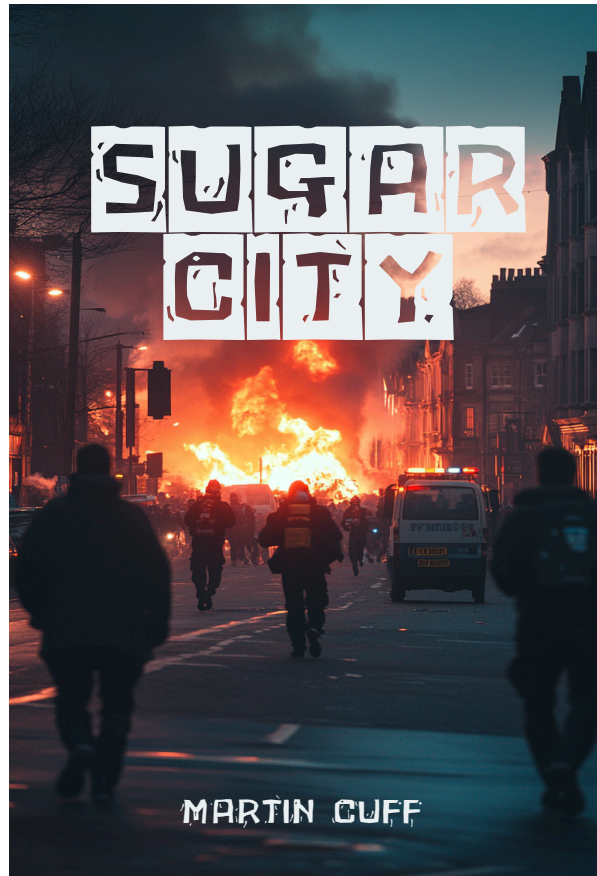


SUGAR CITY

Sample Pages 1-55



by

Martin Cuff

Martin Cuff
10 Warnham Court
Warnham
West Sussex RH12 3QF

Tel: +381 62 107 3365
E: martin@martincuff.com
W: www.martincuff.com

LAST WEEK

REDLAND, BRISTOL

“Don’t worry, we’ll be fine.”

Dorette Singer watched Amy Wilken stuff the last of her things – phone, purse, lip ice, sunglasses, kleenex - into her handbag. Amy closed the bag’s clasp and looked around the kitchen in case she’d forgotten anything else.

“If you don’t have it, you don’t need it,” said Dorette sagely, all the warmth of Port of Spain in her smile.

Amy shucked a laugh. “Dory, you’re a life saver, I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

In his high-chair, Amy’s boy Archie, a chubby cherub just over two years old, was funnelling fruit pieces into his mouth with his fingers and a spork. “Bye,” he said, opening and closing his plump little fist by way of a wave. “Loveyooooo.”

“Love you too, to the moon and back. Be good for Auntie Dory.”

But Archie’s attention was drawn back to a grape that’d broken loose from his plate and was jiggling inexplicably across his food tray. Then, a yelp from a funny brown dog on CBeebies turned him away entirely.

Amy sighed. “I think I’m ready.”

“You’re ready,” Dorette said smiling, the beads in her braids clattering softly when she laughed.

One more look around and Amy said: “Right, I’m done,” before being very much not done, and stopping to clean Archie’s mouth with a Wet Wipe. Archie pulled a face and strained to look past her to watch the cartoon.

“Go,” said Dorette. “We’ll be fine.” She took the cloth from Amy and put it into the bin under the sink.

“Thanks, Dory. Have a good day. See you later, then.”

But Amy would not: either have a good day - or see her son again.

When Amy’d gone, Dorette spent the morning cleaning and tidying, and tending to the child before Archie’d finally become tired enough for a nap in the cot in his room upstairs.

Then the doorbell went.

This was not unusual; it was a walkable suburb, and the streets were a festival of sweepers from the council, uptight Jehovah’s Witnesses, joggers and beggars and activists with petitions, moms wheeling buggies and food delivery riders on electric bikes. When Dori opened the front door, there was a young black man waiting on the step. He was wearing an old-fashioned suit worn at the knees and elbows, and a yellowing white shirt with a too-wide tie, cracked sneakers on his feet. He was clutching a battered IKEA blue bag stuffed with unidentifiable things and held out a leaf of paper, laminated but creased and curling at the corners like it’d been fished from a bin.

“I collect,” he said in halting, broken English. “For refugee. Food. Clothes. Maybe baby thing.”

He didn’t smile.

Dorette was drawn to his eyes; they were buggy and jaundiced and emotionless. He looked like he might already be stoned. She tightened her grip on the door frame.

“Sorry?”

He gestured vaguely at the paper but didn’t offer to hand it over. His eyes darted past her into the hallway, and she intuitively pulled the door closer behind her.

“Collect. Stapleton Arms Hotel.” This was a former business hotel recently accepting asylum seekers. “For poor peoples,” he said. “Refugee.”

He thrust out the IKEA bag so it fell open; she could see a jumble of cast offs – bobbling jumpers, stretched t-shirts, a doll.

Now Dorette was kind and Dorette was sweet, but you didn’t live forty-eight years in East Bristol without having some smarts. She was alert to a scam.

“This isn’t my house. I just work here,” she said.

The man didn’t move. He stared at her, his face unlined and unreadable.

“I can’t give you anything,” she added. “You’ll have to come back when the owners are home.”

The man looked around casually, at the house and at its neighbours: fresh paint, climbing roses, affluence. “Rich peoples this road,” he snarled. “Plenty money.”

Dorette said nothing but pulls a face intended to close this discussion down right now.

“Yes, it is so,” the man said, a kind of lazy insolence salting into his words. “Rich peoples must do help.” His alarming yolky eyes still scanned the entrance hall behind her.

“Well, I have nothing to give you here, I’m sorry.”

She turned to end this conversation.

“You have baby?” he said suddenly.

Her stomach clenched. She glanced down; the monitor in her hand was quiet, green light steady.

“You need to leave,” she said, her voice crisp and loud.

He didn’t argue. Just shrugged and walked back down the path, shoes scuffing the paving stone, head low.

Dorette closed the door. Slid the chain. She stood still for a beat, listening.

Dorette checked on Archie.

Heading up the stairs, she saw the boy’s bedroom door standing ajar.

She knew she didn’t leave it like that.

She reached the child’s room and pushed the door open, glancing into the darkened interior. She snapped on the overhead light.

The cot was empty.

She dropped to her knees, old knees, looking under the bed, behind the nursing chair, in the back of the cupboards, in case he was hiding.

Panic rising, she ran to the master bedroom, but it was undisturbed, as she’d left it when she’d made it up this morning.

Dorette called out: “Archie. Archie,” the panic raising her pitch to a wail.

Still, there was no reply.

She ran back into the boy’s bedroom, disbelieving, devastated.

And then she saw the outline of a man’s boot print on the thick cream carpet.

BARRY BRENNAN SHOW
SEVERN VALLEY TALK RADIO 102.2FM

I hate to be the voice of reason – again – but just asking the question that's on everyone's mind: how is it that a two-year-old child vanishes in broad daylight, and the only person of interest just happens to be from the refugee hotel down the road?

Really?

These people come here with no papers, no history, no police checks, no accountability at all? But we're told it's all fine, nothing to see here?

Really?

As I said, I'm just asking questions.

TODAY

CLIFTONWOOD

It was a beautiful morning in late June as I drove up from the coast towards Bristol. The North Somerset countryside unfolding around me, all green and enticing like a Wordsworth ode, the road snaking between thick hedgerows bristling with cow parsley, red campion and woundwort. The air turned spongy, like the wraps of a weighted blanket, and I headed inland through Leigh Woods. I slowed and rolled down the windows to see if I could hear the song of morning birds – the Robins, and Song Thrushes, Blackbirds and Chiffchaffs, Blackcaps and Willow Warblers – joining the morning chorus in the dappled light. As the sun rose in the sky, I slowed to pass a young mother on a bay hunter with a small girl behind her on a pretty Welsh pony with a braided mane. The woman waived, an elegant regal dismissal. Warmth and tree pollen hung in the air, a morning of possibility and excitement.

