

I

*Why did you let your eyes so rest on me,
And hold your breath between?
In all the ages this can never be
As if it had not been.*

Mary Elizabeth Coleridge
A Moment

Of all the couples sitting in the Rivoli Bar at the Ritz that Thursday evening, the pair that was having the most conspicuously good time was not, in fact, a couple.

Cormoran Strike and Robin Ellacott, private detectives, business partners and self-declared best friends, were celebrating Robin's thirtieth birthday. Both had been slightly self-conscious on first arriving in the bar, which resembled an art deco jewel box, with its walls of dark wood and gold, and its frosted panels of Lalique glass, because each was aware that this outing was unique in the almost five years they'd known one another. Never before had they chosen to spend an evening in each other's company outside work, without the presence of other friends or colleagues, or the pretext of injury (because there'd been an occasion a few weeks previously, when Strike had accidentally given his partner two black eyes and bought her a takeaway curry as recompense).

Even more unusually, both had had enough sleep, and each was looking their best. Robin was wearing a figure-hugging blue dress, her long strawberry-blonde hair clean and loose, and her partner had noticed the appreciative glances she'd drawn from male drinkers as she passed. He'd already complimented her on the opal lying in the hollow at the base of her throat, which had been a thirtieth birthday gift from her parents. The tiny diamonds surrounding it made a

glittering halo in the bar's golden lights, and whenever Robin moved, sparks of scarlet fire twinkled in the opal's depths.

Strike was wearing his favourite Italian suit, with a white shirt and dark tie. His resemblance to a broken-nosed, slightly overweight Beethoven had increased now that he'd shaved off his recently grown beard, but the waitress's warm smile as she handed Strike his first Old Fashioned reminded Robin of what her ex-husband's new wife, Sarah Shadlock, had once said of the detective:

'He is strangely attractive, isn't he? Bit beaten-up-looking, but I've never minded that.'

What a liar she'd been: Sarah had liked her men smoothly handsome, as proven by her relentless and ultimately successful pursuit of Matthew.

Sitting facing each other in leopard-print chairs at their table for two, Strike and Robin had initially subsumed their slight awkwardness in work talk. Discussion of the cases currently on the detective agency's books carried them through a powerful cocktail apiece, by which time their increasingly loud laughter had started drawing glances from both barmen and customers. Soon Robin's eyes were bright and her face slightly flushed, and even Strike, who was considerably larger than his partner and well able to handle his alcohol, had taken enough bourbon to make him feel pleasantly buoyant and loose-limbed.

After their second cocktails, talk became more personal. Strike, who was the illegitimate son of a rock star he'd met only twice, told Robin that one of his half-sisters, Prudence, wanted to meet him.

'Where does she fit in?' Robin asked. She knew that Strike's father had been married three times, and that her partner was the result of a one-night stand with a woman most commonly described in the press as a 'supergroupie', but she was hazy about the rest of the family tree.

'She's the other illegitimate,' said Strike. 'Few years younger than me. Her mother was that actress, Lindsey Fanthrope? Mixed-race woman? She's been in everything. *EastEnders*, *The Bill* ...'

'D'you want to meet Prudence?'

'Not sure,' Strike admitted. 'Can't help feeling I've got enough relatives to be going on with. She's also a therapist.'

'What kind?'

'Jungian.'

His expression, which compounded wariness and distaste, made Robin laugh.

The Ink Black Heart

‘What’s wrong with being a Jungian therapist?’

‘I dunno . . . I quite liked her from her texts, but . . .’

Trying to find the right words, Strike’s eyes found the bronze panel on the wall behind Robin’s head, which showed a naked Leda being impregnated by Zeus in the form of a swan.

‘. . . well, she said she hasn’t had an easy time of it either, having him as a father. But when I found out what she does for a living . . .’

His voice trailed away. He drank more bourbon.

‘You thought she was being insincere?’

‘Not exactly insincere . . .’ Strike heaved a sigh. ‘I’ve had enough matchbox psychologists telling me why I live the way I do and tracing it all back to my family, so-called. Prudence said in one of her texts that she’d found forgiving Rokeby “healing”— Sod this,’ said Strike abruptly, ‘it’s your birthday, let’s talk about *your* family. What does your dad do for a living? You’ve never told me.’

