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‘Detective Sergeant Conway,’ said the female officer, holding out her hand for me to shake.

Her colleague was talking to the receptionist while we waited in the lobby. By my estimation of a Special Branch officer, I would have called him overfamiliar. There was a roar of laughter from a group of men in tuxedos, entering through an enormous, ornate revolving door. They danced beneath a chandelier the size of a family car. I was wishing it down on them when I looked at DS Conway.

‘What’s his problem with you?’ she said, nodding at her partner. The man turned from the desk, walking back towards us, and she fixed her posture like she hadn’t given me a second thought.

The lift went endlessly up towards the penthouses, a part of the tower I had never been in before. The man used a key card that granted us access to these upper echelons. A muzak version of ‘My Heart Will Go On’ ended, faded out, and then faded back in again at the start. Like everything else in the building, the lift was decked with mirrors and reflective steel.

I looked at my shoes.

We stopped on the forty-fifth floor and the doors opened with an affected whoosh. Before the mechanized schoolmistress voice of the lift could finish speaking, the man had taken me firmly by the arm.

We moved down a long, tastefully minimal hallway, leaving

Detective Sergeant Conway behind. We passed two other apartments, the only others on this level, before coming to a stark black door. The man used his card to open it and directed me into the lounge area of a large, anonymous residence.

There had been a lot of talk in the press about these penthouses. Only the ultra-rich need apply. The suite itself wasn't quite worth it, but you weren't paying for that. You were paying to be five hundred feet in the air. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to look down on millions of people or, if your head was big enough, have them look up at you.

The room was dark, lit ambiently by the neon city below. Three walls of the lounge area were made of huge panes of glass, offering a near-panoramic view.

'Take a seat,' said the charcoal man. I stayed standing. 'Fine. He'll be with you in a minute.' With that, he turned on his heel and walked towards the door. He opened it just enough for a person to pass through and made sure that it closed quietly behind him.

Discretion.

As soon as it shut I went after him, my eye to the peephole. The hallway was completely deserted and I wondered if he could have moved that fast. For a second I thought he might have squatted down out of view, but the idea was too ridiculous.

'We're alone, Waits, if that's what you're wondering.'

I turned to the voice. I could see the dark outline of a man against the glow of the city from outside.

'How'd you get the shiner?' he said, that unmistakable Oxbridge accent.

I touched my eye. 'Right place at the right time.'

'I thought Detective Kernick must have taken a dislike to you . . .'

'He did seem disappointed that someone beat him to it.'

'That was the impression he gave me as well.' The man stepped

into the dim light and smiled. ‘I should introduce myself. David Rossiter, MP.’

I crossed the room. He was a tall, commanding presence. In his mid-forties, wearing a tailored suit and projecting the warmth of a good politician. He gave the firm handshake of a man who meets people for a living, using both hands to cup mine. His skin was warm but his wedding ring was cold to the touch.

‘Do take a seat,’ he said. I sat down and after a slight pause, so did he. ‘Interesting.’

‘What’s that, Mr Rossiter?’

‘I motioned to the seat on my left, you chose the one on my right – and call me David.’ I smiled, feeling a dull ache across both my eyes. ‘You’re probably wondering why I asked you here, Aidan.’

‘Waits,’ I said. ‘I assume it’s not a social call.’

‘Very well then, Waits. Do you follow politics?’

‘Only when I can’t help it.’

He smiled again. When he smiled, he looked directly at me, assuring me each time that I had amused him in some special way. I’d seen him on the covers of newspapers, giving war criminals the same look.

‘I wouldn’t want to presume you know who I am.’

‘You’re David Rossiter, MP.’

‘And what do you know of my career?’ he said, cradling the last word.

‘Only what the papers say.’

‘You should know better than most not to believe what the papers say. *Disgraced* Detective Aidan Waits . . .’

I ignored him. ‘Your father was an MP and did all right out of it. You were more idealistic, though; when your brother went into frontline politics, you were still grifting it as a barrister. You married young and it worked. But I suppose a man would make it work with a vodka heiress.’

The smile again.

'You got into politics at a funny time. The Tories had spent four years out of power, and another four after you joined. In spite of that you brought credibility to the old boys. Didn't toe the party line, spoke in favour of gay marriage, women's rights. Even immigration. Just the right kind of reckless to be a cabinet MP. It was no surprise when you were made Secretary of State for Justice, particularly with the law background. And I suppose it helps that you're a well-turned-out family man with two good-looking girls.'

