecognised in the streets of London, but with the capture of a serial killer he had become lodged in the public imagination, a sensational oddity, a jokey aside on quiz shows, an object of curiosity all the more fascinating because he refused to satisfy it.

Having wrung every last drop of interest out of Strike's ingenuity in catching the Ripper, the papers had exhumed Strike's family history. They called it 'colourful', though to him it was a lumpen internal mass that he had carried

with him all his life and preferred not to probe: the rock star father, the dead groupie mother, the army career that ended with the loss of half his right leg. Grinning journalists bearing chequebooks had descended on the only sibling with whom he had shared a childhood, his half-sister, Lucy. Army acquaintances had given off-the-cuff remarks that, shorn of what Strike knew was rough humour, assumed the appearance of envy and disparagement. The father whom Strike had only met twice, and whose surname he did not use, released a statement through a publicist, implying a non-existent, amicable relationship that was proceeding far from prying eyes. The aftershocks of the Ripper's capture had reverberated through Strike's life for a year, and he was not sure they were spent yet.

Of course, there was an upside to becoming the best-known private detective in London. New clients had swarmed to Strike in the aftermath of the trial, so that it had become physically impossible for him and Robin to cover all the jobs themselves. Given that it was advisable for Strike to keep a low profile for a while, he had remained largely office-bound for several months while subcontracted employees – mostly ex-police and military, many from the world of private security – took on the bulk of the work, Strike covering nights and paperwork. After a year of working on as many jobs as the enlarged agency could handle, Strike had managed to give Robin an overdue pay rise, settle the last of his outstanding debts and buy a thirteen-year-old BMW 3 series.

Lucy and his friends assumed that the presence of the car and additional employees meant that Strike had at last achieved a state of prosperous security. In fact, once he had paid the exorbitant costs of garaging the car in central London and met payroll, Strike was left with almost nothing

to spend on himself and continued to live in two rooms over the office, cooking on a single-ringed hob.

The administrative demands freelance contractors made and the patchy quality of the men and women available to the agency were a constant headache. Strike had found only one man whom he had kept on semi-permanently: Andy Hutchins, a thin, saturnine ex-policeman ten years older than his new boss, who had come highly recommended by Strike's friend in the Met, Detective Inspector Eric Wardle. Hutchins had taken early retirement when he had been struck by a sudden bout of near-paralysis of his left leg, followed by a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. When he had applied for contract work, Hutchins had warned Strike that he might not always be fit; it was, he explained, an unpredictable disease, but he had not relapsed in three years. He followed a special low-fat diet that to Strike sounded positively punitive: no red meat, no cheese, no chocolate, nothing deep-fried. Methodical and patient, Andy could be trusted to get the job done without constant supervision, which was more than could be said for any of Strike's other hires apart from Robin. It seemed incredible to him, still, that she had walked into his life as a temporary secretary to become his partner and outstanding colleague.

Whether they were still friends, though, was another question.

Two days after Robin and Matthew's wedding, when the press had driven him out of his flat, while it was still impossible to turn on the TV without hearing his own name, Strike had sought refuge, in spite of invitations from friends and his sister, in a Travelodge near Monument station. There he had attained the solitude and privacy he craved; there he had been free to sleep for hours undisturbed; and there he had downed nine cans of lager and become increasingly desirous

of speaking to Robin with each empty can that he threw, with diminishing accuracy, across the room into the bin.

They had had no contact since their hug on the stairs, to which Strike's thoughts had turned repeatedly in the ensuing days. He was sure that Robin would be going through a hellish time, holed up in Masham while deciding whether to pursue a divorce or an annulment, arranging the sale of their flat while dealing with both press and family fallout. What exactly he was going to say when he reached her, Strike did not know. He only knew that he wanted to hear her voice. It was at this point, drunkenly searching his kit bag, that he discovered that in his sleep-deprived haste to leave his flat, he had not packed a recharging lead for his mobile, which was out of battery. Undeterred, he had dialled directory enquiries and succeeded, after many requests to repeat himself more clearly, in getting connected to Robin's parents' house.

Her father had answered.

'Hi, c'n'I speak t'Robinplease?'

'To Robin? I'm afraid she's on her honeymoon.'

For a muzzy moment or two, Strike had not quite comprehended what he had been told.