But at top of the hour and the news came on the radio leading with the ongoing kidnapping of a small child, Archie Wilken, from his home in Bristol last week.

“The boy, aged two and a half, was snatched from his home in Redlands around midday, last Thursday while under the supervision of the family helper, Ms. Dorette Singer of Hillfields. Ms. Singer was distracted by an asylum seeker collecting at the front door, and when she returned inside, the child was missing,” said the on-air journalist.

“No ransom has been reported and no other motive given. Detectives say they aren’t ruling anything out at this time. Police have asked anyone who witnessed anything....”

And just as quickly, the news ended, and the station returned to its normal programming of witless banter and Sabrina Carpenter wailing *Please Please Please*.

Please.

Crossing the bridge into the city, I made my way through increasingly narrow streets up into Cliftonwood, where cheerful houses were stacked and painted like a children's bookshelf - coral, mint, pastel lemon, teal. I pulled to a halt in Ambrose Street, in front of the cream-coloured Victorian that was home to Quagga Films, my tv production company.

Quagga was in the middle of production on our latest project and most of my team was already out on set. My bookkeeper Meryl Jonas was in; she was drinking tea and watching the news on her phone to rev up her day.

"That little boy's still missin'," said Meryl as I passed her office.

"Yeah, I heard," I said.

"Can't believe there are no leads or nothin'," said Meryl, holding up her phone for me to see the drama being recycled every few minutes. "It's like Lucy Deaver, all o'er agin."

Six-year-old Lucy had been snatched from a Spanish holiday flat in 2007 and had never been found. Her disappearance remained a potent news story in Britain, and the years that followed had been a tangle of creepy suspects, false accusations, mistaken sightings and investigative dead-ends covering half the continent.

"I really hope not," I said.

In all sorts of ways.

I found my assistant Toy bustling round the kitchen making coffee. There were three cups laid out on a tray, with a milk jug and sugar bowl.

Fancy, I thought.

And then a quick calculation: “Who are these for?”

The filter coffee machine stopped dripping, and Toy pulled it off its hot plate to pour me a mug. As she handed it to me, she said: “Hate to be bearer of bad news, *ori mi*, but you have visitors.”

It wasn’t even 8am. “That’s a bit early. Who’s here?”

“Your mother.” She grimaced comically.

My face fell. “My *mother*?”

“And she brought a friend.”

“Who?” I asked.

“White. Old. Scary,” said Toy, shrugging her shoulders.

“You’ll need to be way more specific.” My mother’s friendship circle attracted a certain *type*.

“Pearls?” said Toy.

“Twin set?” added Meryl.

“Helmet hair?”

“*Blue* helmet hair.”

I shrugged a “*still no idea*.”

“What do they want?” I asked instead.

Toy cocked her head to one side, regarding me like I was certifiable. “Uh-ahh, do I look like someone who will ax your own mother questions?” She liked to put on her Nigerian accent when she was scoring points.

“Wise,” I said. You did not want to ask Thelma Forsythe too much of her business.

“Surprise of the year then, my sister,” said Toy, grinning. “They’re sitting up there, inside your office, VIP.”

I took a deep breath and turned to go. “I can’t believe you invited my actual mother to cross the threshold. Do you *never* watch horror movies?”

My mother Thelma and her friend were sitting primly at the large meeting table in my office when I entered.

“Darling,” Mum said, getting up from her chair and air-kissing me. She hovered her perfectly made-up lips just above my skin. Gripping my arms by my side, she then took a step back and appraised me. “Did you pick up weight?” she asked.

Sigh.

“Hello, Mother,” I grimaced. “And nice to see you too, Aunty Margaret.”

From the second chair, Margaret Berenson regarded me with hood-lidded hostility. Margaret Berenson had never liked me, not since I’d chopped off one of her daughter’s pigtails in nursery school. She glanced at her watch as if I was wasting her time.

“Well, you’re both up early,” I said, forcing myself to smile. “And you’re lucky you caught me.”

“I called the girl in advance to check you’d be here,” said Mother.

“The *girl* is nearly thirty years old, Mother, and her name is Toy.”

She regarded me blankly, like I’d said something in Urdu, or Algonquin.

Toy entered with the coffees and some glasses of cold water and began to serve them at the table.

“Toy,” I said, “How kind of you to let Mrs. Forsythe know the details of my schedule.”

Sarcasm rocks.

“You’re welcome, Mallory. Always happy to help,” said Toy.

Sarcasm rocks: except when other people do it.

“Anything else I can get you, Mrs. F?” Toy said brightly.

“Oh no thank you dear. You’re very kind.”

My mother. The Duchess of Cliftonwood, apparently.

Doing mental thumbclicks to get their attention, I said: “Sorry, I haven’t got long today. We’re filming over in Wells, and I have to leave in a few minutes.”

“One of your little shoots?” said Mother.

The “little shoot” was *The Queen’s Warrant* - a multi-platform drama on Queen Elizabeth I’s 1597 decree to deport all the black people from England. Glorious period costumes, rich historic locations, smart political experts, leading Tudor historians, as well as several of the greatest actors of their generation – and I’d pulled all the funding, production and the distribution deals together myself, out of my own sheer force of will.

My mother still thought I should get a proper job.

“Yup and today is a shoot day. So, what’s up? What can I help you with?”

“Darling,” said Mother. “It’s your friend, Janey.”

Janey, Jane, Berenson - she of the missing childhood pigtail - was Margaret’s only child, and she was not in fact my friend. That wasn’t through lack of parental effort, it has to be said. Throughout our childhoods and across our teen years, our mothers had aggressively attempted (and miserably failed) to cement a friendship between us. I was a creative loudmouth with an unruly streak; Jane was a science geek who read Physics

textbooks for fun. I snuck out of school to meet boys and drink peach schnapps when I was fifteen, Jane was on the science team and the maths team and stayed a virgin until she was long out of high school.

But here's the thing; Jane and I didn't actually dislike each other. We just had absolutely nothing in common, and we were happy enough to let each other be - albeit separately. Unfortunately, our amicable truce was not enough for my mother, nor for Margaret Berenson, who'd interpreted our *entente cordiale* as proof if any were needed of my special failings as a human being.

"What about Janey?" I asked.

Margaret Berenson leaned forward in her chair, wincing with some discomfort as she did. She said: "Janey is missing."

"Missing?" I replied, confused. "What do you mean missing?"

Margaret Berenson had condescension seeping from her pores: "As in, *she cannot be found*. She has not been in contact for several days."

"And that's unusual, is it?"

Margaret looked insulted. But then, Margaret always looked insulted. "Of course it is," she snapped.

"OK, I'm sorry," I responded amicably. "When was the last time you heard from her, then?"

Mrs. Berenson pursed lips which decades of smoking had wrinkled into crepe-y little lines below her sharp, neat nose. "Last Thursday," she said.

Five days ago.

"We usually had brunch together on Thursdays, at the Ivy in Clifton. Last week she didn't turn up and her phone's been off ever since."

“And you say that’s out of character?”

“Mallory, you’ve known Jane since you were three years old,” my mother interjected. “You know it’s out of character.”

I didn’t know anything of the sort, but for the purposes of peace, I concurred that yes, it was probably strange.

“Has there been anything bothering her recently? Enough to make her want to disappear? Boyfriend troubles? Trouble at work?” I asked.

“If something was bothering her, she would have told me.”

I wondered if that was true, though I said nothing. In so many ways, the social media age encourages each of us to present a perfect life, curated to the point of inauthenticity online, and that often requires fooling even those closest to us.

Margaret came straight to the point. “Thelma says you can find people. I need you to find Janey.”

“I research stories for films and tv shows,” I said, back-peddalling. “It’s a bit of a different skillset.”

“You know what to ask,” my mother noted. “You know *who* to ask.”

“Still - it’s not my area of expertise.”

“But you have a Private Investigator’s licence,” Mother said firmly.

“I also have a 25-metre swimming medal from when I was seven. And a Brownie Badge for tying good knots. Neither of these things are really relevant to my life on a day-to-day basis today.”

“But you qualified,” she protested.

