

One

The door crashed shut behind him.

He was out.

Billy Robson didn't believe it. He hadn't allowed himself to believe it, even when the bolt on the cell door had been rattled at six-thirty that morning. He'd been awake most of the night, snatching just the odd few moments of fitful sleep, waiting for the dawn. Waiting but still not believing.

After five years' anticipation of one moment, it was difficult to believe when it eventually came.

He had been the last one to leave; the last one to bow his head and step through the door in the front gate of Wormwood Scrubs. Now he stood, clutching the small hold-all, and watched. The rest of the released parolees sorted their friends and relatives from the small knot of people waiting at the end of the short, snow-covered drive.

Greetings were muted, abruptly curtailed by the cons who were anxious to be away from the grim Victorian walls.

Only one of them remembered him. 'See ya around, Billy-boy. Be lucky.'

Robson inclined his head and watched impassively as the door of the man's taxi slammed. After five years it was like stepping out of a dark cinema into bright daylight. Everything was too vivid and too loud, all bustle and movement. Too much to take in at once.

The remaining people on the corner began drifting towards a waiting Cortina mini-cab.

There was no sign of Sandy. Perhaps she'd missed the bus, or couldn't get a taxi.

Exhaust from the Cortina belched into the sharp cold air, drifting across his line of vision in a billowing cloud. Slowly it eddied away.

There was no one left.

He was aware of the cold of the snow starting to seep up through the thin leather soles of his shoes. His nose had started to run, dampening the black hairs of the moustache he had kept since his days in the Royal Marines.

In fact, coming out today reminded him of the day, six years earlier, when he'd stepped outside Bickleigh Barracks in Plymouth as a civilian. At twenty-seven he had been free again after nine years' service to the Crown.

The memory flooded back. He had a small fist of apprehension in his gut then. A well-founded apprehension as it turned out. Within twelve months he was doing another sentence, much less pleasant. Five years for driving a bank-robbery getaway car.

Never again.

Robson began to walk. A slow smile crossed his face. He could keep on walking now. Not just a hundred yards to the prison's perimeter wall. But a thousand yards. Miles. As far as he wanted.

In a way, he was pleased that Sandy was late. He knew which way his wife would come, so it wouldn't hurt to indulge himself in the unfamiliar sights and smell around him.

Just the air. Crisp and clean. Not like the cloying fug of stale sweat, cigarette smoke and urine buckets you got with three men sharing a thirteen-by-seven cell each night. Even

the air in the yard smelled nothing like the sweet free air on the other side of the wall.

Idly he watched as an electric milk-float rattled to a halt and the milkman carried four pints over to a shop doorway, whistling as he went.

Robson's heart soared. What a sight for sore eyes. He grinned stupidly to himself. He was, after all, beginning – just beginning – to believe it.

BLEEP! BLEEP! . . . Hitler has only got one . . . !

The loud sing-song blast on the musical horn made him jump. He turned to see the custom-painted E-type swerve past the milk-float. It slipped neatly across the road, through the oncoming traffic, and jerked to a halt beside him.

Angry hooters united in protest. Andy Sutcliff's head grinned up from the open window and his hand came out to cheerfully V-sign the aggrieved motorists.

'Well, if Billy-boy isn't on the run again. You didn't hang about, did you?'

Robson grinned down at the unruly mop of fair hair. 'With jokes like that, Andy, you and I *could* just fall out!'

'And ruin our long-running relationship? Schoolboy chums, and Best Man and all that crap . . . ?'

'Piss off.'

Aren't you going to get in . . . ?'

Robson leaned on the purple roof. 'I'm expecting Sandy.'

'I know you are, Billy-boy, but you'll have to make do with me. Sand was a bit poorly this morning. She asked me if I'd do the honour of picking up our fallen idol.'

'Is she ill?'

Sutcliff shook his head. 'No, nothing serious. Just sick. Probably woman's troubles. Or maybe it was the few jars we had last night to celebrate you comin' out.'

Robson laughed. 'You could have waited until I was there.'

He had scarcely opened the door and settled into the mauve fleecy-covered passenger seat when Sutcliff had released the clutch with a vengeance. The exhausts rumbled with menace as the garish E-type leapt forward, prising its way through a gap in the oncoming stream of traffic and back to the left-hand lane. A second cacophony of hooters protested as the drivers were forced to brake.

'You haven't changed,' Robson observed with a grin. It was good to be with his old friend again. No one else's company was ever quite as enjoyable. Even if it was embarrassing on occasions. 'You never mentioned your new motor.'

