

PART I

1

The train left the station with a moaning intensity, chugging and sparking over the tracks. Jack looked around for an exit sign, people ebbing and flowing. It was sliding towards the evening when he left Embankment station and headed towards his father's club. He walked along the river with the City to his northwest, the breeze whipping across the swollen Thames; the riverside silhouette making postcards at every step.

He took a left turn and walked uphill. He checked he had his keys in his pocket. Jack and his father were supposed to be having something to eat but, most likely, it would be four or five strong Martinis and then the bill. Why they met up, he could hardly tell. Their relationship had always been cool and the passing of time had just made it worse.

His father was just one of the things that had conditioned Jack to always question what it meant to be a man. He wondered what it might be like to have a son of his own. What made it worse was that from the stories that made it past the blockade, from the photos he'd seen and the letters he'd been allowed to read, his father had been so different. There had been a rich, electric talent where now there was a muscular

engine; there had been a witty, vivacious man who made people smile and fall in love with him, where now there was a man who wanted to create a distance, who wanted people to fear him, who didn't need the adoration like he once had.

Jack looked at his father across the table in a dim light, sat in comfortable chairs, his lines adding to the handsome mien, the suit impeccably tailored. He felt such little emotion apart from anger, for feeling so little.

"A drink?" his father asked.

"Yes, sure. The usual, I guess."

Alistair beckoned over at a passing waiter, held his arm up at a half-mast, signing 'two' with his fingers, not waiting for acknowledgment. He slid a little into an overstuffed leather armchair. Jack braced himself for the back and forth of conversation.

"It's been tough at work. People are worried, margins are tighter," said Alistair.

"Seems that way, yes," said Jack. "I guess it's not a great time to be planning a new office."

"Well, we had to shelve it for a while. It will still happen, just not – yet." Alistair said this with the displeasure that delay always caused him. "And how do you feel about the question I asked, Jack?"

Jack was supposed to start working in a proposed new office, with a view to eventually heading it up, taking over from a stand-in manager, taking his place in his father's empire of sorts. His father ran a law firm with his old friend, Ray. They had been close since they were at university and had done the stereotypical decadent young professional thing together, finding ways to enjoy themselves around work. Ray's full name was John Raymond Baxbury, which had an air of solidity that Jack liked. Ray was like an uncle to Jack, a warmer proposition than his father, a livelier storyteller, a better drinking

buddy. Almost all of what Jack knew about his father's past came from Ray, from a pint or two, a bottle of overpriced red surrounded by pinstripe and loud laughter, from a drinking session after a lengthy meeting. Little bursts of sunlight through an old tarpaulin; soft rain on an eager young face.

The drinks arrived and they sipped, and sipped again.

"I – don't know, Dad."

"You – don't know?" He copied Jack's pause exactly. "What is there that is so hard to work out? This is your family role, Jack."

"It's the family role according to you."

"Whatever it is, this much is true: it is a question that you need to answer soon."

"I thought the plans were shelved?"

"I need to plan ahead. And there are ways to get the money together."

"There aren't ways to guarantee clients."

"Yes, there are. Leave that to me."

For a while, they shared a silence. Across the room came the clink of glasses and heavy 18/8 cutlery on plates. A muted laugh. Jack spotted a couple on a date, the girl laughing for appearances at her companion's anecdote. Fake laughter echoes through the ages. Jack felt the weight of the world, of his fears, of his lack of love press heavily on his temples, the strong cocktail after no food pressing harder than before. Anticipating an Alka-Seltzer at ten in the morning, he thought of long, lonely stretches in a world devoid of comfort; of the gnawing pain of waiting for affection returned; of all of these things, and then he looked at his father. He thought of waiting worriedly at bus stops in the rain, waiting for the big drops to land on the nape of your neck.

"I'll think about it."

A tiny pause. His father looked slightly distracted. "Good."

“Yes, I guess it could be.” Jack didn’t know why he’d said that. Like about a quarter of all of the things he’d ever said to anyone, he’d struggle to find a reason.

“How is – work?” asked Alistair, seemingly having built Jack’s pausing into his repertoire.

“It’s fine; I get by. We’re working fairly long hours but I make sure I have some fun.”

“Are you dating?”

“No, not really. Why do you ask?”

“A man says he’s working long hours, it’s either to run away from a heartbreak or because you’re expecting to run into one.”

“In the office?”

“Anywhere. And then you’ll be distracted.”

“Is that what you call it? A distraction?” Jack felt his face set slightly.

“At your age? Yes, that’s what I call it.”

“Maybe I’m a little more mature than you give me credit for.”

“Jack, I watched you run through girls at a rate of knots at school and tie yourself in knots over some of them. I’m just here to say: it’s not worth it.” Alistair looked around, nodding at a few familiar faces, smiling at one lady whose laugh tinkled across the room. Making love among the starched white napkins.

“A homograph, now? Very clever. So, it’s not worth it, right?”

“No.”

“And you and my mother?”

“She was very different to the thin-ice bullshit I see today, Jack. Years go to nothing. Waste comes to waste. We’ve been through some times.”

“And it was just like that: a piece of magic, here you go, a

solid lasting life partnership?” Jack ran his fingers through his hair. “Why do you say these things? To piss me off? Or just because?”

“I want you to be spared the pain I know that you’re liable too, Jack.”

“You do?”

“I do, because I worry about you. You’re my only son.”

“You – worry – about *me*?” Jack leaned forward.