I sighed. But only because she was right.

I do indeed have a Private Investigator's license which says I can gather information, conduct interviews and write all kinds of reports. I understand lawful interceptions, surveillance protocols and the proper way to preserve evidence without contaminating it. I passed the background checks and have enough knowledge of the law to know when I'm breaking it. I'd even passed – *don't laugh* - the ethics exam. But I'd done all of it to help my tv research activities – to open doors when television journalism couldn't - not to be a crime fighter.

"Have you been to the police?" I asked.

"I went to New Bridewell on Friday when I couldn't get hold of her," said Margaret.

"And you filed a report?"

Margaret shot a testy look that said: *obviously*.

"Who did you speak to there?" I asked.

"A Detective Menadue."

"He took it seriously?"

"She. Yes, *she* did."

"Well, if the police are on to it, I don't know what more you think I can do...."

"They haven't even made a follow-up call to ask more questions." Margaret Berenson sniffed into a tissue and tucked it back into her sleeve. "That's why I need you to look for her."

"Aunty Margaret, honestly, I don't really have the skillset."

Thelma spoke up. "But you found that missing woman last year." She was referring to the *Homeland* case where I'd unwittingly solved a kidnapping as well as a series of murders and I'd brought a serial killer to justice.

“I did, but it was sort of by accident. Finding that woman wasn’t really *intentional*, it was just luck.”

“So, you won’t help?” said Margaret, folding her arms defiantly. “You won’t help find my daughter, one of your oldest friends?”

I started to say “She’s not...” but thought better of it.

And besides, I couldn’t think of anything else to add that would soothe her fears. As much as I really didn’t want to get involved, she did have a point. In 2022 alone, over 170,000 people were reported missing in the UK – that’s about one every 90 seconds.

And I also suspected that the local force would not be looking very hard right now, not with all the attention that would be given to finding the toddler who’d been kidnapped from his home.

So, I said nothing.

“You’re being so unhelpful, Mallory,” my mother said, clutching her pearls. “You are embarrassing me.”

“I’m not being unhelpful,” I replied suddenly certain that I was whining. “And I don’t mean to embarrass anyone. I’m just trying to think how I can help you better than the police with all their manpower and resources. Me trying to find Janey on my own is really not....”

“Can you at least check her apartment?” asked Margaret.

“You haven’t done that?”

“I knocked on her door twice this weekend. There was no answer. I don’t have keys,” said Mrs. Berenson.

So how do you expect me....?

“Fine,” I said. “When I get a chance, I will go check out Janey’s apartment. You’ll give me the address?”

“I wrote it down,” she said, pushing a piece of paper across the table to me. “It’s in Hotwells.”

“What about her friends? A boyfriend?”

“I made a list. Nice girls...” *None of whom would cut off a pigtail.* “She was seeing someone called Rylan Adams,” Margaret added in a tone that said she still didn’t approve of the match.

“OK,” I said. “I’ll speak to each of them. And what about work?” I asked.

“She’s clinic manager at Queensbury Family Health. At the Whitman Clinic. The private one in Cotham.”

“Anything I should know about that?”

“No, why would there be?” said Margaret.

OK.

“One last thing. And do you have a good photo of her? A recent one?” I asked.

Margaret Berenson opened her phone and flicked through some photos to find one she approved of. “This one?”

It was an image of Jane wrapped up in winter jerseys and a woollen hat, her arms clutched defensively around a bosom that I knew barely existed. She looked drawn and tired.

“This is recent?”

“March this year. She’s lost a bit of weight since then, I think.”

“You think? I thought you said you had brunch together every week?”

Margaret's mouth dropped open, caught out in her lie. Tears stung her eyes - but they were tears of indignation. "Well, we *used* to. We always used to. But for the last few weeks, she always cancelled with an excuse. Work commitments or something similar."

"And?"

"I haven't seen her since the middle of March."

It was mid-June now.

"Has she even been in the city since March? Do you know?"

Margaret glowered at me with unrestrained fury. "Of course I know. I'm her mother."

There wasn't much point arguing. I thought about it for a second more and then continued: "OK, so let me take a look at her social media, see if there are any clues to what's going on with her. And I can make some calls to see if there is any record her recent movements on CCTV and the like."

There are around 36000 cameras operating in Bristol alone, of which 1274 are council run; chances are, one of them would have seen something.

"Thank you dear," said my mother.

"I really hope everything's ok and it's just a misunderstanding," I said.

Mrs. Berenson stared at me like I'd been lobotomised.

I think I even held my hands up in defeat.

"I promise I'll see what I can find out," I said. "Before you go, please leave everything important you can think of with Toy. I'll also need you to sign some papers that you give me permission to go into her apartment and stuff and bring away anything useful I might find. I'll start work as soon as I can."

Margaret Berenson nodded curtly but said nothing, the thin line of her mouth settling into a sneer of disdain.

“If that’s all?” I said, beginning to clear up my things.

“Thank you, dear,” said my mother again, getting up from her chair and herding Margaret towards the door.

But as she was leaving, she turned back and said: “Oh, Mallory dear, did you ever call that nice Mr. Wilkinson, whose number I gave you? He’s still looking for an office manager, you know, if you’re interested? A very nice law firm he has. One of the best.”

BISHOP'S PALACE, WELLS

The gardens of the Bishop's Palace in Wells were already theatrical: moat glinting under the walls, mute swans cruising in elegant, lazy loops, mill pools calm and glassy, the Cathedral's austere reflection glittering back from the surface. But today, the gardens had been transformed for the cameras - all gilt and ruby silk, as if Good Queen Bess herself was about to sweep down the path in farthingale and ruff. There were banners across the ramparts, pavilions of crimson and gold, arbours of twisted greenery, and beds of plants and herbs bullied into neat parterres, as though the Queen's gardeners had nipped round just this morning with a pair of shears. In a craft tent off to the left, extras in costume - ruff collars, doublets, overblown hats with explosive feathery plumes – drank coffee and studied their phone screens as they waited for the call. Near the ruined arch of the Great Hall someone was actually strumming a lute, the reedy sound carrying up and over the rose beds like a promise of something recently lost but hope to soon be found.

I arrived while the team was putting the final touches to décor and lighting, checking cables and filters and angles and sound, so I went to the wardrobe trailer to see my old friend Rhys ap-Owen before the cameras rolled.

"I can't believe you cast me as a bad guy," said Rhys when he saw me. "Again."

Rhys was playing Sir Thomas Sherley, the ignoble gentleman with a string of debts who masterminded the evil plan at the heart of *The Queen's Warrant*. In more modern times, Sherley might have been considered an entrepreneur, but in the era of this film, he's little more than a grubbing con-man with more failed business ventures than pox scars. Wood, fish, access, even debt collection, he'd tried everything short of alchemy,

and that, to be honest, was never entirely off the table. Sherley's genius for ideas was never matched by discipline, his optimism by actual business insight; he was a chancer, little more.

In the forthcoming scene, Sherley watches Queen Elizabeth - *Gloriana, Virginia Regina, Good Queen Bess, she of all the names* - receive a petition from a German Merchant called Caspar van Senden who'd recently returned from Spain with nearly ninety Englishman he'd ransomed from Spanish prisons at his own expense. Van Senden was seeking compensation, but Elizabeth was notoriously tight-fisted with her own money. "Make some other proposal," she says to him.

Sherley's plan to deport all of the black people from England starts here.

They were already taking too many English jobs, apparently.

"You play such a *good* horrible person," I said. "Besides: the 'stache is an absolute winner."

Mid-fifties, alpha-male-movie-star-handsome, rugged and square-jawed, and an absolutely raging homosexual, Rhys was sporting a glorious Raleigh-esque moustache that Make-up had tweaked into "*Your Country Needs You*" peaks.

"You think so? I think I might keep it." He twirled the tip with his fingers.

"Don't touch it," said Sunny the wardrobe artist who was finishing his look.

"Sorry."

"You've totes gotta keep the pumpkin breeches too," I said.