Sutcliff chuckled as he jumped the traffic-lights. 'Didn't want to make you jealous. Like it?'

'Truthfully?'

'Course.'

'It's bloody awful. Who in God's name chose the colours?'

'Some pop star whose roadie absconded with all the assets – except this car. It was a finance company reclaim, so I got it cheap.'

'I can see why.'

Sutcliff scratched at the thick scrub of fair curls at his chin. 'It pulls the birds, no trouble. You can see the footprints on the roof.'

'Time you settled down, Andy, and found yourself a wife.'

'In time, Billy, in time. I can't afford to run an E-type and a wife.'

'How's the motor trade, then?' Robson plucked at the sleeve of his friend's suede jacket. 'That must have cost a bob or two.'

The E-type swerved to overtake a dawdling car on the inside. 'Well, I'm scratching a living, Billy-boy, you know

how it is. Shifting the odd motor off the forecourt, and doin' a bit of duckin' and diving on the side. To keep the old head above water. But what with the tax man and the VAT inspector, it ain't easy.'

Robson smiled to himself. Some things never changed. But he hadn't been really listening. His mind had moved on to the prospect of being reunited with Sandy. For a moment he allowed himself to imagine the creamy complexion that made her look younger than her twenty-nine years. Those stunning grey eyes that were so often clouded with some obscure minor worry, but could be bright and laughing at the slightest provocation. And that hair. That's what made everyone fall in love with Sandy. Her hair. Soft, light, red-blond waves with a natural hint of ginger.

In his mind's eye, his gaze travelled down her pale, slender body. Suddenly the smell of her hair seemed to fill the car . . .

The effect of it shook Robson for a moment. For two years now he hadn't allowed himself to think of her in that way. Not since that Christmas after her visit, which had left him feeling desperately aroused. They all knew the gentle tell-tale tremor of the bunk-beds. His cell mates had said nothing. Just exchanged knowing smirks and continued the game of Hangman that they played obsessively.

'You listening, Billy?'

Robson realised they were nearly at the Mile End Road. 'Sorry, Andy. Miles away.'

'Dirty sod.' Sutcliff grinned.

'How'd you guess?'

'I'd be the same. It's got to be either Sandy, or young Dan.'

The words pulled Robson up short. He realised that he had hardly thought about his son since he'd walked through the gates of the Scrubs. He also knew why.

Dan had been only four when he'd gone inside. Scarcely more than a toddler. Now he was nine. Almost an adult. Soon it would be school studies and girls. Hopefully in that order.

Sandy had wanted to bring him in for the occasional visit, but Robson had steadfastly refused. He wasn't sure of his reasons. Shame or pride. Guilt? A bit of both. Like erotic thoughts of his wife, he'd not allowed his son to enter his conscious mind. Now he felt distinctly nervous.

'Andy, stop at the corner, will you. I want to get some snouts.'

'Thought you'd given it up.'

Robson suddenly saw the funny side of it. Afraid of meeting his own son. 'I've just started again.'

He'd smoked two in the short time before the monolith of Newey House could be seen above the East End rooftops, like a finger poking a rude gesture at the sky. It had been one of the first tower blocks built in the early 1960s. An architect's vision of the better world to come – a vision that, no doubt, he made sure he didn't have to live anywhere near.

Andy Sutcliff parked the car in a side street where a group of schoolchildren were playing football. After warning them of the dire consequences of even looking at its gleaming paintwork too hard, he walked with Robson through the maze of council houses and maisonettes to the entrance of Newey House.

Already the window in the newly-installed security door had been smashed. Anyone could reach in and open it without punching in the code number. Aerosol graffiti was the only decoration on the rough slab walls of the lobby which had the souless smell of accumulated dirt and damp concrete.

A tall West Indian in a bright bomber-jacket was waiting

impatiently by the lifts with a roll of carpet. Beside him stood an elderly woman loaded down with a tartan bag.

The West Indian grinned at Robson. 'Hope you're feelin' fit, man. Looks like they're both outa order again. Mashed.'

Sutcliff rolled his eyes in despair. 'Not again? They break down every time I bloody come here. Got it in for me, they have.'

'It's them Chinese on the top floor,' the old woman muttered accusingly. 'They jam matchsticks in the buttons.' She didn't elaborate as to why they should want to commit such a sabotage.

Robson said: 'If someone's holding it, I'll send it down. What floor you live on, love?'

