

BBN—Bird and Baby

‘I’ll meet you at Carfax at eleven,’ he’d said. Sally had already been waiting fifteen minutes under the tower at the crossroads. Every time she met the man he seemed to keep her hanging around but today she had more patience – she was about to get close to the margins of his political career.

‘I need to see people at the City Council in the morning then, if you’re around in Oxford, we can perhaps have a bit of lunch before I head off to my surgery.’

Sally guessed he’d be coming from the direction of St. Aldate’s, which was straight ahead. She searched the masses as they headed towards her but the queues at the bus stops obscured her view further down the hill. Eventually she spotted a head of white blonde hair bobbing through the crowd. Long hair tied back and clutching a portfolio of files, Ana was engaged in intense conversation with Robert Cross, whom Sally now saw emerging out of the distance. She hadn’t anticipated having Ana as a lunch guest and felt a little irrational irritation at her presence, although she realised that Ana was likely to be with him all day helping with constituency work and, not surprisingly, she’d need lunch too.

As Robert approached the Carfax crossroads he broke off debating with Ana, looked up and immediately spotted Sally. She felt her remaining vestiges of cynicism about him melt a little as his eyes locked in uninterrupted contact with hers as he crossed the road. It was as if she were the only other person in Oxford. Rapt, Sally extended her hand towards him. He gave a perfunctory shake then quickly followed with a hug and a kiss on her cheek. Ana shook Sally’s hand.

‘I’m so sorry. I’ve kept you waiting again,’ he said.

‘Obviously a man in demand,’ Sally said.

‘His own fault he’s too busy,’ said Ana, laughing. ‘When we do the diary I say “No room for that one” but he always puts it in anyway.’

‘I’ve been looking forward to our oenological discussion all morning, makes the afternoon’s grind a little more bearable.’

Ana was puzzled momentarily.

‘Using long Greek words doesn’t make your pub lunch sound like hard work,’ she said.

‘I was wondering, if we move quickly, whether we’d be able to get some lunch in one of those tiny front rooms in the Eagle and Child – a bit of quiet and privacy. Ana’s going to catch us up later on – she can’t resist the opportunity to look around the shops.’

‘Tempting. I can’t wait to get to M & S’ she said, her eyes darting towards Robert. ‘And, besides, I don’t eat much at lunchtimes.’ Sally noticed Ana’s lithe figure was perhaps proof of her midday abstinence but she didn’t really have her marked down as woman at Marks and Spencer – perhaps Latvians thought the shop unusually exotic?

‘So, just the two of us?’ said Sally. ‘Pub’s fine by me.’

‘OK, bit of a hike to St. Giles. Hope you’re fit.’

Sally and Robert weaved through the high street shoppers along Cornmarket. He held his head high, walking confidently, scanning the street for familiar faces. He nodded briefly in the direction of a couple of acquaintances he’d identified, mouthing a few silent hellos. Noticing the boisterous group of anti-vivisectionists who had set up a stall opposite McDonald’s, he ducked to the other side of the street. This evasive

manoeuvre was made to Sally's relief: she'd spotted a couple of her activist associates, Rabid Rachel and Sledge, hassling shoppers for signatures on their petition. She prayed she'd not been recognised.

'Come on. Keep up,' Robert urged Sally as she attempted to keep pace. 'Glad I dodged being pounced on by the animal rights brigade,' he continued while moving back to the centre of the street.

'I'm surprised you just walk around the city centre like a –' Sally paused to find the right phrase.

'Normal person?' Robert offered. 'No. When you exist in a Westminster bubble Monday to Thursday, you owe it to yourself to get out and connect with the real world – get rid of the introspection and claustrophobia. I even came in using the Thornhill Park and Ride today and I'm even going to take the bus down the Cowley Road later on.'

'But I thought, as a minister, you might have bodyguards or something,' Sally asked.

'Not important enough. Just an ordinary, expendable minister for the time being. Got to fend for myself without unnecessarily drawing on taxpayers' money,' he grinned. 'Mind you –'. He stopped. A little past HMV he pointed out St. Michael's Street, an unobtrusive side road on the left. 'The one time I thought I might have needed bodyguards was just down there –'

'Where?' asked Sally, also stopping briefly to look down the street.

'That's where the Oxford Union is,' he continued. 'Bedlam last time I went. I'll tell you all about –'

'Robert!' a deep voice called from over Robert's shoulder. He spun round. His right hand was grasped and then pumped up and down in an enthusiastic handshake. 'Must be constituency work day.'