'Hello?' Michael Ellacott had said, and then, angrily, 'I suppose this is another journalist. My daughter's abroad and I would like you to stop calling my house.'

Strike had hung up, then continued to drink until he passed out.

His anger and disappointment had lingered for days and were in no way abated by his awareness that many would say that he had no claims upon his employee's private life. Robin wasn't the woman he had thought her if she could have got meekly on a plane with the man he mentally referred to as 'that twat'. Nevertheless, something close to depression weighed upon him while he sat in his Travelodge with his

brand-new recharging lead and more lager, waiting for his name to disappear from the news.

Consciously seeking to distract himself from thoughts of Robin, he had ended his self-imposed isolation by accepting an invitation that he would usually have avoided: dinner with Detective Inspector Eric Wardle, Wardle's wife April and their friend Coco. Strike knew perfectly well that he was being set up. Coco had previously tried to find out through Wardle whether Strike was single.

She was a small, lithe, very pretty girl with tomato-red hair, a tattoo artist by trade and a part-time burlesque dancer. He ought to have read the danger signs. She was giggly and slightly hysterical even before they started drinking. Strike had taken her to bed in the Travelodge in the same way he had drunk nine cans of Tennent's.

Coco had taken some shaking loose in the weeks that followed. Strike did not feel good about it, but one advantage of being on the run from the press was that one-night stands found it far harder to track you down.

One year on, Strike had no idea why Robin had chosen to remain with Matthew. He supposed her feelings for her husband ran so deep that she was blind to what he really was. He was in a new relationship himself, now. It had lasted ten months, the longest since he had split up with Charlotte, who had been the only woman whom he had ever contemplated marrying.

The emotional distance between the detective partners had become a simple fact of daily existence. Strike could not fault Robin's work. She did everything she was told promptly, meticulously and with initiative and ingenuity. Nevertheless, he had noticed a pinched look that had never been there before. He thought her slightly jumpier than

usual and, once or twice while parcelling out work between his partner and subcontractors, he had caught an uncharacteristic blank, unfocused expression that troubled him. He knew some of the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and she had now survived two near-fatal attacks. In the immediate aftermath of losing half his leg in Afghanistan, he, too, had experienced dissociation, finding himself suddenly and abruptly removed from his present surroundings to those few seconds of acute foreboding and terror that had preceded the disintegration of the Viking in which he had been sitting, and of his body and military career. He had been left with a deep dislike of being driven by anybody else and, to this day, with dreams of blood and agony that sometimes woke him, bathed in sweat.

However, when he had attempted to discuss Robin's mental health in the calm, responsible tones of her employer, she had cut him off with a finality and a resentment that he suspected could be traced to the sacking. Thereafter, he had noticed her volunteering for trickier, after-dark assignments and it had been something of a headache to arrange work so that he did not appear to be trying, as in fact he was, to keep her on the safest, most mundane jobs.

They were polite, pleasant and formal with each other, talking about their private lives in the broadest brushstrokes, and then only when necessary. Robin and Matthew had just moved house and Strike had insisted that she take a full week off to do it. Robin had been resistant, but Strike had overruled her. She had taken very little leave all year, he reminded her, in a tone that brooked no argument.

On Monday, the latest of Strike's unsatisfactory subcontractors, a cocky ex-Red Cap Strike had not known while in the service, had driven his moped into the rear of a taxi he was

supposed to be tailing. Strike had enjoyed sacking him. It had given him somebody on whom to vent his anger, because his landlord had also chosen this week to inform Strike that, along with nearly every other owner of office space in Denmark Street, he had sold out to a developer. The threat of losing both office and home now loomed over the detective.

To set the seal on a particularly shitty few days, the temp he had hired to cover basic paperwork and answer the phone in Robin's absence was as irritating a woman as Strike had ever met. Denise talked nonstop in a whiny, nasal voice that carried even through the closed door of his inner office. Strike had latterly resorted to listening to music on headphones, with the result that she had had to bang on the door repeatedly and shout before he heard her.

'What?'

'I've just found this,' said Denise, brandishing a scribbled note in front of him. 'It says "clinic" . . . there's a word beginning with "V" in front . . . the appointment's for half an hour's time – should I have reminded you?'

Strike saw Robin's handwriting. The first word was indeed illegible.