She told him it was the twelfth.

He picked up her bag. 'I'll drop it outside your door for you on our way up.'

The wizened face peered up at him from under the floral nylon headscarf. 'You're Billy Robson, aren't ya?' She didn't wait for confirmation. 'I 'eard you was out.'

Robson smiled gently. 'I didn't go inside for nicking old ladies' shopping, love.'

She cackled with mirth. 'Na, course you didn't, dear. You're a good 'un. Everyone round 'ere knows that.' She waved a warning finger at him. 'Just you stay outa trouble, Billy-boy, and look after your wife an' son proper. She's a lovely girl, that 'un. You make sure you deserve 'er.'

'Shall do, Gran,' Robson assured her.

The West Indian then insisted on shaking his hand. 'Name's Spiro,' he introduced. 'I've heard about you. If there's anything I can do, man, just knock me up. On the floor below.'

Robson was beginning to feel like the neighbourhood's prodigal son as they began the climb.

'Twenty-four floors,' Andy Sutcliff complained, 'That's forty-eight soddin' flights. Like climbing bloody Everest. Why'd you have to pick the top floor?'

'I didn't choose it, Andy. When we lost the house we had to take what the council offered. It was all they had.'

By the time they reached the eleventh, Robson's unused leg muscles were screaming for rest.

The two friends faced each other, breathing heavily and laughing at the stupidity of their shared agony.

Suddenly Robson sniffed the air. 'What's that smell?' He moved towards the landing door.

Quickly Sutcliff placed a restraining hand on his friend's shoulder. 'Careful, Billy. Someone's using smack. Heroin.' For a moment Robson held his friend's gaze, then turned and gently eased open the door.

There were three of them. Two youths sat on the concrete floor beside the lifts, one with his legs outstretched, his head lolling. The second was crouched over with knees drawn up to his chest, supporting a sheet of aluminium foil in his hands. A third was standing, slightly bent as he played a cigarette lighter beneath the foil for his friend to sniff up the fumes.

Robson went to say something, but Sutcliff silenced him. 'C'mon, Billy. You've got a home to go to, remember?'

Quietly, he let the swing door close. Somehow the scene had really sickened him. They were not much older than his own son. An evil tableau of hunched dwarfs, so feverishly intent on their deeds that they hadn't even noticed him.

'They call it chasin' the dragon,' Sutcliff said as they started to climb the stairs again. 'All the kids are doin' it

now. It's nothing to them. They're even pushin' it outside the schools. Call it "Happy Powder". Give it free until the kids get hooked.'

'What's been happening to the world while I've been inside?'

Sutcliff gave a brittle laugh. 'It's a meaner place, Billy, that's all. And the kids see smack as a way out. Accordin' to the papers, it's a bleedin' epidemic, especially in the big towns. You know, teenagers out of work, no future and all that.'

They dropped off the old woman's shopping outside her door on the twelfth, and continued on up.

As they neared the top floor, Robson forgot about the incident with the young junkies. Instead he was aware that his elation at being free again was tempered by wondering how he'd be able to cope again with normality. The trivia of life suddenly seemed momentarily important. Helping in the home, going shopping with Sandy, assisting his son with sums he couldn't fathom himself, lying in on a Sunday morning . . .

Abruptly they were there. Through the swing-door and onto the landing. The same graffiti-smearred walls, the same odour of soiled concrete and faint tang of someone cooking cabbage.

But this floor was different. This was home. He'd heard about them so often that even the pile of black polythene bags that emanated from the flat opposite seemed familiar. No one knew what the Chinese family did, but the speculation was that they were running some kind of "sweat shop". One of the lifts, at least, he noted, was working now.

The cheerful ding-dong doorbell chimed behind his front door. He heard a muffled voice somewhere inside. A sudden

scuffling movement as something was hastily tidied away. A cushion being plumped.

The distant blurred form on the other side of the frosted glass grew in size, outlined against a shaft of wintry sunlight.

Through the pane he could almost distinguish his wife's familiar features. Pale fleshy blobs through the patterns. His heart pounded. He heard her hand on the Yale lock. The click and faint creak of hinges that needed oil.

'Hello, Sand.' He was aware that his grin was stupidly huge.

She seemed smaller than the last time he had seen her. More slender, and more vulnerable. She looked tired, too, her skin paler than he remembered. But it did nothing to detract from the dancing light of pleasure in her grey eyes.

'Billy . . . ?'

For a second they just stood and looked at each other. Neither quite believed it. Andy Sutcliff shifted his feet.