'John,' said Robert, continuing to shake the man's hand vigorously. 'What a stroke of luck bumping into you. I've got a stack of letters for you on my desk waiting for my signature when I start ploughing through the paperwork this afternoon.'

'Don't tell me – Blackbird Leys – "City of Squealing Tyres"?'

'That's a bit of cheap gibe, all that community work's paying dividends there, keeping the lid on it. No, it's mainly about the supposed resurrection of kerb crawling near the Cowley Road –'

'Conflicting priorities, Robert. And with your big boss cutting our budget...'

He stopped mid-sentence, his attention suddenly turning to Sally. 'And who's this young lady with you?'

'I'm sorry,' said Robert. 'Sally Hunter. This is Sir John Long – the Chief Constable.'

Sally held out her hand tentatively. Sir John was a tall, neat well-manicured man; a few whiffs of his distinctive aftershave were even detectable on the spring breeze.

'Wonderful to meet you,' Sir John said.

'And I'd suggest you prioritise the kerb crawlers. Women need not only to *be* safe but also to *feel* safe on the streets at night,' Sally continued. The two men looked at Sally with mild surprise. 'And, of course, it's a nightmare for the local residents.'

'Yes, of course, the local residents,' agreed Sir John.

'Nip it in the bud – not a huge problem yet – but it's a very diverse community – some with very traditional moral standards who aren't particularly well disposed to your force. Bit of police support might build confidence, if you follow my thinking?' suggested Robert.

‘Ticks a lot of boxes, I suppose. I’ll see what I can do.’ Sir John looked at Sally again. ‘And what brings you out into Oxford with Robert on a Friday lunchtime?’ he asked. ‘I’ve got the odd feeling I’ve met you before but I have to apologise as I can’t quite place you.’

Sally swallowed hard. She had a very good idea of where the Chief Constable might have seen her face before: on the front line of the photo-reportage of countless demonstrations.

‘I’m a wine writer,’ she volunteered.

‘Ah. I must have seen you up at one of the Rothschild’s tastings at Waddesdon Manor.’

‘I was there a couple of weeks ago. You must have an amazing memory for faces,’ said Sally, relieved that the Waddesdon tasting was one of the few authentic activities and accomplishments she claimed on her viticultural curriculum vitae, but she hadn’t remembered *his* face.

‘Great asset in my line of work...I understand the connection now. Robert’s planting up that vineyard in the Chilterns isn’t he? Is his wine any good?’

‘It’s not bad...but there’s bucket loads of potential,’ said Sally.

‘I’ll send you round a couple of bottles at Christmas, John, so you can taste for yourself,’ said Robert.

‘A couple? What about a case?’ He glanced at Sally. ‘Raffle it off for charity. Anyway, got to get on; let you sign those letters you’ve promised me. I’m off for a working lunch with the Vice-Chancellor, among others,’ Sir John declared, walking away.

‘Working lunch of several bottles of claret and a police driver to take him home, more like,’ Robert said to Sally. ‘More to the point, what’s this about my wine being “not bad”? You could at least have said it was good.’

‘I set high standards,’ Sally said. ‘I’m a hard woman to please.’

The snug was intimate. Its Lilliputian proportions were accentuated by the dark wood panelling and low beams and there was barely room for a couple of small tables and a few chairs. Robert and Sally were the only occupants of the room. The remnants of a quick sandwich lunch sat on small plates on the table before them. Sally closed her notebook and tried to thread her pen into its spiral binding. The pub was still quiet but inquisitive customers were now filtering through the entrance corridor which separated this historic front room from another equally atmospheric and small counterpart. A couple of curious tourists had popped their heads through the doorway but had not intruded on what must have looked like Robert and Sally’s private meeting.

Robert sat on a wooden bench underneath the frosted glass window. Behind him were thrown a procession of silhouettes of people passing by the pub’s whitewashed exterior along St. Giles.

‘This place is a real tourist trap later on but if you get in early enough to get one of these snugs to yourself then I find it can be one of the most private places in Oxford – but I think you’re going to have to start glaring at people now to keep them out of here,’ said Robert.

‘I’m done as far as work’s concerned. I’ve got plenty of material for today,’ said Sally. ‘And, do you think I really look that fierce?’

‘I’m sure if the need arose but you look more...’ He paused to think, leaning back on the panelled wall. He picked up his pint of beer and looked at Sally as if

passing judgement and continued slowly ‘Assertive but not aggressive...professional ...composed...and very erudite.’