'No,' he said. 'Just throw it away.'

Mildly hopeful that Robin was quietly seeking professional help for any mental problems she might be suffering, Strike replaced his earphones and returned to the report he was reading, but found it hard to concentrate. He therefore decided to leave early for the interview he had scheduled with a possible new subcontractor. Mainly to get away from Denise, he was meeting the man in his favourite pub.

Strike had had to avoid the Tottenham for months in the aftermath of his capture of the Shacklewell Ripper, because journalists had lain in wait for him here, word having got out that he was a regular. Even today, he glanced around

suspiciously before deciding that it was safe to advance on the bar, order his usual pint of Doom Bar and retire to a corner table.

Partly because he had made an effort to give up the chips that were a staple of his diet, partly because of his workload, Strike was thinner now than he had been a year ago. The weight loss had relieved pressure on his amputated leg, so that both the effort and the relief of sitting were less noticeable. Strike took a swig of his pint, stretching his knee from force of habit and enjoying the relative ease of movement, then opened the cardboard file he had brought with him.

The notes within had been made by the idiot who had crashed his moped into the back of the taxi, and they were barely adequate. Strike couldn't afford to lose this client, but he and Hutchins were struggling to cover workload as it was. He urgently needed a new hire, and yet he wasn't entirely sure that the interview he was about to conduct was wise. He had not consulted Robin before making the bold decision to hunt down a man he had not seen for five years, and even as the door of the Tottenham opened to admit Sam Barclay, who was punctual to the minute, Strike was wondering whether he was about to make an almighty mistake.

He would have known the Glaswegian almost anywhere as an ex-squaddie, with his T-shirt under his thin V-neck jumper, his close-cropped hair, his tight jeans and over-white trainers. As Strike stood up and held out his hand, Barclay, who appeared to have recognised him with similar ease, grinned and said:

'Already drinking, aye?'

'Want one?' asked Strike.

While waiting for Barclay's pint, he watched the ex-Rifleman in the mirror behind the bar. Barclay was only a little over thirty, but his hair was prematurely greying. He

was otherwise exactly as Strike remembered. Heavy browed, with large round blue eyes and a strong jaw, he had the slightly beaky appearance of an affable owl. Strike had liked Barclay even while working to court-martial him.

‘Still smoking?’ Strike asked, once he’d handed over the beer and sat down.

‘Vapin’ now,’ said Barclay. ‘We’ve had a baby.’

‘Congratulations,’ said Strike. ‘On a health kick, then?’

‘Aye, somethin’ like that.’

‘Dealing?’

‘I wasnae dealin’,’ said Barclay hotly, ‘as you fuckin’ well know. Recreational use only, pal.’

‘Where are you buying it now, then?’

‘Online,’ said Barclay, sipping his pint. ‘Easy. First time I did it, I thought, this cannae fuckin’ work, can it? But then I thought, “Och, well, it’s an adventure.” They send it to you disguised in fag packets and that. Choose off a whole menu. Internet’s a great thing.’

He laughed and said, ‘So whut’s this all about? Wasnae expectin’ to hear from *you* any time soon.’

Strike hesitated.

‘I was thinking of offering you a job.’

There was a beat as Barclay stared at him, then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

‘Fuck,’ he said. ‘Why didn’t ye say that straight off, like?’

‘Why d’you think?’

‘I’m no vapin’ every night,’ said Barclay earnestly. ‘I’m no, seriously. The wife doesnae like it.’

Strike kept his hand closed on the file, thinking.

He had been working a drugs case in Germany when he had run across Barclay. Drugs were bought and sold within the British army as in every other part of society, but the Special Investigation Branch had been called in to investigate

what appeared to be a rather more professional operation than most. Barclay had been fingered as a key player and the discovery of a kilo brick of prime Moroccan hash among his effects had certainly justified an interview.

Barclay insisted that he had been stitched up and Strike, who was sitting in on his interrogation, was inclined to agree, not least because the Rifleman seemed far too intelligent not to have found a better hiding place for his hashish than the bottom of an army kit bag. On the other hand, there was ample evidence that Barclay had been using regularly, and there was more than one witness to the fact that his behaviour was becoming erratic. Strike felt that Barclay had been lined up as a convenient scapegoat, and decided to undertake a little side excavation on his own.