‘Oh, haven’t I?’ said Robin, with mild surprise. ‘He’s a professor of sheep medicine, production and reproduction.’

Strike choked on his cocktail.

‘What’s funny?’ Robin asked, eyebrows raised.

‘Sorry,’ said Strike, coughing and laughing simultaneously. ‘Wasn’t expecting it, that’s all.’

‘He’s quite an authority, I’ll have you know,’ said Robin, mock-offended.

‘Professor of sheep— What was the rest of it, again?’

‘Medicine, production and reprod— *Why’s* that so funny?’ Robin said, as Strike guffawed a second time.

‘Dunno, maybe the “production” and “reproduction” thing,’ said Strike. ‘And also the sheep.’

‘He’s got forty-six letters after his name. I counted when I was a kid.’

‘Very impressive,’ said Strike, taking another sip of bourbon and attempting to look serious. ‘So, when did he first become interested in sheep? Was this a lifelong thing or did a particular sheep catch his eye when he was—’

‘He doesn’t *shag* them, Strike.’

The detective’s renewed laughter made heads turn.

‘His older brother got the family farm, so Dad did veterinary science at Durham and, yeah, he specialised— Stop bloody laughing! He’s also the editor of a magazine.’

‘Please tell me it’s about sheep.’

‘Yes, it is. *Sheep Management*,’ said Robin, ‘and before you ask, no, they don’t have a photo feature called “Readers’ Sheep”.’

This time Strike’s bellow of laughter was heard by the whole bar.

‘Keep it down,’ said Robin, smiling but aware of the many eyes now upon them. ‘We don’t want to be banned from *another* bar in London.’

‘We didn’t get banned from the American Bar, did we?’

Strike’s memory of the aftermath of attempting to punch a suspect in the Stafford Hotel was hazy, not because he’d been drunk, but because he’d been lost to everything but his own rage.

‘They might not have barred us *explicitly*, but try going back in there and see what kind of a welcome you get,’ said Robin, fishing one of the last olives out of the dishes that had arrived with their first drink. Strike had already single-handedly finished the crisps.

‘Charlotte’s father kept sheep,’ Strike said, and Robin felt that small frisson of interest she always experienced when he mentioned his former fiancée, which was almost never.

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, on Arran,’ said Strike. ‘He had a massive house there with his third wife. Hobby farming, you know. Probably a tax write-off. They were evil-looking bastards – the sheep, that is – can’t remember the name of the breed. Black and white. Huge horns and yellow eyes.’

‘They sound like Jacobs,’ said Robin, and responding to Strike’s grin, she said, ‘I grew up with massive piles of *Sheep Management* next to the loo – obviously I know sheep breeds . . . What’s Arran like?’

She really meant, ‘What was Charlotte’s family like?’

‘Pretty, from what I can remember, but I was only at the house once. Never got a return invitation. Charlotte’s father hated the sight of me.’

‘Why?’

Strike downed the last of his cocktail before answering.

‘Well, there were a few reasons, but I think top of the list was that his wife tried to seduce me.’

Robin’s gasp was far louder than she’d intended.

‘Yeah. I must’ve been about twenty-two, twenty-three. She was at least forty. Very good-looking, if you like them coke-thin.’

‘How – what . . .?’

‘We’d gone to Arran for the weekend. Scheherazade – that was the stepmother – and Charlotte’s father were very big drinkers. Half the family had drug problems as well, all the stepsisters and half-brothers.’

‘The four of us sat up boozing after dinner. Her father wasn’t

The Ink Black Heart

over-keen on me in the first place – hoping for something a lot more blue-blooded. They'd put Charlotte and me in separate bedrooms on different floors.

'I went up to my attic room about two in the morning, stripped off, fell into bed very pissed, turned out the light and a couple of minutes later the door opened. I thought it was Charlotte, obviously. The room was pitch black. I moved over, she slid in beside me –'

Robin realised her mouth was agape and closed it.

'– stark naked. Still didn't twig – I had most of a bottle of whisky inside me. She – ah – reached for me – if you know what I'm saying –'

Robin clapped a hand over her mouth.