Sally blushed. The compliments were perfectly judged: it was exactly the image she had intended to project. Yet she was more flattered by the mockingly arch manner in which he made his pronouncement. The way he’d carefully looked her up and down as he spoke caused her to wonder whether it was merely her professionalism and erudition that aroused his interest.

He stretched out his long arms and legs, uncoiling, gradually unwinding after the interview. His movements were relaxed, smooth and calm. She settled back in her seat, breathing deeply but gently. They exchanged smiles silently. She felt completely comfortable in his company.

Robert rolled his eyes upwards as if chasing a thought. ‘Talking of fierce women,’ he eventually said. ‘I got interrupted when I was telling you about what happened at the Oxford Union.’

‘Bloody Chief Constable, interrupting all your best stories?’ said Sally.

A grin flickered across his face. ‘I could have done with some more help from his boys that night. I’d never seen so much anger and pure rage. I’d been sent by the whips to speak in a debate for the government’s defence position and this rent-a-mob had a picket down St. Michael’s Street to try and stop me.’

‘Did they?’ asked Sally.

‘Almost.’

‘Who were they?’

‘Oxford’s New Model Army they called themselves. They seemed to particularly have it in for me. I guess it’s the same old story – my supposed rich background. But I didn’t deserve that, surely?’

‘It probably wasn’t personal—’

‘Oh, it was...particularly this girl, sorry, I should say woman. She was quite young though. I had to push past and she shoved and hit and screamed the kind of language you only hear in a barracks. Tried to pull my hair too, what’s left of it, but battered and bruised, eventually the police got me inside.’

‘Sounds awful,’ said Sally in a tone of calculated neutrality. ‘If you remember he so well, did you report her to the police afterwards?’

‘No. Makes martyrs. Plays into their hands. It was all such chaos I wouldn’t have been able to do a photofit or anything. I just have vivid recollections of odd bits of her. She was about your height, I think but, a grubby eco-type, hard, very unfeminine. You wouldn’t like her at all.’

‘Let’s hope you never meet her again,’ said Sally, trying to move the conversation on.

‘She’ll turn up again like a bad penny, I’m sure. What annoys me about those types is that I’d like to go up to them and “Yes. I’m actually with you on that” – but I can’t say it openly because of collective responsibility.’

‘So you had some sympathy with them?’ asked Sally, startled.

‘With some of their arguments, yes, in a moderate sort of way. What’s that saying of Lyndon Johnson’s? The tent one?’ he asked himself, flicking his fingers in frustration.

‘Rather have someone pissing out of the tent from the inside than the other way round?’ suggested Sally.

‘Well done! Yes, there are plenty of us pissing out from the inside. It’s the only realistic way to change things – a lot bloody harder than waving a few placards around and swearing.’

Sally became suddenly emboldened. ‘So were you against the Iraq war?’ she asked.

Suddenly Robert grabbed the glasses on the table and dextrously swapped his pint of beer for Sally’s orange juice.

‘Bear with me. I’ve just seen that smiley woman from BBC Oxford,’ he whispered.

Sally turned around to see a familiar face swing through the doorway.

‘Robert, nice to see you’re out working in the constituency,’ said a tall, blonde woman with liberally-applied make-up. She was Emily Smiley, a reporter on the regional BBC TV news programme.

‘Emily, lovely to see you. What are you up to?’ he asked.

‘On the go, as ever, just grabbing a bit of lunch and then we’re off to film an item down your end of town – Cowley Road. Residents complaining the kerb crawling’s starting up again. You sent us a press release on that didn’t you?’

‘Yes. They’re agitating for a police crackdown or they say they’ll be sending out their own vigilante squads. But, want an exclusive? I had a meeting with the Chief Constable about it this morning.’

Sally couldn’t help but smile at Robert’s liberal interpretation of the word ‘meeting’. She covered her mouth with her hand.

‘You’re quick off the mark or are you just spinning me a line?’ asked Emily.

Sally turned round. ‘No. He did. I was with him.’

‘Cool,’ said Emily, eyeing up Sally as if she was trying to remember whether she was someone she was supposed to recognise.

‘I’ve got a surgery down there this afternoon. If you’re still there about five I can do a bit to camera for you –’ offered Robert.

‘We’ll be there late – always better to do the sleazy stuff when it’s dark. We might even spot some action,’ said Emily.

‘But if you don’t mind I’ve got this interview to wrap up,’ he said, gesturing at Sally.

‘Wonderful. We’ll give you a call and tell you where we are. I’ve got your mobile number haven’t I? Anyway, must go.’ She disappeared down the corridor towards the bar, which was becoming more crowded.