This threw up interesting information relating to building materials and engineering supplies that were being reordered at a thoroughly implausible rate. While it was not the first time that Strike had uncovered this kind of corruption, it so happened that the two officers in charge of these mysteriously vanishing and highly resaleable commodities were the very men so keen to secure Barclay's court martial.

Barclay was startled, during a one-to-one interview with Strike, to find the SIB sergeant suddenly interested, not in hashish, but in anomalies relating to building contracts. At first wary, and sure he would not be believed given the situation in which he found himself, Barclay finally admitted to Strike that he had not only noticed what others had failed to see, or chosen not to enquire into, but begun to tabulate and document exactly how much these officers were stealing. Unfortunately for Barclay, the officers in question had got wind of the fact that he was a little too interested in their activities, and it was shortly after this that a kilo of hashish had turned up in Barclay's effects.

When Barclay showed Strike the record he had been keeping (the notebook had been hidden a good deal more skilfully than the hashish), Strike had been impressed by the method and initiative it displayed, given that Barclay had never been trained in investigative technique. Asked why he had undertaken the investigation for which nobody was paying, and which had landed him in so much trouble, Barclay had shrugged his broad shoulders and said ‘no right, is it? That’s the army they’re robbin’. Taxpayers’ money they’re fuckin’ pocketin’.

Strike had put in many more hours on the case than his colleagues felt was merited, but finally, with Strike’s additional investigations into the matter to add weight, the dossier on his superiors’ activities that Barclay had compiled led to their conviction. The SIB took credit for it, of course, but Strike had made sure that accusations against Barclay were quietly laid to rest.

‘When ye say “work”,’ Barclay wondered aloud now, as the pub hummed and tinkled around them, ‘ye mean detective stuff?’

Strike could see that the idea appealed.

‘Yeah,’ said Strike. ‘What have you been doing since I last saw you?’

The answer was depressing, though not unexpected. Barclay had found it hard to get or keep a regular job in the first couple of years out of the army and had been doing a bit of painting and decorating for his brother-in-law’s company.

‘The wife’s bringin’ in most o’ the money,’ he said. ‘She’s got a good job.’

‘OK,’ said Strike, ‘I reckon I can give you a couple of days a week for starters. You’ll bill me as a freelancer. If it doesn’t work out, either of us can walk away at any time. Sound fair?’

‘Aye,’ said Barclay, ‘aye, fair enough. What are you paying, like?’

They discussed money for five minutes. Strike explained how his other employees set themselves up as private contractors and how receipts and other professional expenses should be brought into the office for reimbursement. Finally he opened the file and slid it around to show Barclay the contents.

‘I need this guy followed,’ he said, pointing out a photograph of a chubby youth with thick curly hair. ‘Pictures of whoever he’s with and what he’s up to.’

‘Aye, all right,’ said Barclay, getting out his mobile and taking pictures of the target’s photograph and address.

‘He’s being watched today by my other guy,’ said Strike, ‘but I need you outside his flat from six o’clock tomorrow morning.’

He was pleased to note that Barclay did not query the early start.

‘Whut happened to that lassie, though?’ Barclay enquired as he put his phone back into his pocket. ‘The one who was in the papers with ye?’

‘Robin?’ said Strike. ‘She’s on holiday. Back next week.’

They parted with a handshake, Strike enjoying a moment’s fleeting optimism before remembering that he would now have to return to the office, which meant proximity to Denise, with her parrot-like chatter, her habit of talking with her mouth full and her inability to remember that he detested pale, milky tea.

He had to pick his way through the ever-present roadworks at the top of Tottenham Court Road to get back to his office. Waiting until he was past the noisiest stretch, he called Robin to tell her that he had hired Barclay, but his call went straight to voicemail. Remembering that she was supposed to be at the mysterious clinic right now, he cut the call without leaving a message.

Walking on, a sudden thought occurred to him. He had assumed that the clinic related to Robin's mental health, but what if—?

The phone in his hand rang: the office number.

'Hello?'

'Mr Strike?' said Denise's terrified squawk in his ear. 'Mr Strike, could you come back quickly, please? Please – there's a gentleman – he wants to see you very urgently—'

Behind her, Strike heard a loud bang and a man shouting.

'Please come back as soon as you can!' screamed Denise.