'Oh, God, Billy . . .'

She threw herself at him, her arms tight around his neck. It seemed like an age that they clung together. Not speaking, just drawing strength from each other, feeling the ebb and flow of unspoken emotion.

Andy Sutcliff cleared his throat. 'Er, well, you two, I'll – er – leave you to it. I guess you've a lot to talk about. I'll see you around.'

Robson gently eased back from his wife, his eyes not leaving her face. 'Sure, Andy, and thanks for all you've done, mate. I'm grateful, really.'

Sandy peered over her husband's shoulders and roughly wiped the tears from her eyes. 'Yes, thanks, Andy, for picking Billy up. I don't know what I'd have done without you.'

Sutcliff dismissed it with a wave. 'Worth it, just to see the smile on your face, love.' He hesitated by the lift. 'Oh, by the way, Billy, I saw Rich Abbott yesterday evening. He asked if you could drop round the club tonight for a drink. Celebrate, for old times' sake.'

Robson's back stiffened. Without turning around he said: 'There's no old times *to* celebrate, Andy. I've spent the last five years trying to forget Rich Abbott. Tell him thanks but no thanks.'

Sutcliff scratched at his beard. 'He might not like that.'

'I don't give a toss what he likes.'

Robson's friend went to say something, then thought better of it, as Sandy led her husband inside.

The door closed, and for the first time Robson noticed young Dan. His son was standing uncertainly by the living-room door, his skinny four-foot-six frame dressed in jeans and a faded Royal Marines T-shirt that was several sizes too big for him. He had his father's straight black hair, but cut in a fringe; the same blue eyes. The freckles and the mouth, now set in a sullen pout, belonged to Sandy.

'Hey, aren't you going to come and say hallo to your Dad?' his mother asked.

Dan's eyes flickered, unsure.

Robson dropped to one knee. He could hardly believe that this was the same wild and hairbrained four-year-old he'd last seen. 'Hallo, son. It's good to see you again.'

Dan made no attempt to move. His eyes dipped to study his tatty trainers with profound interest.

Robson and Sandy exchanged glances. 'Come on,' she repeated. 'Come and say hallo to your Dad.'

Grudgingly Dan advanced across the threadbare carpet, still diverting his eyes from Robson's. His father reached out

slowly to take hold of the boy's shoulders, and draw him close, hugging him tightly to his chest.

Dan still said nothing. It was then that Robson felt the charged emotion well up inside him, tearing aside the barriers of protection he had built up so carefully over the years. He could do nothing to stop the tremors and the thin trickle of tears that ran onto his son's hair.

When the door of Dan's bedroom closed for the last time at eight o'clock that night, Robson had to admit to a sense of relief.

It had been a long day and it hadn't been easy. Only slowly, very slowly, had Dan begun to accept him. For the most part he answered in monosyllables; rarely did the boy allow his eyes to meet those of his father.

Robson sat down on the sofa and stretched out his legs. Home sweet home, perhaps, but it was hard work.

The room was more sparsely furnished than he remembered. Just a well-worn sideboard and coffee table, and the tatty three-piece suite. Different from the ones they'd had before he went inside.

Sandy came in with a tray of coffee. It looked as though the day had taken its toll on her, too. Her eyes were dark-rimmed, her straggly hair in need of a shampoo.

'You look all in, Sand.'

She smiled wanly. 'It must be all the excitement. Not every day you get your old man back after five years. And Danny didn't make things easier. You'd think he'd be pleased to see his Dad.'

Robson stirred his coffee. 'He just needs time to adjust. We all do. By the way, I haven't asked you what happened this morning? Why you sent Andy?'

She shrugged and settled down on the floor by his feet. 'I felt a bit sick. Shivery, you know. Must be one of those flu bugs floating about. Danny's always picking up something from school and passing it on. I seem to get everything that's going since that glandular fever last year. It's a devil to shake off. Doc reckons it can recur on and off for months, years even. Leaves you feeling so bloody lethargic and run-down.'

'Have you been sleeping okay?'

Absently she scratched at her arm. 'It's all right if I use Valium or Mogadon, but then I can't get it together the next day.'

He reached down and held her wrist. She was trembling. 'You'll sleep all right now, Sand. You won't need your pills. You've got me.'

Her laughter was brittle as she drew her hand away. 'You reckon that now you're back, God's in His heaven and all's right with the world?'

Robson grinned. 'Well, for us.'