‘Yes, Emily, you and the world have my mobile number,’ said Robert swapping their drinks back again. ‘Sorry about making it look like you were supping away on pints but, with that lot, it does no harm for me to cultivate a sober image.’

Sally had ordered the orange juice for exactly the same reason. ‘Fine by me. I’ve been known to polish off the odd pint myself. Didn’t she see you swap them?’

‘No. She popped back out to talk to her colleague – probably to say she’d spotted me. It’s getting a bit busy in here. I’ll need to get a move on soon.’

‘What was she doing in here herself if she was working?’

‘Friday lunchtime? You must be joking. They’re pissheads, the lot of them.’

‘Who?’

‘Journalists, present company excepted, of course,’

‘Just like politicians, you mean, present company excepted?’

‘Some of them even plant their own vineyards to slake their thirst, would you believe?’

‘You didn’t answer my question,’ said Sally. ‘About the war.’

‘No. I didn’t. You’re tenacious. Why do you want to know?’

‘Just being nosy, I suppose – and wondering what those protestors might have thought if they knew you agreed with some of views – bit ironic.’

‘This is off the record, right?’ he said.

‘Naturally,’ Sally said, intrigued and pleased by having drawn him into discussing his politics.

‘I can’t lie in hindsight. I supported it at the time but only on the pretext that there *were* actually WMDs. If you accept that there were none then the whole thing was indefensible. But just because I might agree with the protestors about the outcome don’t think I have any sympathy with their overall attitude. I stand *for* what I believe in. People like that just stand *against* everything...but, yes, I do have views that might have your average anarchist wondering if something strong had been dropped in their herbal tea if they ever heard them.’

‘What sort of views? You seem moderate almost to a fault.’

‘I’m a frustrated but pragmatic idealist. That’s why I loathe this bloody place so much.’

‘The pub?’

‘No, Oxford, or, I should say, the “gown” side of Oxford. Just to make sure, this is all off the record, right?’

She nodded.

‘I’ve got plenty of people in the party who’d like to embarrass me.’

‘Why?’

‘Rivalry, jealousy, mainly, and they can use their big class-war stick with nails stuck through it to beat me with – I’m the rich bastard.’

‘That’s unfair.’

‘That’s politics. But I didn’t get into politics to make a career for myself. I didn’t need to. Do you know what commits me to politics? I want everyone to have the chances that I had. Sounds clichéd but it’s true. Everyone has potential and it has to be developed, otherwise it’s such a waste. That’s why I can’t bear elitism. You can start right here in the Eagle and Child or, as those “in the know” call it, “The Bird and Baby”.’ He made invisible quotation marks with his fingers. ‘You know if you take a look down there, just past the bar, in the Rabbit Room...’

‘The Rabbit Room? I don’t follow you.’

‘It’s like everything in Oxford – arcane bloody names that no-one understands – maybe they ate rabbit or it’s about people rabbiting on...’

‘Surprised you’re not sitting there now,’ she teased.

‘Very funny...look I’m a politician and you’ve wound my spring so you’ll have to hear me out...who cares why it’s called that...but there’s a letter on the wall signed by a few Oxford dons and their friends, including C.S.Lewis – ‘

‘I loved *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when I was a little girl’

‘That’s the man plus several others including one John Ronald Reuel Tolkien...’

‘Really...what’s the letter about?’

‘It’s some sort of commendation from about 1950 to the barman or landlord for his good beer and hospitality.’

‘Sounds quite a nice gesture.’

‘I suppose so but it also sums up what’s wrong with the whole place...such an exclusive, cosy world...as if Oxford dons have first refusal on...’

‘Writing children’s fantasy books?’

‘Yes, well, not exclusively children’s, I find *Lord of the Rings* offers a few good analogies for the state of the Labour Party...’

‘Such as who’s the evil Lord Sauron?’ Sally asked.

‘I’m not even going to comment on that off the record but that’s beside the point... it’s the disproportionate influence that this place has on culture, politics, architecture, education, everything really. A whole genre of literature dominated basically by an Oxford pub writing group...you wonder how many other talented writers might have been scribbling away in vain.’

‘They might have worked the old school tie network to get published but they’ve stayed popular because of people like the books,’ Sally found herself arguing back.

‘I don’t disagree, but not everyone gets the breaks, I doubt someone working at Austin Rover would have their sort of access. That’s the point.’

‘Ah, Sally, he’s giving you the hobbit speech? It’s the real reason he likes to come to this pub – some MPs complain about the attitudes of Middle England – Robert complains about Middle Earth.’ Ana stood in the doorway, having caught the end of an evidently familiar conversation. She held several shopping bags in her hands.