Rhys was smoking an electric cigarette and reclining cross-legged, in the lush costume of a gentleman at the court of Queen Elizabeth I - long, dark velvet jerkin, sleeveless and close-fitted, over a slashed doublet of dark green satin. His padded pumpkin breeches, or trunk hose, were of deep burgundy damask, trimmed with black

braid falling puffily to just above the knee, where they met silk stockings pulled taut by discreet garters.

“They do marvellous things to my calves, it’s true,” he said, lifting a leg like a ballet dancer to admire the shape of it.

“Keep still,” said Sunny.

“It’s not exactly comfy though,” Rhys added, fiddling with the cloth of the jacket.

“Don’t touch that either,” said Sunny.

Sunny then put a natty wool cap onto Rhys’s head and adjusted it. Then she picked up a radio and spoke into it.

“This is Sunita; please can you send Rachel to Rhys’s trailer? I need her go-ahead on Sherley.”

Rachel was a historian who specialised in the late Elizabethan era. I was lucky to have her to check the authenticity of every single item on set - including Rhys.

The radio crackled back an affirmative; Rachel was on her way.

Rhys sighed and went to sit down.

“Stand,” said Sunny. “I’m not ironing any of you a single more time.”

When Mike Matombo the director called cut, the actors and extras relaxed, and the crew sprang into action preparing for the next take. I looked around the Video Village at the executive producers clustering around video monitors fed directly by the cameras. They’d viewed the action in real time without being on the camera's immediate path. Two men, two women, different territories, interests and bank accounts.

“Nice,” said Drew Haskill, my US streamer partner. Short, grey-haired, with perfect teeth and a Hollywood perma-tan, he’d supervised productions in fourteen languages on every continent at this point, and he knew the table of global incentives by heart. He had that self-important vibe of a lot of Hollywood men, but he was excited by what he’d seen, I could tell.

“Do you want to do it one more time?” said Saoirse Kennedy, the woman from Heart TV, the British distributor. Well, Saoirse was from Northern Ireland, so her accent was impenetrable. As the more junior of the partners on the ground, she was also on the fussy side, always trying to prove her status and experience asking for more, or different, or again.

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” said Drew, peering closely at the small screen where the footage was replaying. “This looks really great. And anything else we can fix in post. Right, Mallory?”

The producers finally turned to me for my input.

“I thought it was fantastic. Thank you,” I said.

The moneymen on a tv series are usually neither as collaborative nor as appreciative. But I’d earned both collaboration and appreciation in droves. I liked to think that was because my work tapped into something universal in the human condition: empathy.

My breakthrough series, *Campaign*, had told the stories of some of the UK’s most shameful or unlikely military invasions – Haiti in 1793, Iceland in 1940, Buenos Aires in 1806 – but from the point of view of the troops on the ground. Geopolitical History Documentary, yes, but it also included a reality component where we challenged

athletes and hard men to live like our forefathers had. With the help of historians, military experts, medical and health specialists, educators, politicians and elite sportspeople, our series asked: What was it like on? How was your uniform? What did you bring with you, what did you eat, where did you go to the bathroom, how did you avoid typhus or cholera or dysentery or just blistered feet? Where did you sleep and what happened when you got sick? How did you survive?

How could anyone survive?

The series had been so successful that it had spun off into a coffee table book, a series of cookery books, a separate tv show on health and fitness, a theme park, several film tourism products in cities around the world, and some live re-enactments with hundreds of costumed participants that attracted thousands of tourists. There was even a movie in development by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck's company. It won several BAFTAs and International Emmys and had been franchised in Italy, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany and the USA, where productions were ongoing.

Meanwhile, I continued to nurse this fascination for unique events in history that still affect us today. What I cared about wasn't the pageantry of the past, it was the people caught up in it: strip the academic distance from history and make it human again. My driving belief is that if we could vividly connect to the lives of people who lived centuries ago, who were exiled, enslaved, or silenced, then maybe we could learn how not to repeat those cruelties now. It was about the real textures of human experience, about opening the door to understanding our world.

People over there, and people over then, as it were.

This thinking was integral to *The Queen's Warrant*. On paper it was a tv series about a royal decree, a bureaucratic order from the Elizabethan era to deport all the

Black people from England. I mean, that's disturbing enough. But what mattered to me were the lives behind those words: the women who feared being torn from their children, the men threatened by violence, the communities hollowed out by prejudice disguised as policy. I wanted to know who these people were: what they ate for breakfast, what they prayed for, how they mobilised and cared for each other and how they survived.

It was a hard ask of the audience - it demanded empathy, compassion, outrage, dismay – particularly given the current media narrative on refugees. But I was relying on the belief that it's only a loud minority who are xenophobic and the rest of the people are actually quite nice.

Whether my reliance was well placed or not was about to be sorely tested.

On my way from set I saw Reg "Rex" Harris, our head of security, in conversation with Firdoze the 2nd AD. Rex was a retired detective in his sixties now, who'd spent three decades in Avon & Somerset CID before trading in police procedure for call sheets and risk assessments. Firdoze had a clipboard and a cokie pen, and her walkie talkie bleeped at her hip. She looked harassed.

Admittedly, Firdoze always looked harassed.

"Mal, we've got a problem," she said. "People are starting to pull their kids from tomorrow's shoot."

"Because of this kidnapping?" I asked. The incident had already taken on a life of its own; it did not need to be qualified with names.

"Yeah, they want to keep their children safe at home."

“I told her: Even though the kid was taken from his own bed?” said Rex gruffly, with the no-nonsense allergy to bullshit of man who’d once kicked down doors for a living.

“All these public appeals for information all over the TV,” said Firdoze, “the radio, on digital billboards and motorway signs. Child Rescue Alerts. It’s just ... it’s causing as much panic as anything.”

“Listen, Missy,” said Rex trying to hold back a lecture, “We always run safe sets. We always go above and beyond all the usual safeguarding rules. But I can run round and make sure that all of our systems are rock solid, if you notify all the agents and the parents of how we’re managing things?”

“Are there any continuity issues with any of the kids dropping out so far?” I asked.

“No. Not that I know of yet.”

“So, speak with Tanya...” I said. Tanya was the kids’ casting agent, “...if there are problems and ask her to come up with viable solutions. And let me know of any cost implications as soon as possible.”

“OK Mal, thanks. Will do. I hope to God they find this poor child soon. It’s getting jittery out there.”

CLIFTONWOOD AGAIN

I had an early evening dinner down in the harbour, so with some time to kill, I popped back into the office. I found Toy still there, flicking through magnified images on her computer.

“Hey,” I said. “What are you still doing here?”

“I fell into that Jane Berenson rabbit hole, no lie,” she replied.

“You started already?”

“Ah-ah, what do you think?”

I smiled. Toy was a terrier with a bone.

“And? Have you found something?”

“Well, yes and no,” she said. “Got a mo?”

I said I did and pulled a chair up next to her.

Toy swung her computer screen around so I could get a good look at it. She pushed her weave back over her shoulder before continuing. “Mostly I found nothing,” she said, “like - actual radio silence. This Jane sista? She isn’t anywhere online. Like, really, nowhere.”

“Really?” I was surprised. “I’m sure we’re Facebook friends. We used to be, at least.”

“Not anymore. I searched all your accounts. Then I checked direct. She has no Instagram, no Twitter or TikTik account, no Snapchat. Not even Facebook.”

“That’s strange,” I said - though admittedly it wasn’t *that* odd; there’d been several times when I’d been so bored of the constant, mindless distraction that I’d considered deleting my own accounts. Maybe that’s what Jane had done?

“She does have LinkedIn.”

Toy handed me a print-out of Janey’s professional life; an unspectacular progression of mid- to senior management positions of increasing responsibility, primarily in healthcare. About five years ago she’d joined Queensbury Health in Cotham as Centre Manager for the Whitman Clinic.

“What’s the Whitman Clinic?” I asked.

“It’s a Fertility Centre. Been around about fifteen years, far as I can tell. Owned by a Dr. Edward Theunissen. Royal York Crescent, Clifton Prosper – smart,” she said. “He’s 43. Divorced, two kids. Seems respected, supports charities, takes part in the Balloon Festival. Ex wife lives in Castle Carey now.”