'– and we kissed and it was only when she whispered in my ear that she'd noticed me looking at her tits when she'd bent over the fire that I realised I was in bed with my hostess. Not that it matters, but I hadn't been looking at her tits. I'd been getting ready to catch her. She was so pissed, I thought she was going to topple into the fire when she threw a log on it.'

'What did you do?' Robin asked through her fingers.

'Shot out of bed like I had a firework up my arse,' said Strike, as Robin began to laugh again, 'hit the washstand, knocked it over and smashed some giant Victorian jug. She just sniggered. I had the impression she thought I'd be straight back in bed with her once the shock wore off. I was trying to find my boxers in the dark when Charlotte opened the door for real.'

'Oh my *God*.'

'Yeah, she didn't take too kindly to finding me and her stepmother naked in the same bedroom,' said Strike. 'It was a toss-up which of us she wanted to kill most. The screaming woke Sir Anthony. He came charging upstairs in his brocade dressing gown, but he was so pissed he hadn't tied it properly. He turned the lights on and stood there holding a shooting stick, oblivious to the fact that his cock was hanging out until his wife pointed it out.'

'“Anthony, we can see Johnny Winkle.”'

Robin now laughed so hard that Strike had to wait for her to compose herself before continuing the story. At the bar a short distance from their table, a silver-haired man was watching Robin with a slight smirk on his face.

'What then?' Robin asked breathlessly, mopping her eyes with the miniature napkin that had come with her drink.

‘Well, as far as I can remember, Scheherazade didn’t bother to justify herself. If anything, she seemed to think it was all a bit of a laugh. Charlotte lunged at her and I held Charlotte back, and Sir Anthony basically seemed to take the view that it was all my fault for not locking my bedroom door. Charlotte was a bit inclined that way too. But life in squats with my mother hadn’t really prepared me for what to expect from the aristocracy. On balance, I’d have to say people were a lot better behaved in the squats.’

He raised his hand to indicate to the smiling waitress that they were ready for more drinks, and Robin, whose ribs were sore from laughing, got to her feet.

‘Need the loo,’ she said breathlessly, and the eyes of the silver-haired man on the bar stool followed her as she walked away.

The cocktails had been small but very strong, and Robin, who spent so much of her life running surveillance in trainers, was out of the habit of wearing heels. She had to grasp the handrail firmly while navigating the red-carpeted stairs down to the Ladies’ Room, which was more palatial than any Robin had visited before. The soft pink of a strawberry macaron, it featured circular marble sinks, a velvet sofa and walls covered in murals of nymphs standing in water lily-strewn lakes.

Having peed, Robin straightened her dress and checked her mascara in the mirror, expecting it to have run with all the laughing. Washing her hands, she thought back over the story Strike had just told her. However funny she’d found it, it was also slightly intimidating. In spite of the vast array of human vagaries, many of them sexual, that Robin had encountered in her detective career, she sometimes felt herself to be inexperienced and unworldly compared to other women her age. Robin’s personal experience of the wilder shores of sexual adventurousness was non-existent. She’d only ever had one sexual partner and had reasons beyond the usual for wishing to trust the person with whom she went to bed. A middle-aged man with a patch of vitiligo under his left ear had once stood in the dock and claimed that nineteen-year-old Robin had invited him into a dark stairwell for sex, and that he’d choked her into unconsciousness because she’d told him she ‘liked it rough’.

‘I think my next drink had better be water,’ Robin said five minutes later, as she dropped back into her seat opposite Strike again. ‘Those are seriously strong cocktails.’

‘Too late,’ said Strike, as the waitress set fresh glasses in front of them. ‘Fancy a sandwich, mop up some of the alcohol?’

The Ink Black Heart

He passed her the menu. The prices were exorbitant.

‘No, listen—’

‘I wouldn’t have invited you to the Ritz if I wasn’t prepared to cough up,’ said Strike with an expansive gesture. ‘I’d have ordered a cake, but—’

‘Ilsa’s already done it, for tomorrow night?’ Robin guessed.

The following evening a group of friends, Strike included, would be giving Robin a birthday dinner, organised by their mutual friend.

‘Yeah. I wasn’t supposed to tell you, so act surprised. Who’s coming to this dinner, anyway?’ Strike asked. He had a slight curiosity about whether there were any people he didn’t know about: specifically, men.