‘It was quite a revelation,’ said Sally.

‘This place makes him very impassioned,’ agreed Ana, clenching her fist to emphasise her point.

‘Yes, bristling with authority like an angry Aslan,’ Sally said.

‘A talking lion’s not the worst thing I’ve been compared to,’ said Robert, laughing.

‘Now back to important things,’ said Ana. ‘I’ve been shopping.’

She lifted a Blackwell’s carrier bag and rifled through its contents. She lifted out a couple of weighty hardbacks.

‘For me – for my studying – when I get the time,’ she said, looking sharply in Robert’s direction and placing the two hardbacks on the table. She pulled two more books out of the bag and handed them to Robert. ‘The Tony Benn diaries you were looking for – was on special offer so I got it. The other is, I heard the author on *Start the Week...* a Zeitgeist book that everyone’s going to be talking about – so you should at least flick through it.’

Robert picked up the book and read the blurb on the back of the jacket. “‘Bounce – how the simple concept of a bouncing ball explains the dynamics of modern society and the economy. Apply the ten simple rubber rules and transform your business and personal life...’” Reminds me of when I was a management consultant.’

‘And here are those other things you asked me to get for you. First time and only time.’ Ana handed over a small Marks and Spencer’s bag.

‘Ana, you know I would have gone myself but I had the interview arranged with Sally.’

She turned to Sally ‘You know what I say to some people if they ask me what it’s like working for an MP – like a wife without the sex, I say. Wife without sex.’

Sally was puzzled.

‘Underpants. He said he’d run out. I bought the brightest boxers I could. I hope he hates them,’ Ana joked. She then unpacked a larger, glossy carrier bag.

‘But being an MP’s personal shopper has a few benefits,’ she continued. ‘Sally, tell me what you think of these.’ She opened an expensively packaged shoe box branded Dune and gently lifted out a pair of very long, black, shiny, high-heeled, leather boots.

‘Aren’t they gorgeous? In a sale. Couldn’t resist’

‘They’re incredible,’ said Sally.

‘Men don’t understand shoes,’ said Ana.

‘Hard choice – shoes or men?’ said Sally, playing along but hoping to disguise her almost total lack of interest in footwear.

‘I don’t know why women spend so much time paying attention to their feet when it’s the last place a man looks,’ said Robert.

‘See,’ said Ana.

‘Because women don’t dress for just for men’s gratification,’ said Sally ‘We like to look good for our own sake. Don’t you agree Ana?’

‘Sure, appearance is so important – women are competitive, they notice how each other dresses, more so than men,’ said Ana. ‘But I think Mark will like these just as much as I do.’

‘Mark?’ asked Sally.

‘My boyfriend – in London.’

Sally took a sharp intake of breath, realising how she’d previously added two and two and made about five hundred.

‘A long-suffering man – and it’s all my fault’ said Robert. ‘He’s in the political game as well – assistant to Bridget Bacon, the Chief Whip.’

‘Incest, as you say’ said Ana. ‘But at least he knows what crazy things I have to do in this job.’

Ana stroked the boots, lovingly. ‘What size are you, Sally?’

‘Five.’

‘Same as me. You want to try?’ Ana said, offering a boot to Sally.

‘Well...’ demurred Sally, enjoying the smell of the leather herself. ‘Go on then. One life for yourself and one for your dreams.’

She slipped off her comfortable court shoes. Sally stretched each leg in turn, resting her foot on the ancient wooden benches. She slid the boots over her calves, the leather rubbing tighter over her jeans as she buried her foot further. A couple of men entering the pub caught a sly gaze as they lingered by the doorway. She massaged, tugged, coaxed and rolled the leather to squeeze close around the contours of her legs. Ana helped pull the lacing tight along the back of the boots.

‘I hope Mark doesn’t have to do exactly the same duties as you Ana,’ said Sally. ‘I hope Bridget Bacon buys her own underwear.’

Robert grimaced. ‘Please! It doesn’t bear thinking about – perhaps an industrial-sized, heavily re-inforced chastity belt.

‘That someone’s locked and thrown away the key for?’ added Sally

‘If it hadn’t rusted up first,’ said Robert.

Ana looked a little lost. ‘I hope you’re not being rude about your Chief Whip.’

When Sally stood up the boots were longer than she had imagined. Buckles and tassels encroached along her thigh.

‘They look fantastic,’ said Ana. Sally wasn’t so sure but thought that now they were on she may as well try them out.