I read further on Toy’s handout, it said: *The Whitman Clinic specialises in hormone treatments, fertility surgery, artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, donor sperm and oocytes, surrogacy and gestational carriers, and semen and ovarian tissue cryopreservation.*

“OK, nothing earthshattering then?”

But beyond Jane’s own LinkedIn profile though, there was no activity - no photos, no posts, no likes of other people’s “*I’m delighted to announce*” announcements - no engagement whatsoever.

“The last time she was active was more than two years ago. Who knows when she ducked?”

“What about her boyfriend? Rylan? Or any of the other friends on Margaret’s list? Does Jane appear in anywhere in those accounts?”

“Well,” said Toy with a grin, “this is where it gets interestin’. Her mom dropped four names apart from the boyfriend, yeah? I ran through all their accounts. At least one of each was public. Nothin’ stood out at first. But then: take a look.”

Toy began to lay out A4 screen-grab images from Jane’s friends’ accounts, her extravagantly shaped and painted nails clicking on the tabletop as she put each picture in place. Each of the images included Jane Berenson.

“I started from 2020,” she said.

In the earlier images, Jane Berenson appeared just as I remembered her. Pretty-ish. Auburn hair verging on red, usually in a plain, shoulder-length bob, often tucked under an Alice Band. She never wore make up, always clean skin and hair, no lipstick or nail polish, not even on special occasions. Her clothing was unadorned too, simple Mandarin collar jackets, neat white shirts, long skirts, brogues or loafers. She looked professional, self-contained, not exactly a ball of laughs but she clearly had friends.

Toy went on: “About a year ago, things start to change. She’s standin’ apart, looks like she doesn’t really want to be there. Like maybe somethin’s troubling her.” Toy paused and stood upright to stretch her back. “I don’t know, sha. Maybe I’m readin’ too much into it?”

“I don’t think you are,” I agreed, peering more closely at each image. “She clearly changes quite a lot, doesn’t she? She gets paler and more withdrawn; her smile certainly dims. But it’s such a gradual change, I don’t suppose you’d have noticed if these images weren’t laid out side by side?” I ran my fingers over the images, tracing Janey’s evident mental and physical decline.

“But then,” Toy continued, “from around March of this year, she just vanishes. No pics, no tags, nothin’. Last time she anywhere, it’s the pic her mom gave us, 15th March.”

I looked at the final photograph again, more closely this time. Although she was smiling, the smile seemed mirthless and strained. Jane Berenson looked exhausted, and deeply worried.

“We know she’s been in telephone contact until recently - just last week. But March was the last time her mother saw her,” I said. “She could have left town at any time between now and then?”

“Right. This girl ghosted hard, man. Like, Madam Koi Koi levels of vanish.”

“So, what happened to in March 2025 to make her want to hide away?”

“And what happened last week to make disappear altogether?”

WAPPING WHARF

I got to Lapin at Wapping Wharf just after seven thirty, the bistro engulfed in an aroma of buttered shallots. It was quieter than usual, and I passed between the tables quickly to join my friends. After the requisite kissings-and-greetings, I quickly picked up the direction of the conversation: like much of the city, they were discussing the Archie Wilken kidnapping.

“It’s gotta be the father, right?” Kevin McPherson was saying to the table.

Kevin was the husband of my friend Louisa, also present but blank faced and wishing it would be over soon. Theirs was a marriage that most of us believed would be blessedly short, and without issue. Kevin was handsome but he’d become horribly aware of that fact since joining Hyrox.... shaved chest, designer tattoos and very pleased with the sound of his own voice. “It’s always someone close,” he said.

“It’s not the dad,” said Franco, Eleanor’s sweet, nerdy husband. “I play in the squash ladder with him at Redland Green. I’ve met him a few times. He loved being a dad.”

“Perhaps he flipped? Maybe the kid’s not sleeping? Screaming all the time? Maybe he just lost it?” Kevin shrugged. “Shit happens.”

Louisa looked at him as if indeed it might.

“What about the helper then?” asked Marina. She was a casting director with a pale Irish skin and a shock of red hair that fell straight to her wasp waist. “Could she have had something to do with it?”

"I saw her interviewed on tv," said Eleanor. "She looked completely distraught. Poor darling! Couldn't stop crying."

"Doesn't rule her out, though does it?" said Kevin gracelessly. "And what do you reckon about the story about the refugee?"

Dolores the nanny had claimed she was distracted by a young black man collecting handouts for the asylum hotel. A theory, yet unproven, was that he'd kept her talking just long enough for someone else to get into the back of the house.

"Seems well dodgy to me," Kevin said, answering himself.

"We don't know that for sure," Eleanor interjected. "He might have had nothing to do with it all."

"Yeah, but how likely is that?" said Kevin. "He mentioned the baby."

"If there were two of them, it suggests it was planned," said Marina.

"Which makes it much more scary," said Louisa. "Maybe it's for ransom?"

"But why them? The Wilkens aren't *that* well off," Franco replied, calmly. "I mean, it's Redlands, ok, but that's not Clifton."

"There hasn't been any ransom demand, has there?" asked Eleanor.

Everyone agreed, no, we hadn't heard that.

"We haven't heard that...yet..." added Kevin, portentously.

"The whole town is spooked," Louisa acknowledged.

"That's because the media is out of control," said Marina. "Every ten minutes there's a new story about how there are no breaks in the story. The tabloids have gone feral, every masthead and webpage shrieking '*Are there immigrants in your area?*'"

"There are already protests outside the Stapleton Arms Hotel."

"Did you see that one guy dressed as a Crusader? Complete kook."

“We don’t even know if the asylum seeker was involved,” I said.

“The *Express* says it’s going to release a list of every known refugee hotel in the country.”

“What do you think, Al?” asked Eleanor. “Have you heard anything?”

Alice Bourne was a kick-ass lawyer who could be relied upon to eliminate all the speculative stuff and replace it with facts and figures. She weighed the question carefully before speaking. “Well. First, around 110,000 children are reported missing in the UK every year,” she said.

“What? How?” we responded in unison. “That’s outrageous!”

“I know, it’s a *huge* number, but a lot of that is due to the way statistics are collected. For instance, children’s homes report a kid missing if they leave the home without permission. Some kids in care are reported missing five times a day.

“Anyway, it means the stats are skewed and they don’t reflect the fact that child abductions are actually pretty uncommon in the UK. Also, they’re not usually what you’d think of as kidnapping either. Mostly it’s one of the parents: messy divorces, custody battles that turn ugly, international marriages breaking down where Dad wants to return to Lagos or Beirut or Bangladesh or whatever. But it’s illegal to cross a border with your own child without the written consent from everyone with parental responsibility, or a court order allowing you to travel with the child. So even if someone tries that... well, it’s enforced. But that’s not the case here either,” said Alice. “From what Franco says, it’s a happy, loving family, right Frank?”

Franco agreed.

“Many missing children in the stats are actually runaways, mostly teenagers escaping abuse or neglect. At two years old, Archie Wilken doesn’t fall into that

category either. And he wasn't accidentally caught up in another crime – he wasn't strapped in a child-seat in the back of a car that was stolen, for instance.”

She paused.

“There are of course some really disturbing cases of abduction as part of Child Sexual Assault or sexual exploitation. Grooming gangs. Online predators. But mostly those crimes target older girls. I mean, it would be horrific if this crime *was* sexually motivated, but according to the statistics it's unlikely. And it's worth noting that most missing persons cases are solved within 24 hours.”

“Most? But not all?” asked Eleanor.

“The UK Missing Persons Unit has about 1,500 children listed as long-term missing, meaning they've been gone for over 28 days, and their disappearance remains unresolved.”

“That's *a lot* of missing kids,” I said.

“Yes, it is. But what's striking is still how very rare it is for young male children from white middle class families to be abducted by strangers. Which makes this incident... strange. No clear motive. No known suspects. No pattern to fall back on.”

“Which is exactly why everyone's panicked,” said Marina.

“When it doesn't fit the script, we realise how little we really know.”