Robin listed the names of the couples.

‘... and you and me,’ she finished.

‘Who’s Richard?’

‘Max’s new boyfriend,’ said Robin. Max was her flatmate and landlord, an actor who rented out a bedroom because he couldn’t make his mortgage repayments without a lodger. ‘I’m starting to wonder if it isn’t time to move out of Max’s,’ she added.

The waitress appeared and Strike ordered them both sandwiches before turning back to Robin.

‘Why’re you thinking of moving out?’

‘Well, the TV show Max is in pays really well and they’ve just commissioned a second series, and he and Richard seem very keen on each other. I don’t want to wait until they ask me to leave. Anyway’ – Robin took a sip of her fresh cocktail – ‘I’m thirty. It’s about time I was out on my own, don’t you think?’

Strike shrugged.

‘I’m not big on having to do things by certain dates. That’s more Lucy’s department.’

Lucy was the sister with whom Strike had spent most of his childhood, because they’d shared a mother. He and Lucy generally held opposing views on what constituted life’s pleasures and priorities. It distressed Lucy that Strike, who was nearly forty, continued to live alone in two rented rooms over his office, without any of the stabilising obligations – a spouse, children, a mortgage, parent-teacher associations, duty Christmas parties with neighbours – that their mother, too, had ruthlessly shirked.

‘Well, I think it’s about time I had my own place,’ said Robin. ‘I’ll miss Wolfgang, but—’

‘Who’s Wolfgang?’

‘Max’s dachshund,’ said Robin, surprised by the sharpness of Strike’s tone.

‘Oh . . . thought it was some German bloke you’d taken a shine to.’

‘Ha . . . no,’ said Robin.

She really was feeling quite drunk now. Hopefully the sandwiches would help.

‘No,’ she repeated, ‘Max isn’t the type to try and set me up with Germans. Makes quite a nice change, I must say.’

‘Do many people try and set you up with Germans?’

‘Not Germans, but . . . Oh, you know what it’s like. Vanessa keeps telling me to get myself on Tinder and my cousin Katie wants me to meet some friend of hers who’s just moved to London. They call him Axeman.’

‘Axeman?’ repeated Strike.

‘Yes, because his name’s . . . something that sounds like Axeman. I can’t remember,’ said Robin, with a vague wave of the hand. ‘He’s recently divorced, so Katie thinks we’d be perfect for each other. I don’t really understand why it would make two people compatible, just because they’ve screwed up a marriage each. In fact, if anything—’

‘*You* didn’t screw up your marriage,’ said Strike.

‘I did,’ Robin contradicted him. ‘I shouldn’t have married Matthew at all. It was a mess, and it got worse as we went on.’

‘He was the one who had the affair.’

‘But I was the one who didn’t want to be there. I was the one who tried to end it on the honeymoon, then chickened out—’

‘Did you?’ said Strike, to whom this was new information.

‘Yes,’ said Robin. ‘I knew, deep down, knew it was all wrong . . .’

For a moment she was transported back to the Maldives, and those hot nights she’d paced alone on the white sand outside their villa while Matthew slept, asking herself whether she was in love with Cormoran Strike.

The sandwiches arrived and Robin requested a glass of water. For a minute or so they ate in silence, until Strike said,

‘I wouldn’t go on Tinder.’

‘*You* wouldn’t, or I shouldn’t?’

‘Both,’ said Strike. He’d managed to finish one sandwich and start on his second before Robin had taken two bites. ‘In our line of work it’s not smart to put yourself online too much.’

The Ink Black Heart

‘That’s what I told Vanessa,’ said Robin. ‘But she said I could use a fake name until I got keen on someone.’

‘Nothing like lying about your own name to build a firm foundation of trust,’ said Strike and Robin laughed again.

Strike ordered more cocktails and Robin didn’t protest. The bar was more crowded now than when they’d first sat down, the hum of conversation louder, and the crystals hanging from the chandeliers were each surrounded by a misty aureole. Robin now felt an indiscriminate fondness for everyone in the room, from the elderly couple talking quietly over champagne and the bustling bartenders in their white jackets to the silver-haired man who smiled at her as she gazed around. Most of all, she liked Cormoran Strike, who was giving her a wonderful, memorable and costly birthday evening.