‘Ana, do you mind if I try walking a bit in them? I’ll maybe take a quick look at this Rabbit Room, now Robert’s r–, gone on so much about it.’

‘Sure, but I’m dying to try them myself,’ said Ana.

Robert left the foot fetishism to the women, preferring to scroll intently through the messages on his Blackberry, although Sally thought she caught him casting a few surreptitious looks in her direction.

‘Robert, the surgery this afternoon, do you mind if I come along?’ Sally asked on the spur of the moment. ‘Just out of interest?’ asked Sally.

‘You’re into masochism now as well as sadism?’ he said, pointing at the boots. ‘Sure you’re more than welcome but we do actually need to get there one of these days – we’re catching the bus, you know.’

Sally strode along the corridor towards the bar. The boots were heavy but she enjoyed the swaying motion caused by her long, deliberate steps. Ana certainly had chutzpah. Sally would never have contemplated buying something so outrageous, even if she had the money. However, her wine-writer alter-ego found the confidence to make this short catwalk through the long and narrow pub, ever so subtly swinging and swaggering her hips as she skirted a bunch of men drinking at the bar.

She found that the Rabbit Room was actually an area of open seating towards the back of the pub. She squeezed past a group of Japanese tourists to scan the picture frames above the fireplace. The height of the heels helped Sally read the framed, hand-written letter. Perhaps it was because she was a writer but she had to disagree with Robert: as she stared at the artefact she felt an increasing sense of awe. Cramped into the bottom margin was J.R.R. Tolkien’s handwriting, which was eerily familiar to Sally from the calligraphy in *The Silmarillion* and the other Middle Earth sagas she’d bought but never got round to reading. She was overwhelmed by a sense of humility and reverence. It was, she supposed, the intensity of feeling of the sort of religious epiphany triggered by viewing a sacred shrine or relic – except that she didn’t believe in religion.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Ana.

‘Just reading this silly note from a bunch of drunken, white, privileged Englishmen, who wrote fairy stories,’ Sally apologised.

‘Merton Professor of English Language and Literature,’ Ana read. ‘Not just any drunken old man. It’s what Oxford means to me – English – the dictionary. Look around the pub, so many people from other countries who’ve all learned to talk to each other in English. Partly why I’m here. It’s a wonderful gift and some people would say it comes from right here.’

‘Is that a good thing, that people understand each other?’ asked Sally. ‘They still fight.’

‘It makes us free,’ said Ana.

‘What I find strange is the militarism,’ said Sally ‘Look at Lewis – 13th Light Infantry – and Tolkien – Lancashire Fusiliers.’

‘You might think that a significant part of *your* life if you’d been sent to the trenches in the Somme like they were,’ said Robert, picking up the tail end of the women’s conversation.

‘No,’ said Sally.

‘True,’ said Robert. ‘I’m a defence minister. Someone mentioned it to me once. Come on, I’ve got a surgery to do and I guess Ana will be want a walk in her boots.’

Sally pulled the door closed. The constituency office was a nondescript building in a litter-strewn side street of scruffy, shared student houses and mouldering bedsit conversions. It sat next to a row of empty shops, their windows plastered with vivid fly-posters promoting student events. Sally caught up with Ana as turned the corner on to the main Cowley Road.

The traffic splashed and rasped slowly through the spitting rain. Heavy clouds steadily snuffed out the lingering natural light. The day yielded to the gaudy glow cast by a ribbon of illuminated plastic fascias, their lurid lettering advertising the strip of

restaurants and convenience stores. An aroma of frying fat saturated the air, oozing from the slick of takeaways that lined the roadside.

Ana passed the window of a kebab house. She looked with contempt at the compacted meat turning on the rotisserie.

‘And this is what students in this great university city eat?’ Ana complained. ‘Disgusting.’

‘Only usually after downing a dozen pints of beer,’ added Sally. ‘Greasy kebab – the perfect way to end a night getting hammered. I’d bet most students haven’t ever eaten them sober, except perhaps as leftovers the next morning’

‘Ugh, dog meat,’ said Ana, pacing the pavement in her proud, new boots.

Sally noticed Ana’s striking reflection in a shop window. The tops of the boots rode just above the knee on Ana’s long legs, revealing a tantalising glimpse of thigh below the hem of her black skirt. Sally instinctively felt the attention of the eyes of onlookers being attracted towards the pair of them and heard a few women pedestrians tutting disdainfully as they passed by.

Sally spotted a newsagent’s shop. She called to Ana.