BARRY BRENNAN SHOW
SEVERN VALLEY TALK RADIO 102.2FM
Transcript

Barry Brennan (Host):

Good Morning, Bristol. So I'm asking the big questions again for you today. With a child missing in Bristol - a two-year-old boy, taken in broad daylight - parents everywhere are asking the same thing: how safe are our kids really? We're told not to panic, but isn't that what they always say? Let's hear from the real experts - you, Bristol's residents and citizens.

Caller 1 - Darren, Bedminster:

I've put up cameras round the house, motion lights, everything. Can't trust anyone these days. And I'll be honest, Barry - half the people round here, I don't even recognise them anymore. Used to know every face on this street, and now it's all foreigners.

Barry (mild chuckle):

And nothing wrong with you saying that mate. The truth isn't racist. It's called noticing. Nothing wrong with noticing.

Caller 2 - John. Retired Teacher, Southmead:

It's the system that's failed us, Barry. We've no idea who's coming through our borders. Rapists. Murderers. And then we act surprised when things like this happen.

Barry:

Well, I can't comment on that directly - not till the facts are in, of course - but it's interesting, isn't it, how often people mention the same concerns? Borders. Background checks. Community breakdown. Same words, every time.

Caller 2 (returning):

It just feels like nobody's protecting us anymore.

Barry:

I think you're right, John: I hate to be the voice of reason - again - but British people are tired of being second class citizens in our own homes. I don't know about you, but people are telling me it's time ordinary people took back a little control. But we'll let the listeners make up their own minds about that. What do you think, folks? Are we at an inflection point?

BROADMEAD

The next morning was hot and pungent, late June in full radiance. My first stop was Broadmead and the New Bridewell Police Station, home to Detective Inspector Manadue and the Avon and Somerset Constabulary. Manadue was the officer who'd taken the report of Jane's disappearance. I turned into the parking lot closest to the police station and then walked the short distance to the Island - a building with the charm of a tag wart – that filled most of the block on Bridewell Street.

The station had been recently refurbished inside; blonde wood, rounded corners, soft lighting, bright artificial fabrics. It looked more like a trendy co-working hub than the front line of law enforcement. There were frosted glass panels with giant prints of Bristol streets, chaotically colourful community noticeboards, piped elevator music; you expected yoga mats and oat lattes, not uniformed officers behind the counter (sorry, *reception*) barking orders and scribbling notes. I asked for Detective Menadue and the duty officer gestured me through to the back with a wave, saying: "Second door on the right," without looking up from his paperwork.

I found the door and knocked and entered.

The office was open plan, desks and filing cabinets, white boards on the walls spidered with barely legible handwriting and diagrams in red and blue and green ink. A desk fan rattled noisily. There was a policewoman at a desk near the window, eating a Tesco's egg-and-cress sandwich with one hand and pulling salt and vinegar crisps from a family-size bag with another. Opposite her, was a male detective with a widow's peak. Only the woman looked up.

"You can leave the door abroad, love" she said in a melodious Cornish accent.

"It's like Hot Yoga in here," I said, fanning myself.

"And I didn't bring the stretch pants for it," said the policewoman.

"What about the air-con? I thought the building was only just re-done?"

"Still waiting," she replied, tugging the fabric under her armpits to help the circulation. "And that fan is about as useful as peep-toed wellies. Anyhoo, what can I do you for, my love?"

"You're Detective Manadue?"

"The very same. And you are?"

"My name's Mallory McCormack. Margaret Berenson, Jane Berenson's mother, asked me to come and speak with you about the case."

"She asked you? Or she told you to?"

"Well, *told* me."

She chuckled. "She's a force, that one."

"Terrifying."

"Come and sit down," said Manadue. "Sorry, I'm still having me brekkie. It's been so busy, I'm only just getting round to it. Your choices are either eating, or hangry. I'm told eating is better."

"It is," said the male Detective, deadpan, without looking up from his computer. "She talks less."

"Everyone's a comedian?" said Manadue.

"I'm here all week," said the man.

Then his phone rang, and he snatched the handset from its cradle. "DS Morgan," he said and listened to the speaker.

Manadue watched the exchange ruefully. "It's that missing boy," she said.

"There's a helpline and we're getting hundreds of calls a day, but nothing useful to show for it so far."

"Well, I promise I won't keep you from that for long. I was just hoping you could give me an update on Jane's missing person case? Can you tell me where you're at?"

"I'll tell you what I can. And the problem is, there's not much to report. We rung around all the 'ospitals in a fifty-mile radius, but no one of Jane's description had been admitted durin' the previous 48 hours. We also went to her flat, but there was no one there. I reached out to the landlord to gain access, but he lives in Cyprus most of the year and he's gone hiking in the so I've not been able to reach him. I'm also waiting on a court order for her bank records and her phone log. Her phone's still at the apartment we think; it was pinging off the local mast til the weekend. So, we're moving, but not very fast."

"Did you find her car?"

"She sold it. Three weeks ago."

"Oh, great, so at least we have a visual on her within the last month?"

"Ah, no to that," said Manadue. "She got some kid from Task Rabbit to do the exchange."

"Interesting. What about the boyfriend? Rylan Adams?"

"Not the boyfriend, apparently."

"Oh really?"

"March, it seems."

"And?"

“And nothing. I’m keeping him in mind. But so far...” she wobbled an equivocal hand.

“So far nothing?”

“Exactly. You’re right about one thing, tho,” Manadue continued. “Although she’s been in regular telephone contact with friends and family until recently, the last time she was actually seen by anyone in the flesh was March 15th when she had lunch with her mother. For all we know, she could’ve been on the beach in Marbella since then.”

“So, we agree she’s gone, but we don’t know when, or where. Or why?”

“Yep. As far as we can tell, she’s not exactly missing. She’s just... not here.”

“Which means?”

“Which means: Jane Berenson is over 18, with no priors, no dependents and no mental health issues. She’s officially low risk. And there’s nothing yet to suspect foul play. We can’t bring out the sniffer dogs just because Margaret Berenson demands it. Even *if* Margaret Berenson demands it.”

“I understand. Any theory about why she might have gone into hiding? I mean that seems like a big step for a person with a job and a life.”

“Not if you’d seen the kind of mental illness that walks through my door, love,” said Manadue. “Present company excepted of course - no offense.”

I grinned. “None taken. But if you were to guess?”

“It would only be speculation. But Stress? Work stuff? Money or Health issues? The breakup? It’s often one of those.”

“Her mum says she didn’t have any problems.”

“Her mother would though, wouldn’t she? In my experience, kids aren’t always open with parents like Margaret Berenson.”

“Jane is almost forty.”

“And that’s the nub of it, int’it? Jane Berenson is a grown-ass woman, and we don’t tell grown-ass people what to do, where to go or when to do it. And while I get it that her mother is worried, if an adult person wants to condiddle and slip off the radar for a while, that’s her choice. This is still a free country, last time I looked.”

“Fair enough.”

“Look, the case is open,” she said. “I’m following up enquiries, but until we’ve got something solid, we can’t make it our top priority. But I promise you I’ll keep shaking the cages to til we find out what’s happened to her.”

“OK, thanks,” I said.

“You’re welcome, love.”

“So, will you explain all that to her mum?” I asked.

“Oh no. I’m leaving all that up to you.”

When I left Broadmead, I called Wendy Burger from the car.

“Dave?” I said, when she picked up.

Yes, Wendy Burger. Aka Dave.

Inside joke.

“Heya, Mal! I’m at cricket with the boys,” she said in her lilting Welsh accent.

“Well, that sounds fun,” I said in a tone that said that it really didn’t, actually.

“It’s dead boring, I’m not gonna lie. Feels like my eyeballs are bleeding. Someone English made up these rules, isn’t it?”

“Obviously.”

“Well then. So, are you calling to save me? I really hope you’re calling to save me.”

“I do have something for you. A missing person case. The daughter of one of my mum’s friends has disappeared.”

“You want me to help find her? Or to cut up her ex? I’m totally in for either.”

I snorted.