As for Strike, who genuinely hadn’t ogled the breasts of Scheherazade Campbell all those years ago, he was doing his best to extend the same courtesy to his business partner, but she’d never looked better to him: flushed with drink and laughter, her red-blond hair shining in the diffused glow from the golden cupola above them. When she bent forward suddenly to pick up something on the floor, a deep cavern of cleavage was revealed behind the hanging opal.

‘Perfume,’ she said, straightening up, having retrieved the small purple bag she’d carried from Liberty, in which was Strike’s birthday present. ‘Want to put some on.’

She untied the ribbon, unwrapped the parcel and extracted the square white bottle, and Strike watched her spray a small amount on each wrist, and then – he forced himself to look away – down into the hollow between her breasts.

‘I love it,’ she said, wrist to her nose. ‘Thank you.’

He caught a small waft of perfume from where he sat: his sense of smell slightly impaired from long years of smoking, he nevertheless detected roses and an undertone of musk, which made him think of sun-warmed skin.

Fresh cocktails arrived.

‘I think she’s forgotten my water,’ said Robin, sipping her Manhattan. ‘This has got to be my last. I don’t wear heels much any more. Don’t want to faceplant in the middle of the Ritz.’

‘I’ll get you a cab.’

‘You’ve spent enough.’

‘We’re doing OK, money-wise,’ said Strike. ‘For a change.’

‘I know – isn’t it fantastic?’ sighed Robin. ‘We’ve actually got a healthy bank balance *and* tons of work coming in . . . Strike, we’re a *success*,’ she said, beaming, and he felt himself beaming back.

‘Who’d have thought?’

‘I would,’ said Robin.

‘When you met me I was well-nigh bankrupt, sleeping on a camp bed in my office and had one client.’

‘So? I liked that you hadn’t given up,’ said Robin, ‘and I could tell you were really good at what you did.’

‘The hell could you tell that?’

‘Well, I watched you doing it, didn’t I?’

‘Remember when you brought in that tray of coffee and biscuits?’ said Strike. ‘To me and John Bristow, that first morning? I couldn’t fathom where you’d got it all. It was like a conjuring trick.’

Robin laughed.

‘I only asked the bloke downstairs.’

‘And you said “we”. “I thought, having offered the client coffee, *we* ought to provide it.”’

‘Your memory,’ said Robin, surprised that he had the exact words on the tip of his tongue.

‘Yeah, well . . . you’re not a . . . usual person,’ said Strike.

He picked up his almost-empty drink and raised it.

‘To the Strike and Ellacott Detective Agency. And happy thirtieth.’

Robin picked up her glass, clinked it against his and drained it.

‘Shit, Strike, look at the time,’ she said suddenly, catching sight of her watch. ‘I’ve got to be up at five, I’m supposed to be following Miss Jones’s boyfriend.’

‘Yeah, OK,’ grunted Strike, who could happily have spent another couple of hours here in his comfy chair, bathed in golden light, the smell of rose and musk drifting across the table. He signalled for the bill.

As Robin had anticipated, she was definitely unsteady on her high heels as she crossed the bar, and it took her far longer than it should have done to locate the token for her coat in the bottom of her handbag.

‘Could you hold this, please?’ she asked Strike, handing him the bag containing her perfume while she rummaged.

Having retrieved her coat, Strike had to help her put it on.

‘I am *definitely* quite drunk,’ Robin muttered, taking back the little

The Ink Black Heart

purple bag, and seconds later she proved it by turning her heel on the edge of the circular scarlet rug that covered the lobby's marble floor and slipping sideways. Strike caught her, and kept his arm around her waist as he steered her out of one of the side entrances flanking the revolving door, because he didn't trust her in it.

'Sorry,' said Robin as they walked carefully down the steep stone steps at the front of the Ritz, Strike's arm still around her waist. She liked the feel of him, bulky and warm beside her: it had more often been she who had supported him, on those occasions when the stump of his right leg had refused to continue to bear his weight after some ill-advised piece of overexertion. He was holding her so tightly that her head was almost resting on his chest and she could smell the aftershave he'd put on for this special occasion, even over the usual smell of old cigarettes.