“I have to say that I don’t as worry much as your mother worries – about you in this case – so you might think of me as a mouthpiece. For what we both want to communicate to you. What we want you to *understand*.”

“So you actually don’t really care either way?”

“You will live and learn, Jack. You have a weak heart. I’ve seen you fall in love. I want you to fall out of love and into line.”

“You’re a shit. That’s what it is. You love to undermine me.”

“There’s no need ... to use language like that, here. So, if you can’t talk nicely, we can just sit here and drink.”

Jack said nothing. He sat and he drank. A long while passed. Some jazz was playing very quietly in the background. He watched his father, who was momentarily distracted, before stiffening up slightly. “Sorry to be a pain, Jack, but I have to leave – right now, in fact. Something’s come up.”

His phone must have gone off in his pocket. Alistair had set it to vibrate differently according to different people sending messages. What was it? A mistress? Ray? A business partner? Jack didn’t care. His father motioned again, *two more Martinis*, then got up. Jack still said nothing. He felt something give, like it always did when it went bad yet again, sifting through rubble, throwing mess onto more mess.

“There you go – a head start. Then I assume you’ll go out

and do whatever you *do*." Lingering on the last word was his last delay; he headed straight out after shaking his son's hand. Jack sat, his head hurting, wincing a little; two Martinis and the scent of his father's citrus aftershave still in the air. He was such a bastard: in his confidence, his disdain for neediness, and evenings spent like this, wrenching each other with words.

Jack finished his drink, a waiter appearing almost out of nowhere to whisk the empties away. Two more Martinis then and it was only seven in the evening. Where could he go tonight to try and find the elusive One, or maybe the One Right Now, or even just stay alone with the None, drinking at the bar until his legs felt weak and he couldn't feel emptiness anymore. He could head north to Soho. Wend his way to Covent Garden, end up eating a kebab on his knees perched on a wall, somewhere east of the Square Mile, or an empty bus stop 10 yards away, hoping the second night bus of the night would come before daybreak.

The club was well decorated with subtle touches of luxury. The wallpaper was expensive and white with deep red patterning, close to burgundy. It matched the fabric on the chairs around the tables, which gave way at the left of the bar to a set of overstuffed leather armchairs and couches. There were drapes and art on the walls, well-chosen and unobtrusive. A huge print of Rembrandt's *Self Portrait at 63* hung on the right wall.

Jack noticed her first, he was sure of it. Walking through the bank of armchairs and towards the mahogany and polished brass of the bar. She hadn't been there a minute ago.

A girl, a *woman*, looked around the bar, at seemingly nothing in particular. She was stunning, a flow of dark, raven-coloured hair over a pale face, framed beautifully. Her eyes were inquisitive and lively. Jack was given to adoration, given

to this kind of impetuousness.

The Martini glass was still frosted. Still angry, he stood up, didn't wait, went over.

"Hello," he said to her.

She turned around, looked closely at him, did a short double-take. He couldn't see any huge significance, –just as a sign that she was interested, that he was *worth a second look*. From her eyes, she seemed to be pondering a deep and important question.

"Hi..." she said, about to head into another word, but tailing off, biting it back.

"I've got two drinks, paid for by my errant drinking buddy, who – had to leave," said Jack.

"Right," she said, starting to smile.

"Whoever it is that you're waiting for can wait a little longer while you accept my hospitality, surely?"

There was a pause while both parties tried to get the measure of the other. What did they want? What was the game here, and where was it headed? In the end, the drowsy club, the table waiting, Jack's handsome earnestness – these factors won, and she followed him the short distance to the table.

After they were both seated and she had ordered a cocktail, he tried to find his gear through the fog of a slight headache.

"I'm glad you sat down," he offered, wincing at its lack of artifice, his honesty, so early on.

"Well, you'll find out if you're still glad in a little while, I guess," she said.

"My name, by the way, is Jack." He was suddenly mortified he hadn't done this earlier.

"I'm Francesca. Call me Fran," she said in a beautiful voice, quite vibrant and bright, melodic and sure of itself.

"I will," he said, looking at her directly for the first time, trying to pin some weight behind an eye-contact. The eye-fuck;

he wanted it to topple her by degrees, but she held it steady and led his glance downwards, imperceptibly, with an inclination of her head, a mini-nod down to her chest. He couldn't help but follow and chanced up her stunning cleavage, her blouse just a touch too small, the button closed, but begging to be opened.

"Careful," she said. "I'll have to mark down your scorecard if you look at my chest again." It was only for a second but she'd won that particular point. He looked back up, a little lost, and then she pinned him back, a forceful look backed up with a half-smile and a gentle tilting of her head to the right. He narrowed his eyes just slightly, taking stock. She even picked up on this.

"Not going to throw your toys out of the pram, are you?"

He paused. "No, I was just, wincing from a headache I've had all day."

"Is drinking the solution?"

"I think drinking with you might be *a* solution."

"It doesn't solve anything."

"No. But it creates new problems to take away the old ones."

"I can agree with that."

"That's one thing we can start from then."

"You're not going to start singing Deep Blue Something are you? I don't think I'd like that."

"Um, no." He paused, looking at the thick pile of the carpet. "It's not my thing. I only know the chorus anyway."

"Oh, good." She took a deep sip of her drink, taking it half the way down. He looked at his, fairly untouched. He always felt oddly troubled in situations like this, but the adrenaline from the fear would kick start his conversational skills.

"So, what were you doing at the bar, then, Fran?"

"I was looking for someone."