There are very few people in the world who you can phone at any time of night or day saying “I need your help” - and they’d be there with an unmarked van, a bale of rope, a shovel, some heavy-duty bin bags, and a kilogram of jellybeans, no questions asked. Wendy Burger was one of those. She was a glorious, hilarious, golden-brown woman from Tiger Bay, with curves, an Afro and an attitude that spanned galaxies. My former intern, then employee, then partner and friend, she’d stopped working full-time when she’d had her twins Michael and Eddie at the insistence of her long-suffering husband John. I still roped her into my projects on occasion a) because I loved her, b) she was damn good at her job and c) because she could still be persuaded to moonlight as a private investigator if the story was juicy enough.

I explained to her briefly about Jane, her apparent mental decline and Manadue’s suspicion she’d taken a leave of absence on purpose.

“So, I’m going start interviewing her friends, see if I can try to understand what, if anything, made her run. Where I’d like your help is with the paper trail. For example, finding out *how* she ran. It seems like she sold her car about three weeks ago, so either

she's still in the city or she's found some other form of transportation. I'm guessing the latter."

"....Whoaaaaa," Wendy suddenly roared. "Run! Run! Come on you little bugger, move! Go on! Run! To the other end! Run." And then she was back to me. "Well, that was tidy. Mikey just hit the ball."

"Did he score?"

"Yes, God love him. Ran in totally the wrong direction to start with but made it down the thingamybobby eventually."

"The crease?"

"A crease? Why's it called that? See? English people...madness," she said.

"Anyway, they don't normally make the team, God love 'em, but they got to play today coz so many other kids dropped out."

"Because of the missing boys?"

"Yeah. People are worried, Mal."

"You weren't though?"

"I have Betsy." Wendy's mother Betsy was a human incarnation of Rico the Penguin in Disney's *Madagascar* - energetic, hilarious and possibly psychotic. "She's sitting next to me. She says hi. She's brought a taser, a kitchen knife and a sock filled with nails. I think we're safe."

"I'm not sure anyone else is though."

"This is true.

"If we could find if she bought a new car - or a new bicycle - do you think we can see if there's CCTV that tracks her movements?"

“I’ll ask Janine. She’s Alvin’s new girlfriend.” Alvin was Dave’s brother. “She works for council and she’s playing nice at the moment coz she’s trying to impress Betsy - poor misguided fool that she is. Everyone knows Betsy cannot be swayed through good deeds alone.”

“She needs blood sacrifice?”

“I’ll tell her you said that.”

“Not when she’s packing a taser. And how do you feel about phone records?”

“I can’t say I’m fond of them on a personal level.”

“And professionally?”

“I can if I have to.”

“I’d like to see if we can track Jane’s calls. See if anything springs out at us. I hope to pick up her phone this afternoon. I can get Toy to bike courier it to you. Gus can help unlock it if you need him to.”

“Please,” said Wendy disparagingly. “Gus wishes I’d need his help. I’m perfectly capable of breaking into an iPhone myself, thank you very much. And I’m in the area tomorrow, so I can pick up the phone when I’m there.”

We said our goodbyes and agreed to speak again in a few days.

HOTWELLS

Jane's apartment was obviously high on the list of things I needed to access if I was going to get anywhere with the investigation, so I arranged to meet a friend there at six to help me gain entry to the property. I arrived a little early, so I took a walk down to the water's edge and found a table at the Pump House in the shade of an umbrella. At 6pm on a warm and cloudless June evening, this part of the Basin would normally be packed, but today it was strangely quiet, subdued even, families being cautious while the kidnapper remained unidentified. Even the seagulls kept their distance; there were not even chips to steal. Only occasional runners in vests and short-shorts kept the picture moving, thundering along the brickwork to and from the expensive gyms in Harbourside.

Now, personally, I never liked running, at least not unless it was after an ice cream truck. Even runners don't look like they actually enjoy it, a fact I find perversely entertaining. I was therefore taking immense pleasure watching troupes of grimacing men charge past when a small group of runners passed the pub. They were moving easily, running well. Suddenly though, one of the guys, a handsome man with a deep tan and a Māori bicep tattoo (yawn) lost his footing; his right leg seemed to give way under him, he made an "oh" noise and tumbled headlong towards the pavement.

He threw an arm out to try to cushion his fall.

He failed.

There was a sickening thump as he landed on the concrete.

And then I smiled.

Oh sue me.

His companions had the decency to stop, circling back to assess the damage. One, a fit blonde with a military bearing and a scar on his cheek, knelt to check on the fallen athlete and helped him to sit.

“Ted, mate, Are you alright?” The blonde had a crystal Oxbridge accent. “What the fuck happened to you?”

“Don’t know. I was going fine and then I tripped on something.”

Schmuck.

But then my phone pinged; a message to say Bennie had arrived and was waiting in the small parking lot behind Jane’s flat. And tempting as it was, I hadn’t come to the Hotwells to snigger at athletes. I was here for answers.

I left Ted and his posh mates as they hobbled back to the gym, and I turned up the hill towards Jane Berenson’s apartment.

Bennie Williams was leaning on his van in his overalls and paint-spattered work boots. I’d first met Bennie when working on a crime show back in the early 2000’s. He was once a proficient housebreaker who’d mostly gone straight since, and had fully reformed after a cancer scare in 2021. He now made a living as a decorator; there were wooden stepladders and 10 litre buckets of paint in the back of his ageing Datsun that had a *Williams and Son, Painting and Decorating* decal stuck to the side.

The son was Errol, standing next to him, with muscles stretching the fabric of a tight white t-shirt.

“Hello-hello,” said Bennie when he saw me, standing up and flicking the butt of his cigarette into the gutter.

“Hello Bennie,” I said. “Hello Errol. Errol, you got muscles?” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“They’re new,” Errol said, flexing a bicep.

“Impressive,” I said, sounding like it wasn’t.

“He’s gymming like eight hours a day, the muppet.”

“Got a competition coming,” explained Errol. “Professional body building.”

“Dancing about in budgie smugglers and baby oil is what.”

“Well, I’m grateful you changed out of the speedos,” I said.

“What do you think of the spray tan, Mal?” asked Bennie. “He’s orange.”

“He’d give Donald Trump a run for his money,” I said.

“Dihydroxyacetone,” Errol said.

“You stand out like a belisha beacon.”

Errol grinned and pulled a complicated bodybuilding pose. “Thanks, Dad,” he said.

Bennie rolled his eyes.

“And how’ve you been, Bennie?” I asked.

“Yeah good, thanks Mal. Better every day. Just had my latest six-month check. All clear, no relapses. So, I’m doing well.”

“That’s good to know. I’m pleased to hear it.”

“I owe you one Mal.” After his initial diagnosis, I’d managed to get Bennie into an advanced drug trial run by a friend, and it seemed to have saved his life.

“No, you don’t. But thanks for coming, anyway,” I said.

“What’s the gig?”

“So,” I explained, “We’re going up into that block there, the Raylton. It’s an apartment on the third floor. It should be a quick in and out. The owner’s gone missing, and her Mum has asked me to check it out.”

“OK,” said Bennie. “And what’s the catch?”

“The catch is, we don’t have keys. I need you to break in for me.”

Errol grinned, his metal teeth glinting in the late afternoon sunlight.

I’d chosen to meet at the back of the building because there was a discreet entrance there that could be accessed via a row of low garages. Errol jimmied the lock faster even than it would have taken to use a key. We then took a service staircase up to the third floor. Margaret Berenson had told me we were looking for apartment 303 so we went straight to the door. Errol slid a bump key into the lock and clicked the cylinder open.

“*Wah-la*” he said, pushing the door wide.

But though Errol had worked fast, it was not fast enough.

From behind me came the sound of a door unlocking and a reedy voice saying:

“Excuse me. What are you doing?”

I ushered Bennie and Errol ahead of me into Jane’s apartment and turned back to face an elderly man wearing a Jimmy Saville tracksuit zipped to the neck, and sheepskin slippers stained the colour of cardboard. His skin was ruddy and blemished by age-spots, and his pale, motionless eyes were grey like farm sludge. His wispy hair was greasy and combed over.

“Hello,” I said. “I’m Mallory McCormack. Interior Designer. I’ve been hired by Jane’s mother to re-do Jane’s apartment. These are my crew. We’re going in to work out a quote for the redecorating.”