'Taxi,' said Strike, pointing, as a black cab came gliding smoothly towards them.

'Strike,' said Robin, leaning back into him so as to look into his face.

She'd intended to thank him, to tell him what a wonderful evening she'd had, but when their eyes connected no words came. For a minute sliver of time everything around them blurred, as though they stood in the eye of some slow-motion tornado of purring cars and passing lights, of pedestrians and cloud-dappled sky, and only the feel and smell of each other was real, and Strike, looking down into her upturned face, forgot in that second every stern resolution that had restrained him for nearly five years and made an almost infinitesimal dip of his head, his mouth heading for hers.

And unwittingly, Robin's expression moved from happiness to fear. He saw it and straightened up again, and before either of them could quite process what had just happened the mundane roar of a motor-bike courier heralded the return of the world to its regular course; the tornado had passed and Strike was guiding Robin towards the taxi's open door, and she was falling back onto its solid seat.

'Night,' he called in after her. The door had slammed and the taxi had pulled away before Robin, dazed, could decide whether she felt more shock, elation or regret.

2

*Come let me talk with thee, allotted part
Of immortality – my own deep heart!*

Maria Jane Jewsbury
To My Own Heart

The days following their night at the Ritz were, for Robin, full of agitation and suspense. She was well aware that Strike had posed a wordless question and that she'd silently returned a 'no', far more forcefully than if she hadn't been full of bourbon and vermouth, and caught off guard. Now there was an increase of reserve in Strike's manner, a slightly forced briskness and a determined avoidance of all personal subjects. Barriers that had come down over their five years working together seemed to have been re-erected. Robin was afraid she'd hurt Strike, and she didn't underestimate what it took to hurt a man as quietly confident and resilient as her partner.

Meanwhile, Strike was full of self-recrimination. He shouldn't have made that foolish, unconsummated move: hadn't he concluded months previously that a relationship with his partner was impossible? They spent too much time together, they were legally bound to each other by the business, the friendship was too valuable to him to jeopardise, so why, in the golden glow of those exorbitantly priced cocktails, had he jettisoned every good resolution and yielded to powerful impulse?

Self-reproach mingled with feelings still less pleasant. The fact was that Strike had very rarely suffered rebuffs from women, because he was unusually good at reading people. Never before had he made a move without being certain that his advance would be welcome, and he'd certainly never had any woman react the way Robin had: with

The Ink Black Heart

alarm that, in his worst moments, Strike thought could have been disgust. He might be broken-nosed, overweight and one-legged, with dense, dark curly hair that schoolfriends had dubbed pube-like, but that hadn't ever stopped him pulling gorgeous women before. Indeed, male friends, to whose eyes the detective's sexual appeal was largely invisible, had often expressed resentment and amazement that he had such a successful sex life. But perhaps it was insufferable vanity to think that the attraction he'd held for previous girlfriends lingered, even as his morning cough worsened and grey hairs started to appear among the dark brown?

Worse still was the idea that he'd totally misinterpreted Robin's feelings over a period of years. He'd assumed her slight awkwardness at times when they were forced into physical or emotional proximity had the same root as his own: a determination not to succumb to temptation. In the days following her silent rejection of his kiss, he kept going over incidents he'd thought proved the attraction was mutual, returning again and again to the fact that she'd broken off her first dance at her wedding to follow him, leaving Matthew abandoned on the dance floor. She and Strike had hugged at the top of the hotel stairs, and as he'd held her in her wedding dress he could have sworn he'd heard the same dangerous thought in her mind as filled his: let's run away, and to hell with the consequences. Had he imagined it all?

Perhaps he had. Perhaps Robin had wanted to run, but merely back to London and the job. Maybe she saw him as a mentor and a friend, but nothing more.

It was in this unsettled and depressed mood that Strike greeted his fortieth birthday, which was marked by a restaurant dinner organised, as Robin's had been, by their mutual friends Nick and Ilsa.

Here, for the first time, Robin met Strike's oldest friend from Cornwall, Dave Polworth, who, as Strike had once predicted, Robin didn't much like. Polworth was small and garrulous, commented negatively on every aspect of London life and referred to women, including the waitress who served them, as 'tarts'. Robin, who was at the opposite end of the table from Strike, spent much of the evening making laboured small talk with Polworth's wife, Penny, whose main topics of conversation were her two children, how expensive everything in London was, and what a twat her husband was.