'You should write my biography,' he said, the last word tailing off as he noticed that my hands were shaking. Without missing a beat, he stood and poured two large cognacs from a bar in the corner of the room.

'Thanks,' I said, as he handed one of them to me.

'And where do you land, politically?' he asked, sitting back down.

'I'm still up in the air.'

'An undecided?'

'Policy just seems too vague to solve the problems I come up against.'

He took a drink, swilled the liquid round in his mouth for a second and then swallowed. 'Save the world one person at a time?' I nodded. 'There's probably some truth in that.' He shifted in his seat. 'So what if I were to tell you about one person? One person who desperately needs saving?'

'I'd tell you there are better people to do it than me.'

'And I've already told you I don't believe what the papers say.'

I took a drink. 'I'd do what I could, but it's nothing that old charcoal down the hall couldn't manage. It's probably less.'

He seemed to like that.

'In fact, Waits, you're the only person who can help me. What does the name Zain Carver mean to you?'

I didn't say anything.

'This morning,' he went on, 'I spoke to your superior. Terrific chap by the name of Parrs.'

'Why am I only just hearing about it?'

'You've been living off the beaten track. It took Detective Kernick a few hours to find you.'

'Well, I'm glad he was so discreet about it. That beamer blended right in.'

'My apologies. Special Branch get too comfortable blending into affluent areas.'

'And here's me blending into the bad ones.'

'That's why you're here . . .'

'I can't talk to you about Carver until I've spoken to Superintendent Parrs.'

Rossiter considered me for a moment then took a phone from his jacket pocket, holding it out for me to take.

'I'd rather you dialled,' I said.

He smiled, scrolled through his address book and waited for an answer. As usual, Parrs picked up immediately.

'Have your man Waits here,' said Rossiter into the mouthpiece. 'Looks the part. Very authentic. Even accepted a drink on duty. Won't speak to me until he's spoken to you, though.' He held the phone out again and I took it.

'Sir.'

'*Waits*,' said Superintendent Parrs. His Scottish accent was a low growl. 'You'll extend the Minister every courtesy. We'll speak tomorrow.' The line went dead and I handed the phone back to Rossiter.

'Zain Carver,' he said.

'Drug dealer.'

'And what's he to you?'

'A weak link, if I'm lucky.'

'It's your job to get close to him?'

'I have a feeling my job's about to change.' He didn't say anything. 'If Carver succeeds it's because he's a one-off. A businessman among thugs. It's my job to see if that's exploitable.'

'Exploitable how?'

'Three ways, really. With the right pressure applied, he might inform against other dealers. He isn't the biggest or the brightest, but might topple someone who is. Alternatively, he might tell us which police officers are on his payroll. Most interestingly, he could just be a frontman.'

'A frontman for what?'

'There might be a dozen people above him who we've never heard of.'

'I'm curious, what do you get out of all this? I mean, your name's mud now . . .'

'My name wasn't much to begin with. Why am I here, Mr Rossiter?'

He took another drink. I heard his teeth collide with the glass.

'What do you know about my daughter? My youngest, Isabelle.'

'Pretty girl and pretty young. Eighteen, nineteen?'

'She's seventeen,' he said. 'And mixed up with this Carver character.'

'She's a minor, then. Send a squad car round and bring her home.'

'That was what Superintendent Parrs suggested. I'm afraid it may take a little more finesse.' I could see thick spots of rain hitting the panes of glass surrounding us. For a few seconds I could distinguish every one of them, then they became heavier, faster, until the room was wrapped in a blur. I waited. 'A well-read lad like you might remember when Isabelle was last in the news.'

'She collapsed,' I said. 'Exhaustion.'

He didn't move.

'Suicide attempt?'

He nodded. 'Isabelle suffers from depression. Part of the inheritance from her mother's side. There've been other attempts, but

none so forceful as the last. There was too much blood, too much disturbance to keep the papers out. So we gave them exhaustion.' He was staring somewhere off to my right, reliving it all. 'I went to the editors myself and begged them.'

'I see,' I said.

'Do you?' he returned, before moderating it into a different question. 'Do you know the only thing worse than your daughter stabbing herself in the neck?' I shook my head. 'Her waking up, coming home, and hating you for saving her life.' He finished his drink. 'She spoke to me, Waits. Said she understood her condition, understood there'd be black days. And said very calmly that this wasn't one of them. She was thinking clearly and couldn't forgive me for calling the ambulance.'