Suddenly she looked angry. 'I can't just switch on and off like that. Have you any bloody idea what I've been through during the past five years?'

'Of course.' Consoling.

Her eyes bore into his, the pupils small and hard. 'I don't think you have, Billy. I don't think you've a bloody clue. It was bad enough those nine years when you were playing soldiers in the Marines. But at least we had a home of our own at the end of it. A little terraced house. Furniture that wasn't on HP.'

Her words cut like a razor. 'Christ, Sand, I know what I've done. I've paid, though. Paid for five years.'

She climbed unsteadily to her feet. 'Paid, Billy? You haven't even started. It's me who's done the paying. ME!

I've had my house repossessed and I've had to sell off our furniture to meet the bills.'

Robson blinked. Glancing around the room he realised just how much had gone. Not only the furniture, but paintings and ornaments. Earlier he'd noticed how bare the kitchen was. The food-mixer, the fridge, the washing machine. Even their best canteen of cutlery that had been a wedding present from her mother.

'Why didn't you tell me just how bad things were, Sand?'

The anger burned in her eyes. 'And what the hell could you have done about it?' She turned abruptly, clutching her arms about her, squeezing at her sleeves in an effort to suppress her rage.

Quietly Robson climbed to his feet and stepped behind her. He slid his arms around her waist and pressed his face against her hair.

'We've got to start again, Sand,' he murmured. 'I'll make it up to you and Danny, honest I will.' He let his eyes wander around the bare painted walls. 'I'm staying out. An honest job. Like I always intended when I left the Corps. I won't get side-tracked or tempted. I promise you that.'

Slowly she swivelled around in his embrace. Her eyes were moist. 'You poor, poor darling. You don't see it, do you?'

'What?'

She shook her head in slow exasperation. 'You thought it would be easy when you left the Marines. But you weren't qualified *then*. Now we've got three million on the dole and you've got a record.'

'I'll do it.' Determined.

Idly she twisted at the hairs at the top of his open shirt. 'We'll need help from our friends, Billy. I can't continue

bringing up Danny in this slum. Too ashamed to bring his mates back. We've got to have money.'

'We've got each other now.'

After a pause she said softly. '*I* need money, Billy. A woman needs a decent home. That means if you want to keep me, you'll have to get a good job.' She hesitated. 'And I don't know if you *can*.'

Suddenly Robson thought he knew what she was driving at. 'Is this anything to do with Rich Abbott?'

'I think you ought to see him.'

'Has he been around here?'

She shook her head. 'Not like that, Billy. In fact he's made sure no one bothers me. Even that randy milkman was told not to get any ideas if he didn't want his legs broken. Rich is very sweet. He cares about us. And about Danny. More than once, when I couldn't cope with the bills, he's dropped me a few hundred . . .'

'Jesus!' Robson pulled away abruptly.

Rich Abbott cares. So Rich Abbott bloody well might. As far as Robson was concerned, he was the reason he'd spent the last half decade of his life rotting at Her Majesty's pleasure.

Rich Abbott and his cream Roller. Rich Abbott with his fat roll of banknotes and his dollybirds. Rich Abbott who had it all worked out. No risks. Just a little driving. Fast driving with no questions asked.

Even now he could recall that fateful talk in the pub six years ago as though it was yesterday.

Rich Abbott had cared then. Worried that his old school chum couldn't get a decent job and needed the name of a good moneylender so he could pay off his mortgage instalments. Concerned that an ex-Royal Marine couldn't get it together in Civvy Street.

He'd offered the job and in a moment of desperation Robson had been tempted. He was being invited back to the community in which he'd grown up before he'd joined the Marines. Amongst friends. One of the lads again, trusted. Even the prospect of some real excitement appealed. But mostly it was the chance to square things with Sandy. To give themselves and their son a chance. Even if it did mean compromising his ideals – just once.

Just a morning's work. That's what Rich Abbott had said. A morning's work and fifteen grand in cash for his troubles.

But it hadn't worked out like that, had it? It ended up as five years' work and bugger all to show for it.

'It wasn't Rich's fault it went wrong,' Sandy's voice cut through his thoughts.

Robson turned. 'Told you all about it, has he?'

His wife realised she was out of order. She lowered her eyes. 'No, of course not. Just that it was bad luck.'

He stared at the ceiling in desperation, trying to prevent the scene that had haunted him for so long from re-forming in his mind.