Robin had bought Strike a rare test pressing of Tom Waits's first album, *Closing Time*, for his birthday. She knew Waits was his

favourite artist, and her best memory of the evening was the look of unfeigned surprise and pleasure on Strike's face when he unwrapped it. She thought she sensed some return of his usual warmth when he thanked her, and she hoped the gift would convey the message that a woman who found him repugnant wouldn't have gone to so much effort to buy him something she knew he'd really want. She wasn't to know that Strike was asking himself whether Robin considered him and the sixty-five-year-old Waits contemporaries.

A week after Strike's birthday, the agency's longest-serving subcontractor, Andy Hutchins, handed in his notice. It wasn't entirely a surprise: although his MS was in remission, the job was taking its toll. They gave Andy a farewell drinks party, which everyone except the other subcontractor, Sam Barclay, attended, because he'd drawn the short straw and was currently following a target through the West End.

While Strike and Hutchins talked shop on the other side of the pub table, Robin talked to their newest hire, Michelle Greenstreet, known to her new colleagues, at her own request, as Midge. She was a Mancunian ex-policewoman, tall, lean and very fit, a gym fanatic with short, slicked-back dark hair and clear grey eyes. Robin had already been made to feel slightly inadequate by the sight of Midge's six-pack as she stretched to reach the topmost file balanced on a cabinet, but she liked her directness, and the fact that she didn't seem to hold herself superior to Robin, who alone at the agency wasn't ex-police or military. Tonight, Midge confided in Robin for the first time that a major reason for wishing to relocate to London had been a bad break-up.

'Was your ex police as well?' asked Robin.

'Nope. She never held a job for more than a coupla months,' said Midge, with more than a trace of bitterness. 'She's an undiscovered genius who's either gonna write a bestselling novel, or paint a picture that'll win the Turner Prize. I was out all day making money to pay the bills, and she was at home pissing around online. I ended it when I found her dating profile on Zoosk.'

'God, I'm sorry,' said Robin. 'My marriage ended when I found a diamond earring in our bed.'

'Yeah, Vanessa told me,' said Midge, who'd been recommended to the agency by Robin's policewoman friend. 'She said you didn't keep it, either, you fookin' mug.'

The Ink Black Heart

'I'd've flogged it,' rasped Pat Chauncey, the office manager, breaking unexpectedly into the conversation. Pat was a gravel-voiced fifty-seven-year-old with boot-black hair and teeth the colour of old ivory, who chain-smoked outside the office and sucked constantly on an e-cigarette inside it. 'I had a woman send me my first husband's Y-fronts in the post, cheeky cow.'

'Seriously?' asked Midge.

'Oh yeah,' growled Pat.

'What did you do?' Robin asked.

'Pinned 'em to the front door so they were the first thing he'd see when he come home from work,' said Pat. She took a deep pull on her e-cigarette and said, 'And I sent her somefing back she wouldn't forget.'

'What?' said Robin and Midge in unison.

'Never you mind,' said Pat. 'But let's just say it wouldn't spread easy on toast.'

The three women's shouts of laughter drew Strike and Hutchins's attention: Strike caught Robin's eye and she held it, grinning. He looked away feeling slightly more cheerful than he'd done in a while.

The departure of Andy placed a not-unfamiliar strain on the agency, because it currently had several time-consuming jobs on its books. The first and longest-running of these involved trying to dig up dirt on the ex-boyfriend of a client nicknamed Miss Jones, who was locked into a bitter custody battle over her baby daughter. Miss Jones was a good-looking brunette who had an almost embarrassing yen for Strike. He might have derived a much needed ego-boost from her unabashed pursuit of him, were it not for the fact that he found her combination of entitlement and neediness thoroughly unattractive.