‘Mind if I quickly pop in here, Ana. I need to get something.’

Ana followed Sally into the cluttered newsagent’s shop. She scrutinised the magazine rack while Sally went straight to the counter. She found it difficult to attract the newsagent’s attention: he and his head-scarved wife were glaring at Ana while she strutted up and down the shop and then flicked through a magazine.

‘Packet of Golden Virginia and some Rizlas please,’ said Sally, also picking up a tube of mints from the counter. ‘Oh, and a box of matches.’

She glanced behind her to see why Ana was drawing so much tacit hostility. A gloved hand immediately thrust an edition of *New Statesman* and a copy of *Grazia* magazine past Sally’s ear towards the counter. Ana looked down reproachfully at Sally, seeing the tobacco and cigarette papers.

‘For someone else, a friend,’ said Sally.

‘A friend you like to kill?’ said Ana, matter-of-factly, while paying for her magazines.

Unable to think of a pithy response, Sally walked out of the shop in silence, burying the items in her bag. Ana was blunt but, on reflection, perhaps unwittingly prescient. What she’d bought out of force of habit was for the Sally of shared spliffs and roll-ups – supplies that admitted her into the communal displacement activities of idle, doped-up dilettantes. Maybe *that* Sally – Sally Edmonds – *was* dying, being choked off little by little by her new self?

‘How far away is it where we’re meeting Robert?’ Sally asked as Ana came out of the shop.

‘Somewhere called Stafford Road, not far, five or ten minutes away. This way, I think,’ said Ana, standing on the kerb waiting for a gap in the traffic.

‘Are all the surgeries that boring?’ Sally asked Ana, crossing the road.

‘Usually. And he always leaves me to tidy up and collect together everything at the end while he runs off to do something more exciting –’

‘Like a television interview?’ suggested Sally, following Ana on to a side street.

‘Exactly,’ said Ana. ‘But it was better today. I had your help. Thanks.’

‘It was an experience,’ said Sally. ‘If not exactly an enlightening one. I’ve heard enough about council tax arrears, school appeals, housing waiting lists and the rest to last me a lifetime already. Anything remotely personal and he chucked me out. At least the ASBOs and noisy neighbours sounded a tiny bit more juicy...’

‘Not my idea of politics, either. I want the debate, ideology, the cutting and the thrusting...’ said Ana.

‘Tax directives, not tax discs,’ added Sally.

‘Yes, tax discs,’ said Ana tentatively. ‘Now, I thought Stafford Street was this way but I don’t see...’ She stopped at the entrance to an alleyway next to a rundown, gloomy Victorian church. A poster with evangelically large lettering was set by the door, illuminated by the burning orange glow from a street lamp: ‘He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone. (John 8:7)’

Daylight having finally drained away, Ana sought out the pool of light at the foot of the lamppost. She rummaged through her handbag. ‘I’ll find my phone.’

Sally looked back. She had been aware of a low-pitched throb, like the low purr of a car engine, as they’d walked down the side street. She now saw that a black Jaguar had been driving very slowly behind them at a distance. It slowed to creeping pace as it closed upon their street light.

‘Ana, I think we’d better get moving, back to the Cowley Road perhaps?’

‘A couple of seconds, I’m trying to ring Robert.’

The street was full of parked cars. The Jaguar crept its way between the lines of vehicles on each side. It stopped opposite the two women. The driver leant over the passenger seat and stared in their direction.

‘That man, there in the car,’ said Ana. ‘I’ll ask him where Stafford Road is.’

‘Don’t Ana, you don’t know who –’ Sally protested.

Ana had already stepped into the road to approach the car. Its window wound down. Sally ran after Ana, catching her as she bent down to ask directions. The driver was a grey-haired, well-groomed man, wearing an immaculate suit. A strong smell of expensive aftershave drifted out of the open car window.

Before Ana could speak Sally interrupted and spoke directly to the driver. ‘I’ve got a funny feeling we met earlier today,’ she said to the driver. ‘Hold on. I’ll just try to place you. You were talking to Robert Cross. That’s it. Sir John. Ana, have you met the Chief Constable?’

‘No. But I heard a lot about you,’ said Ana. ‘I was writing Robert’s letters to you yesterday.’

‘Sir John. This is Ana – Robert’s research assistant,’ said Sally

‘Wonderful to meet you, Ana. I just popped down here to check out the local problems for myself,’ he said, deliberately avoiding eye contact with Sally and Ana. ‘Not seen anything so far.’

‘Remarkably diligent of you,’ said Sally. ‘Good to see you’re setting an example in community policing.’