Sitting there in the souped-up Jaguar, drumming on the steering wheel with his fingers, palms moist with sweat. Watching ahead. Watching the rear-view mirror. Glancing at the open door of the bank. Heart thumping, trying to burst out of his chest.

Wondering just how long it had been since he'd heard the crack of the shotgun. Shock tactics. Both barrels into the ceiling. Stun everyone into instant obedience as the plaster showered down on them. Their cartridges had only been loaded with rice grain, but no one realised. The bank clerks and customers didn't know Rich Abbott had insisted that no "civilians" got hurt.

How many minutes had it been? It was the longest wait of his life. The street seemed packed with traffic. Every car in London was on this stretch of road. Every pedestrian walking the pavement by his car. And each one of them, it seemed to Robson, peering in at him as they walked past.

He could have sworn he could hear his wristwatch ticking, so aware was he of each long second.

Then they were out. Three men in boiler-suits and grotesque stocking masks. Out into the bright sunlight, exposed to the world.

Robson revved the engine. The doors flew open and the car rocked as the gang leapt in. Hard on the gas, up with the clutch. A roar of exhaust and the screech of dry rubber on tarmac. The rear door swung wildly as he drove straight out into the path of a double-decker bus.

More squeals of brakes and the great red monster slewed across the road and nosed violently into the back of a baker's delivery van. Loaves of Mother's Pride scattered all over the pavement.

It had been a nightmare drive. It had gone wrong from the very start. A sudden fault in the carburettor, and a police car where it shouldn't have been, saw to that. The white Rover had been sitting on their tail right from the start. They didn't have a chance.

Rich Abbott's carefully laid getaway route had to be abandoned. Instead, Robson had to go through the back-doubles, accelerating hard down car-lined residential streets. Making turn after turn to allow each gang member to leap out as he slowed, and to run for safety before the pursuing Rover came round the last corner, the siren screaming in his ears.

He was the only one left when his luck ran out and he rammed the second police car sent to head him off.

At the station, he learned they'd caught the man with the money. Arnie. Neither he nor Robson ever said who else had been with them.

That silence had ensured him an eight-year sentence.

Sandy said: 'It was your decision, Billy. You didn't have to do it. No one forced you. You can't blame Rich. He made nothing out of it, you know that. The police got the money back. But he's looked after us. He didn't have to . . .'

'I know, I know.' Robson gazed out of the window. A glittering panoramic view of East London by night; the one compensation Newey House had to offer.

'There's still time,' Sandy spoke hesitatingly, 'if you want to meet Rich tonight, like Andy said.'

He breathed in deeply and shut his eyes. 'No, Sandy, forget it. I've finished with Rich Abbott. And all his cronies.'

Sandy shrugged. 'Rich says villains always look after their own . . .'

He didn't reply. He didn't trust himself. Slowly he walked to the sideboard and took out a bottle of Tesco's own Scotch. His hands were trembling as he poured the generous measures into a couple of tumblers.

Sandy watched cautiously as he held out a glass to her.

'Thanks,' she whispered.

'Sand, let's go to bed. I've waited five years for this. Five years and one day. And I think that last day was the worst.'

She sipped at her drink, seemingly distracted. 'I'm afraid I'm not feeling very sexy, Billy. Tired. Perhaps we'd do better to wait.'

Robson ran his hand through her hair and planted a kiss gently on her forehead. It said it all. She knew he ached for her.

'All right, Billy.'

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But it wasn't.

It had been a disaster. Robson had sensed Sandy's lack of enthusiasm and his own body had failed to respond. Perhaps it had been the prolonged period of abstinence. He'd heard that long terms in jail could end with impotence or sterility. Or both. It was common prison folklore.

He had slept fitfully until seven. A luxurious extra half-hour over the Scrubs regime. No doubt it would be some time before his inbuilt body-clock would allow him to take full advantage of the extra hours.

He climbed out of the double bed and wrapped a blue terry towelling dressing gown around his naked body, before reaching for the cigarette pack. Only two left.

He grimaced as he lit one of them and stared out at the expanse of grey London sky. It was full of the threat of more sleet.

Out there, somewhere, he told himself, his future lay waiting. All he had to do was find it.

The front door slammed suddenly, jolting him. Danny?

Quickly, he made his way through to his son's bedroom where 'Duran Duran' posters vied for prominence with portraits of West Ham football players.

On the blanket he found the hastily scrawled note: *Sorry, Mum, forgot to tell you I've got to be at school early today. Dan.*

Robson rubbed his eyes and shuffled to the kitchen. As he put the kettle on the stove, he couldn't help wondering what on earth his son had to do at school at seven in the morning?