Their second client was also the wealthiest: a Russian-American billionaire who lived between Moscow, New York and London. A couple of extremely valuable objects had recently disappeared from his house on South Audley Street, though the security alarm hadn't been tripped. The client suspected his London-based stepson and wished to catch the young man in the act without alerting either the police or his wife, who was disposed to consider her hard-partying and jobless offspring a misunderstood paragon. Hidden spy cameras, monitored by the agency, were now concealed in every corner of the house. The stepson, who was known at the agency as Fingers, was likewise under

surveillance in case he tried to sell the missing Fabergé casket or the Hellenistic head of Alexander the Great.

The agency's last case, codenamed Groomer, was in Robin's view a particularly nasty one. A well-known international correspondent for an American news channel had recently broken up with her boyfriend of three years, who was an equally successful TV producer. Shortly after their acrimonious split, the journalist had found out that her ex-partner was still in contact with her seventeen-year-old daughter, whom Midge had dubbed Legs. The seventeen-year-old, who was tall and slender, with long blonde hair, was already featuring in gossip columns, partly because of her famous surname and partly because she'd already done some modelling. Though the agency hadn't yet witnessed sexual contact between Legs and Groomer, their body language was far from parental-filial during their secret meet-ups. The situation had plunged Legs' mother into a state of fury, fear and suspicion that was poisoning her relationship with her daughter.

To everyone's relief, because they'd been so stretched after Andy's departure, at the start of December Strike succeeded in poaching an ex-Met officer by the name of Dev Shah from a rival detective agency. There was bad blood between Strike and Mitch Patterson, the boss of the agency in question, which dated back to the time Patterson had put Strike himself under surveillance. When Shah answered the question 'Why d'you want to leave Patterson Inc?' with the words 'I'm tired of working for cunts,' Strike hired him on the spot.

Like Barclay, Shah was married with a young child. He was shorter than both of his new male colleagues, with eyelashes so thick that Robin thought they looked fake. Everyone at the agency took to Dev: Strike, because he was quick on the uptake and methodical in his record-keeping; Robin, because she liked his dry sense of humour and what she inwardly termed a lack of dickishness; Barclay and Midge, because Shah demonstrated early on that he was a team player without any noticeable need to outshine the other subcontractors; and Pat, as she admitted in her gravelly voice to Robin while the latter was handing in her receipts one Friday, because he 'could give Imran Khan a run for his money, couldn't he? Those eyes!'

'Mm, very handsome,' said Robin indifferently, tallying her receipts. Pat had spent much of the previous twelve months openly hoping that Robin might fall for the charms of a previous subcontractor whose

The Ink Black Heart

good looks had been equalled by his creepiness. Robin could only be grateful that Dev was married.

She'd been forced to temporarily shelve her flat-hunting plans because of the long hours she was working, but still volunteered to stake out the billionaire's house over Christmas. It suited her to have an excuse not to return to her parents in Masham, because she was certain Matthew and Sarah would be parading their new-born child, sex so far unknown, around the familiar streets where once, as teenagers, he and Robin had strolled hand in hand. Robin's parents were disappointed, and Strike was clearly uncomfortable about taking her up on the offer.

'It's fine,' said Robin, disinclined to go into her reasons. 'I'd rather stay in London. You missed Christmas last year.'

She was starting to feel mentally and physically exhausted. She'd worked almost non-stop for the past two years, years that had included separation and divorce. The recent increase of reserve between her and Strike was playing on her mind, and little as she'd wanted to go back to Masham, the prospect of working through the festive season was undeniably depressing.

Then, in mid-December, Robin's favourite cousin, Katie, issued a last-minute invitation for her to join a skiing party over New Year. A couple had dropped out on finding out that the wife was pregnant; the chalet was already paid for, so Robin only needed to buy flights. She'd never skied in her life, but as Katie and her husband would be taking it in turns to look after their three-year-old son while the other was on the slopes, there'd always be somebody around to talk to, should she not wish to spend most of her time falling over on the nursery slopes. Robin thought the trip might give her the sense of perspective and serenity that was eluding her in London. Only after she'd accepted did she learn that in addition to Katie and her husband, and a couple of mutual friends from Masham, Hugh 'Axeman' Jacks would be of the party.

She told Strike none of these details, only that she had the chance of a skiing trip and would like to take it, which meant slightly increasing the amount of time she'd planned to take off over New Year. Aware that Robin was owed far more leave than she was proposing to take, Strike agreed without hesitation, and wished her a good time.