“Where’s Jane?”

“Mrs. Berenson told me to come at this time specifically because Jane wouldn’t be here.” I glanced at my watch. “She didn’t tell me where Jane would be.”

“I should call her.”

“Please do.” Manadue had already told me Jane’s phone was in the apartment. “Sorry, who are you, by the way?”

This caught him off guard and he took a step back. So, I moved towards him.

“Roland Detmers,” he said, trying to stand up straighter. “I live next door.”

“Do you always spy on who comes in and out of Jane’s apartment, Roland?”

“No,” he said, defensively. “What do you mean spy?”

“I’d think it’d be quite intrusive, jumping out at anyone who passed by. I can’t image Jane found it pleasant.”

“You were just making a lot of noise.”

“I don’t think we were. But anyway, we’ll be more considerate when we begin the work properly. If everything goes to plan, we’ll probably be starting the week after next. Now if you’ll excuse me, we do want to be gone by the time Jane gets home.”

With that, I dipped into Jane’s apartment and closed the door behind me.

The apartment was stuffy; all the windows were closed, the blinds were down, and dust hung in the slivers of light that still filtered through the gaps. I joined the men in the living room.

“Who was that then?”

“Nosy neighbour. I’m going to come back and ask him some questions some other time. I just wanted to get us going on this first.”

Errol walked in from the bedroom, sniffing at the stale air. “She’s not dead, then?” he said.

“She’s not dead *in here*,” said Bennie.

“That’s comforting,” I said.

Errol looked around the room; he whistled dismissively. “Someone actually lived here? Like a white woman and everything?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“White women always have *stuff*. She doesn’t have much stuff.”

“S’ttrue’s God,” said Bennie. “Where are her plants, her photographs, her books? Where’s her *Live Laugh Love* decal?”

They weren’t wrong, the apartment felt jarringly empty, unloved and unlived in.

“It looks like an AirBnB,” Errol offered disparagingly. “And not a very good one”

“You’re a *connosseeyer* of AirBnBs now are you?” asked Bennie with a grin.

“Only the ones I’ve burgled...”

“Ag, *man*,” said Bennie, slapping his son affectionately across the back of his head.

“Errol, use your phone and take photographs of things,” I said.

“And make sure none of us appear in the pics,” added his dad.

We searched the flat from top to bottom. There wasn’t much to see.

Jane's bedroom cupboards were tidy, clothes neatly ironed, and colour coordinated, her shelves of jumpers and t-shirts neatly folded, fluffy towels stacked by size. The bathroom cupboards contained toothbrushes and toothpaste, a pink lady's razor, some mid-range cleansers and moisturisers and a tube of Veet. There was a small make-up compact and two tubes of lipstick, both nondescript shades of pink, and a bottle of mouthwash. I opened the lipsticks and the mouthwash and checked them for drugs, just in case.

Nothing.

The desk in the living room was a blank slate too, everything cleared away and neatly arranged, though the desk drawers held a concertina folder full of bank statements and store account statements that I dropped into a backpack. But then I found it. In the bigger bottom drawer, there was a laptop. A MacBook. Looked quite new as I turned it over in my hands. Her Samsung phone was there too, battery dead. I bagged them both, along with their respective chargers.

Bennie emerged from the kitchen, taking off his gloves and looking around one last time. "What do you think?" he asked.

"It certainly doesn't feel like she left in a hurry, does it?" I replied.

"But it also doesn't look like she was in a hurry to come back either," added Bennie.

"Well, at least we know there wasn't a struggle," said Errol.

Bennie was looked around the room and shook his head: "There wasn't a struggle *in here.*"

BARRY BRENNAN SHOW
SEVERN VALLEY TALK RADIO 102.2FM

Good Morning, Bristol. I want to talk to you today about....you've probably seen the headlines already? Yesterday's Albion Tribune, its front page story: "Migrant Sex Crime Epidemic – 20 Times Worse Than Locals."

Twenty times. Twenty. Let that sink in.

Now before the liberal lefty pearl-clutchers have a conniption, let me make something clear: these aren't my numbers. They come from the Institute for Migration Prudence which is a highly respected Tufton Street think-tank. According to their report - and I'm quoting - "migrants from countries such as Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq are disproportionately represented in prosecutions for rape, indecent assault and child grooming."

That's not conjecture, that's conviction data. And yet, when we dare to talk about it, when we just ask the fair questions, we're called racist. I hate to be the voice of reason - again - but the truth is not racist. It's just the truth.

HENLEAZE

That evening, after his long shift at Southmead Hospital, Dr. Ray Fielding had gone to collect his son Charlie from his mother-in-law's house - a face brick bungalow monstrosity with yellow awnings - in Stoke Bishop. Lynette's place was a bit further on from Fielding's own home in Henleaze but given the much-publicised kidnappings of the Wilken boy, it had seemed prudent to let little Charlie hang out with Grandma Lynette after nursery school. And anyway Karina, a *bona fide* neurotic at the very best of times, had insisted: she would not have Charlie watched by anyone who wasn't immediate family. Ray didn't much like his mother-in-law, a woman who masked her controlling interference under wafts of saccharine good cheer, but since Stoke Bishop wasn't far out of his way, and the pick-up and drop off were easy to manage, he'd acquiesced.

Ray was a big guy, maybe 1.92, one of those hulking former rugby-types whose neck was wider than his head, and whose thighs were so stupendous he had to roll as he walked. A former lock for Bath U21's, he easily hoisted three-year old Charlie in his arms, carried him car, and then tenderly strapped the sleeping boy into his car seat saying "*Please don't wake up, please don't wake up*" to himself under his breath as he did so. Ray then said goodbye to Lynette, him bending from his hips, her taking him by his slabby shoulders and air kissing his cheeks, three times, solemnly, a ritual blessing or a Judas curse, he was never quite sure which. Then he climbed into his Kia Sorrento, started the engine and drove for home.

The traffic was heavy for the early evening - an accident at the White Tree roundabout, probably - so Henleaze Road was treacly with cars and the traffic was

moving slowly. Ray really didn't want Charlie to wake up before he got him home; the boy had been fractious recently, so to keep moving, he edged onto Parry's Lane and followed suburban streets home instead.

He'd taken this route home a few times before. He had a Kate Bush cd in his sound system, the aircon blowing just right, Charlie remained sleeping. In his head though, Ray was randomly going over his concerns over Charlie's physical progress. By three, kids are learning to hop, skip, and jump forward, to ride a tricycle or walk downstairs, but he'd noticed that Charlie sometimes struggled with all these things. The boy had physical therapy every week to boost his muscle strength, and occasional injections of prednisone, but it wasn't clear that they were really working. He'd determined to discuss his observations with Karina when he got home, even though he knew he'd need to raise any issues delicately: after ten years of marriage and a good chunk of them spent trying for a child, Karina – *could he say this about the woman he sometimes still loved?* – was an absolute fucking fruitcake. He wasn't *only* sticking with her because of Charlie, but it was the biggest of his reasons.

He was lost in his limited options as he pulled into the parking space in front of their redbrick Edwardian semi in Cheriot Place, so he didn't notice the Toyota Hilux as it pulled up behind him. He also didn't notice the occupants of the car pull balaclavas over their faces. One of the men leapt from the vehicle.

When Ray looked up, he belatedly noted the covered face almost as an academic consideration: *Oh*, he thought. *This is a hijacking. I'm being hijacked.*

Startled, Ray's first instinct was to slam the car into reverse, and was about to do so, when the hijacker smashed the driver's side window. Ray swung round with astonishment, shocked that this nightmare was actually happening to him, when the

brick connected directly with his cheekbone, shattering his eye socket and sending the bridge of his nose into an alarming angle. Then his attacker grabbed him by the collar, dragged him from the vehicle - all 120kgs of him – dumped him unconscious on the driveway like a stranded elephant seal.

The attacker then jumped into Ray's car, and the two vehicles screeched away at speed in the direction of the M49.

When Ray came to, to the noise of Karina screaming as she ran around in hysterics, he was groggy and sobbing and bleeding profusely. His first thought though was that Charlie had been in the Kia when it was driven away from the scene of the crime.