But as he made the tea, he was sure he knew the answer. His son just hadn't wanted to run the risk of having to talk to his father again before he left.

He put it from his mind and took the tray through to the bedroom. He wasn't sorry to have some more time alone with Sandy.

He had difficulty in rousing her, and when he did she was shivering.

‘You got that flu back?’ he asked.

She held the cup in both hands and sipped at it. ‘Seems like it.’ He remembered how edgy she’d seemed sometimes on her visits to the prison. Not herself.

‘You ought to see the doctor again. Even I can see you’re run-down.’

The suggestion appeared to irritate her. ‘I’ll be all right: I’ve got tablets. For Christ’s sake, don’t fuss me!’

He raised his hands in mock surrender. ‘Okay, okay! Sorry I spoke!’

She smiled thinly. ‘I didn’t mean that. Just don’t get at me, eh? I’m not used to it. I sort myself out nowadays.’

‘Sure.’

Ding-dong, ding-dong. The door chimes echoed through the flat.

Robson frowned. ‘Who the hell can that be?’ He glanced at his watch. ‘It’s only eight.’

‘Perhaps it’s Andy.’ In a sudden scurry of activity, she threw her legs out from under the bedclothes onto the floor and stood up. The flash of her slim naked body and pert breasts whipped at his senses. She grabbed her dressing-gown from the end of the bed and gathered it around her shoulders. ‘Let me get to the loo before you answer. I don’t want people to see me in this state.’

Robson laughed. He’d lost his own sense of privacy during his years in the Scrubs. ‘It’s probably only Andy. You said so yourself.’

She grabbed her sponge bag from beneath the bed and moved towards the door. ‘No need to make a thing of it,’ she said irritably. ‘I just don’t want to be seen looking like some slag.’

He followed her through to the hall, waited until she had disappeared into the bathroom, then opened the front door.

‘Allo, Billy-boy. How are you then?’

Rich Abbott hadn’t changed. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, but then he always had. The swarthy, square-chinned face with its blunt features had a sort of inbuilt maturity. Robson guessed he would never look much older. The tan helped, of course, even if it wasn’t natural. It certainly set off the thick waves of black hair.

‘Sorry to call so early, Billy-boy.’ He indicated the open-necked tuxedo and black dinner suit beneath the dark overcoat. ‘But I was on me way back from a poker game up West. Thought I might miss you if I left it. ’Ope I didn’t disturb nothin’.’ One of his icy blue eyes winked knowingly.

Robson felt the hairs on the back of his neck bristle. ‘We’ve nothing to say to each other, Rich. I asked Andy to tell you.’

Rich Abbott’s smile was disarming: perfect white teeth glistened through his morning shadow. ‘Yes, Billy, I got the message. I was upset, but I understand. You missed a good party.’ He peered into the hall. ‘May I come in? Just a couple of mo’s to say thanks to an old school chum . . .’

With a flourish, he produced the magnum of champagne he’d been concealing beneath his overcoat. ‘If you’ve a drop of orange juice, we could have a champagne-breakfast. I ’ad a lucky night.’ The bright white smile persisted.

Robson’s shoulders relaxed. Some things never changed, not around here. ‘Five minutes then.’

The older man stepped smartly in, walking through to the living-room without further invitation, in a search for glasses.

Robson tapped on the bathroom door. ‘It’s Rich. Brought a champagne-breakfast, if you’re interested.’

He heard a mumbled curse. 'Oh, shit! . . .' Then loudly: 'Okay, Billy, I'll be out.'

He went through to find Rich Abbott holding out a glass of sparkling orange liquid. 'Helped meself from the side-board, Billy-boy. Hope that's in order?'

Robson took the glass.

'To freedom. Cheers!' Abbott downed it in three successive gulps.

It wasn't his style, but Robson took a sip. 'What is it, Rich? It won't do me any good with the fuzz if you're seen coming here.'

The man raised a disparaging eyebrow. 'Another reason for the early call, Billy-boy. But if the mountain won't go to Mohammed . . .' He topped up his glass. 'I just wanted to thank you, Billy, personal like. For not grassing. If I'd gone inside again, they'd have thrown away the key. I'm honestly grateful for that.' He sounded as though he meant it.

'What are you doing now?' Rich Abbott didn't miss the implication.