'Takes a long fall for an MP's daughter to end up with a Zain Carver.'

'Well a long fall's what she had,' he said. 'She got involved with them through a friend, I think. Far as I know, she's been living there at Fairview for a month.'

'A month?' He didn't say anything. Fairview was the name of Zain Carver's home. A large Victorian property, south of the city in a young, student-dense area. It was infamous for its house parties, attracting everyone from university heartthrobs to local celebrities. 'I don't know what Parris told you, but my orders have been to stay on their periphery. I've seen cash handovers, drunk with low-level dealers—'

'And some job you're doing of that,' he said. 'As of today, your orders have changed. You're to cross the threshold. Get your hands dirty. Make contact with the main players.'

'And your daughter?'

'I can't risk having her brought home by the police.'

'With respect, sir, the papers listened once, they'll listen again. Anyway, what's a scandal next to getting her home?'

'Scandal?' he said. 'I'd give up this job in a heartbeat if it brought her back.' I believed him, but that should have been my warning. He talked about Isabelle like she was dead already. He composed

himself. 'I can't be the one that makes her hurt herself again. Understand?' Perhaps if I could have seen his face clearly I would have, but we were shrouded in darkness.

I shrugged.

'You're a young man. Just wait. You'd do anything for your kids.'

'What do you want me to do for yours?'

He stopped, as if he hadn't properly considered that yet. 'Can you get close? Can you see that she's OK?'

'I could even ask her how she is.'

'I'd really rather you didn't make direct contact.'

'You're not exactly making this easy, Mr Rossiter.'

'I won't have my daughter brought home against her will. And certainly not by the police.'

'She wouldn't know,' I said. 'Even Special Branch down the hall's having a hard time working it out.' He didn't say anything. 'Look, these are bad people.'

'What kind of trouble do you think she's in with them? Sex?' The word cost him a lot.

'I don't know, I wouldn't think so. Carver considers himself a gent. A businessman.'

'A good thing, surely?'

'Depends on your experience of businessmen. I'd say it's a dangerous thing. There are other ways a girl can be exploited, especially a girl with a name. There are other pushers in the city who'd have treated her badly. She'd have been back home and in counseling by now, however much she might hate you.'

With effort, he ignored the slight. 'But Zain Carver?'

'He's different. More likely to know who she really is. More likely to charm her. He sells Eight and—'

'Eight?'

'Heroin,' I said. 'H is the eighth letter of the alphabet. It's a decent brand name, but mainly it sounds more innocent on a street corner or in a club.'

‘Out of the question. Isabelle’s had her problems, but she wouldn’t use—’

‘None of them would until they do. Anyway, it’s a university town. The last few years, Carver’s done all right with party drugs. Does he know she’s your daughter?’

‘It’s possible.’ He swallowed. ‘Although she’s generally ashamed of the fact.’

‘Even if he did, he’d be playing a dangerous game, not knowing you won’t just have her dragged home.’

‘Hm,’ he said, playing idly with his wedding ring.

‘Has she run away before?’

‘Only to five-star hotels on my Amex.’

‘And do you have a picture of her to hand?’

Rossiter reached into his breast pocket. He produced a photograph and handed it over, cupping it with his free hand like a naked flame. Isabelle was a pale, pretty girl with dull blonde hair and intelligent blue eyes. In the picture she was staring above where the camera would have been. At the person holding it, I thought.

‘Look.’ He leaned forward. ‘I’m sorry about the crack I made, about you drinking with the dealers. You must be under a great deal of stress.’

We sat in silence for a moment.

‘Is there anything else you need from me?’ he said.

‘The name of the friend who introduced her to Carver?’

‘I’m afraid I never met her.’

‘Her?’

‘Him, them; whoever.’

‘Perhaps your wife—’

‘Alexa’s an unwell woman. She’s not to be bothered.’

‘I see. And why are you so interested now?’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘If Isabelle’s been gone for a month?’

‘Well spotted,’ he said, flexing his jaw. ‘You might as well know. I’m fighting a war on two fronts, Waits. Alexa also suffers from

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depression. We've been . . . strained now for some time. I'm afraid Isabelle got lost somewhere in the middle.'

'How should I get in touch with you?'

He handed me an embossed business card. I ran my fingers over the raised letters.

'You'll get me on this number any time, day or night.'

'Well, thanks for the drink. I'll be in touch.'

I left him slouched on the sofa, looking worn out and bereft.