'On my way!' Strike shouted and he broke into an ungainly run.

2

... he doesn't look the sort of man one ought to allow in here.

Henrik Ibsen, *Rosmersholm*

Panting, his right knee aching, Strike used the handrail to pull himself up the last few steps of the metal staircase leading to his office. Two raised voices were reverberating through the glass door, one male, the other shrill, frightened and female. When Strike burst into the room, Denise, who was backed against the wall, gasped, 'Oh, thank God!'

Strike judged the man in the middle of the room to be in his mid-twenties. Dark hair fell in straggly wisps around a thin and dirty face that was dominated by burning, sunken eyes. His T-shirt, jeans and hoodie were all torn and filthy, the sole of one of his trainers peeling away from the leather. An unwashed animal stench hit the detective's nostrils.

That the stranger was mentally ill could be in no doubt. Every ten seconds or so, in what seemed to be an uncontrollable tic, he touched first the end of his nose, which had grown red with repeated tapping, then, with a faint hollow thud, the middle of his thin sternum, then let his hand drop

to his side. Almost immediately, his hand would fly to the tip of his nose again. It was as though he had forgotten how to cross himself, or had simplified the action for speed's sake. Nose, chest, hand at his side; nose, chest, hand at his side; the mechanical movement was distressing to watch, and the more so as he seemed barely conscious that he was doing it. He was one of those ill and desperate people you saw in the capital who were always somebody else's problem, like the traveller on the Tube everybody tried to avoid making eye contact with and the ranting woman on the street corner whom people crossed the street to avoid, fragments of shattered humanity who were too common to trouble the imagination for long.

'You him?' said the burning-eyed man, as his hand touched nose and chest again. 'You Strike? You the detective?'

With the hand that was not constantly flying from nose to chest, he suddenly tugged at his flies. Denise whimpered, as if scared he might suddenly expose himself, and, indeed, it seemed entirely possible.

'I'm Strike, yeah,' said the detective, moving around to place himself between the stranger and the temp. 'You OK, Denise?'

'Yes,' she whispered, still backed against the wall.

'I seen a kid killed,' said the stranger. 'Strangled.'

'OK,' said Strike, matter-of-factly. 'Why don't we go in here?'

He gestured to him that he should proceed into the inner office.

'I need a piss!' said the man, tugging at his zip.

'This way, then.'

Strike showed him the door to the toilet just outside the office. When the door had banged shut behind him, Strike returned quietly to Denise.

‘What happened?’

‘He wanted to see you, I said you weren’t here and he got angry and started punching things!’

‘Call the police,’ said Strike quietly. ‘Tell them we’ve got a very ill man here. Possibly psychotic. Wait until I’ve got him into my office, though.’

The bathroom door banged open. The stranger’s flies were gaping. He did not seem to be wearing underpants. Denise whimpered again as he frantically touched nose and chest, nose and chest, unaware of the large patch of dark pubic hair he was exposing.

‘This way,’ said Strike pleasantly. The man shuffled through the inner door, the stench of him doubly potent after a brief respite.

On being invited to sit down, the stranger perched himself on the edge of the client’s chair.

‘What’s your name?’ Strike asked, sitting down on the other side of the desk.

‘Billy,’ said the man, his hand flying from nose to chest three times in quick succession. The third time his hand fell, he grabbed it with his other hand and held it tightly.

‘And you saw a child strangled, Billy?’ said Strike, as in the next room Denise gabbled:

‘Police, quickly!’

‘What did she say?’ asked Billy, his sunken eyes huge in his face as he glanced nervously towards the outer office, one hand clasping the other in his effort to suppress his tic.

‘That’s nothing,’ said Strike easily. ‘I’ve got a few different cases on. Tell me about this child.’

Strike reached for a pad and paper, all his movements slow and cautious, as though Billy were a wild bird that might take fright.

‘He strangled it, up by the horse.’

Denise was now gabbling loudly into the phone beyond the flimsy partition wall.

‘When was this?’ asked Strike, still writing.

‘Ages . . . I was a kid. Little girl it was, but after they said it was a little boy. Jimmy was there, he says I never saw it, but I did. I saw him do it. Strangled. I saw it.’

‘And this was up by the horse, was it?’