The smile dazzled again. 'I've gone legit, Billy. Well, you know, within reason. That business with you really turned me up. I thought, Rich, I thought, your luck is running out. So I organised a couple of jobs from a distance. Quiet stuff. A nice line in 'jars' – you know, replica jewellery – and some quiet 'tweedles'. Switched jewellery in some real posh houses up in Mayfair. Each job well clued-up first. Even today, some old dowagers don't know they're wearin' zircons round their necks instead of gems.'

He took another swig of the Buck's Fizz. 'That's the way of the future now, Billy. Sophistication. No more going into jugs like we did, or jumpin' up lorries. The Bill's all

computerised now. Even cheque books and cards are gettin' impossible. Holograms an' all. You've got to specialise.'

'I thought you'd gone legit?'

Rich Abbott tapped the side of his nose. 'So I have, Billy-boy, so I have. I've invested in a couple of clubs, and I'm doing a little research into the computer business. Hi-tech.'

Robson shook his head in slow disbelief. 'Times *have* changed.'

'Villainy's changing, Billy.' Abbot spoke almost with regret in his voice as he perched himself on the arm of the sofa. 'Since the Battle of the OK Corral in Glasgow, I suppose. The Brothers Grimm and the Richardsons – shit, there was *respect* in them days, Billy. You could trust people. There was a pecking order and mutual trust. Now it's all cowboys and wogs.' Suddenly, he straightened his back. 'Thank God, I'm young enough to move with the times. Adapt. You know, Billy, I did a three- and a five-year stretch, when I was in me twenties – while you was tear-arsin' around the world in the Marines shootin' people. Next time I went in it would have been for a ten. I couldn't face that. Coming out, I'd 'ave been pushin' fifty. So I've adapted.'

The door opened and Sandy came in. She had made a half-hearted attempt to comb her hair but had forgotten to remove the smudged mascara from the night before. Nevertheless, her complexion had lost its waxy pallor, and she looked better.

As she took the glass from Rich Abbott, her husband noticed that the fever seemed to have passed.

'You're lookin' as lovely as ever, Sand,' Abbott said, but he didn't sound very convincing.

She smiled. 'I've got some bug, but I'm feeling better now.'

Abbott nodded as though she had confirmed something he was thinking. 'It's like I was saying, Billy, crime don't pay nowadays. An' it's not just us. Like your good lady here. Pretty though she is, you can tell she's been through a rough patch. Run-down . . . ?'

Robson felt his anger rising. But Rich Abbott saw it coming, and raised a hand in protest. 'Sorry, Billy, but it's got to be said. We look after our own here, don't forget that. I know you did your bit in the Forces, but you're *still* one of us.' He glanced at Sandy who had seated herself on an armchair allowing an expanse of shapely thigh to show below her carelessly arranged dressing-gown. 'For Christ's sake, you, me and Andy were all at school together. In the same gang. Playing 'Knock-down-Ginger' and runnin' around the old bomb-sites when we should've been in class. And I can remember Sand down the road at the secondary-modern. We were all trying to get down her knickers behind the bicycle-sheds.'

'Rich!' Sandy protested half-heartedly.

Abbott roared. 'No offence, love. None of us succeeded, till lover-boy here came and swept you off your feet.' His laughter subsided. 'What I'm getting at, Billy, is that you've got *mates*. They may be villains, but you've known most since you was a nipper. And since you went in the frame for that bank job, you've earned their *respect*.'

'I'm flattered,' Robson muttered sarcastically.

Rich Abbott climbed to his feet and came to stand with his face only a few inches from Robson's. 'You should be, Billy-boy. And there are several faces in my spieler who owe you as a result of keeping stüm. They'd be happy to show their appreciation.'

Robson shook his head in disbelief. 'If you mean a whip-round, Rich, forget it. I don't need it.'

‘Listen to ’im, Billy, for Christsakes,’ Sandy pleaded. ‘And get off that high-horse of yours before you fall off . . .’

Rich Abbott placed his empty glass on the sideboard and moved towards the door. ‘Well, remember what I said, Billy. You’re always welcome down the spieler, and a lot of you ol’ mates will be there tonight. So, if you’ve a mind, come an’ have a few jars on me. Right?’ He raised his hand. ‘Be lucky.’

The front door closed a few seconds later, and Robson paced thoughtfully back into the room.

Sandy looked up at him. ‘Well?’

‘Well what?’

‘Are you going?’

He glanced around for his cigarettes. ‘What do you think?’

‘I think you’re a bloody fool, Billy Robson.’

Angrily, he snatched the pack from the coffee table. It was empty.