‘Right up by the horse. That’s not where they buried her, though. Him. That was down in the dell, by our dad’s. I seen them doing it, I can show you the place. She wouldn’t let me dig, but she’d let you.’

‘And Jimmy did it, did he?’

‘Jimmy never strangled nobody!’ said Billy angrily. ‘He saw it with me. He says it didn’t happen but he’s lying, he was there. He’s frightened, see.’

‘I see,’ lied Strike, continuing to take notes. ‘Well, I’ll need your address if I’m going to investigate.’

He half-expected resistance, but Billy reached eagerly for the proffered pad and pen. A further gust of body odour reached Strike. Billy began to write, but suddenly seemed to think better of it.

‘You won’t come to Jimmy’s place, though? He’ll fucking tan me. You can’t come to Jimmy’s.’

‘No, no,’ said Strike soothingly. ‘I just need your address for my records.’

Through the door came Denise’s grating voice.

‘I need someone here quicker than that, he’s very disturbed!’

‘What’s she saying?’ asked Billy.

To Strike’s chagrin, Billy suddenly ripped the top sheet from the pad, crumpled it, then began to touch nose and chest again with his fist enclosing the paper.

‘Don’t worry about Denise,’ said Strike, ‘she’s dealing with another client. Can I get you a drink, Billy?’

‘Drink of what?’

‘Tea? Or coffee?’

‘Why?’ asked Billy. The offer seemed to have made him even more suspicious. ‘Why do you want me to drink something?’

‘Only if you fancy it. Doesn’t matter if you don’t.’

‘I don’t need medicine!’

‘I haven’t got any medicine to give you,’ said Strike.

‘I’m not mental! He strangled the kid and they buried it, down in the dell by our dad’s house. Wrapped in a blanket it was. Pink blanket. It wasn’t my fault. I was only a kid. I didn’t want to be there. I was just a little kid.’

‘How many years ago, do you know?’

‘Ages . . . years . . . can’t get it out of my head,’ said Billy, his eyes burning in his thin face as the fist enclosing the piece of paper fluttered up and down, touching nose, touching chest. ‘They buried her in a pink blanket, down in the dell by my dad’s house. But afterwards they said it was a boy.’

‘Where’s your dad’s house, Billy?’

‘She won’t let me back now. *You* could dig, though. *You* could go. Strangled her, they did,’ said Billy, fixing Strike with his haunted eyes. ‘But Jimmy said it was a boy. Strangled, up by the—’

There was a knock on the door. Before Strike could tell her not to enter, Denise had poked her head inside, much braver now that Strike was here, full of her own importance.

‘They’re coming,’ she said, with a look of exaggerated meaning that would have spooked a man far less jumpy than Billy. ‘On their way now.’

‘Who’s coming?’ demanded Billy, jumping up. ‘Who’s on their way?’

Denise whipped her head out of the room and closed the

door. There was a soft thud against the wood, and Strike knew that she was leaning against it, trying to hold Billy in.

‘She’s just talking about a delivery I’m expecting,’ Strike said soothingly, getting to his feet. ‘Go on about the—’

‘What have you done?’ yelled Billy, backing away towards the door while he repeatedly touched nose and chest. ‘Who’s coming?’

‘Nobody’s coming,’ said Strike, but Billy was already trying to push the door open. Meeting resistance, he flung himself hard against it. There was a shriek from outside as Denise was thrown aside. Before Strike could get out from around the desk, Billy had sprinted through the outer door. They heard him jumping down the metal stairs three at a time and Strike, infuriated, knowing that he had no hope of catching a younger and, on the evidence, fitter man, turned and ran back into his office. Throwing up the sash window, he leaned outside just in time to see Billy whipping around the corner of the street out of sight.

‘Bollocks!’

A man heading inside the guitar shop opposite stared around in some perplexity for the source of the noise.

Strike withdrew his head and turned to glare at Denise, who was dusting herself down in the doorway to his office. Incredibly, she looked pleased with herself.

‘I tried to hold him in,’ she said proudly.

‘Yeah,’ said Strike, exercising considerable self-restraint. ‘I saw.’

‘The police are on their way.’

‘Fantastic.’

‘Would you like a cup of tea?’

‘No,’ he said through gritted teeth.

‘Then I think I’ll go and freshen up the bathroom,’ she said, adding in a whisper, ‘I don’t think he used the flush.’