‘We’re looking for Robert. He’s down here somewhere, Stafford Road, doing an interview with BBC Oxford. Do you know where it is?’

He looked at the sat nav integrated into his dashboard. ‘Next right. You’re almost there. 200 yards it says. Anyway, wonderful to meet you again. Must get on. Don’t want to block the traffic,’ said Sir John re-fastening his seat belt and staring resolutely ahead.

‘When I recognised you, I thought you must be going down to do the interview yourself,’ said Sally. ‘I’m sure Emily Smiley would love to hear about the police’s plans directly from the man at the top, especially as you’ve taken the trouble to come and check out the problem for yourself.’

‘I’ll call Robert,’ said Ana, eagerly. ‘Would be great if you joined the interview to show your support.’

‘Of course,’ said Sir John. ‘I’ll wander up there and demonstrate my concern. I’ll park up further along the road. See you later, perhaps.’ As Sally watched the Jaguar draw away, a couple of intensely bright, white lights switched on in the distance. They lit the corner at the far end of the road and illuminated a 4x4 vehicle surrounded by about half-a-dozen figures.

‘Ana, I think we’ve found him.’

‘I’ve brought your notes,’ called Ana to Robert, rounding the corner with Sally. He was standing in the glare of the lights chatting informally with Emily Smiley and Sir John, whose spontaneous participation in the news item had evidently been welcomed. Ana and Sally exchanged nods with the Chief Constable.

‘Thanks Ana. I can depend on you to go the extra mile,’ Robert said, taking a couple of files from Ana. ‘I might be able to refer to these for the interview. We’ll be getting started in a couple of minutes, shouldn’t we Emily?’

‘Not long,’ said Emily breezily. ‘The guys are checking the background shots they’ve been taking and sending them up to the newsroom.’

‘Robert, you know I said earlier about getting back to London?’ asked Ana, smiling winsomely. ‘I promised Mark. There’s a train in about forty minutes.’

‘Shit, I completely forgot.’ He pointed at the boots. ‘If I deprived Mark of the sight of you in those then I’m sure he’d find a way of getting Bridget on my case. Yes, go. But can you take these files with you? Bring them in the office on Monday morning so they’re already there just in case I’m late coming down.’

He took a twenty pound note from his wallet and placed it in Ana’s hand.

‘Thanks for today. I would say buy yourself and Mark a nice bottle of wine.’

‘Not for me,’ said Ana.

‘I know...another political book or something?’

‘More likely lipstick or chocolate’ she laughed. ‘See you Monday.’

He turned to Sally as Ana shot off along the dark street. ‘And thanks very much to you, Sally, for getting stuck into the glamorous side of the job.’

‘It’s been fascinating, wouldn’t have missed it,’ she replied. ‘I don’t need to go quite yet myself. Mind if I hang around and watch the interview? Then I can come with you back into town.’

‘What a glutton for punishment,’ he said. ‘Seriously, that’s would be lovely. We’ll carry on our conversation from earlier.’

‘I’d like to have a look at what these techies are up to. I’ll go and have a nosy while you’re preparing for your interview,’ said Sally, putting her hands in her pockets and wandering round to the back of the 4x4 where two technicians, a woolly-hatted cameraman and someone she concluded was the sound man, were presiding over the recording equipment in the open boot. They concentrated on a small television monitor.

‘Go back a bit,’ said the cameraman with the woolly-hat.

‘Fuck me, I’d have some of that,’ said the sound man. His exclamation caught Sally’s attention and, intrigued, she hovered behind the men, trying to catch a glimpse of what was on the screen.

The sound man continued. ‘Great close-up there. Wouldn’t have expected a real classy one like that on the street down here. I bet she’d still be really dirty. Maybe one of those Russians or Ukrainians they’ve been smuggling in.’

‘Worth paying a bit extra for her to keep the boots on,’ suggested the cameraman. ‘Hang on, she’s coming up to the car. Window’s winding down now.’

‘Look, there’s another. She’s not bad either. Wonder if they do a “buy one, get one free”?’ said the soundman. He waved his hand over the top of the vehicle to attract attention. ‘Emily, got some great stuff here. Struck real lucky. Want a look?’

Emily left Robert in conversation with Sir John and hurried to talk to the technicians. Rounding the back of the 4x4 she noticed Sally and shot her the same quizzical look as she had done earlier in the pub.

‘Got a good little ten-fifteen seconds. There’s this blonde in these boots you wouldn’t believe standing with her mate under the street light...’ started the cameraman.

‘Let’s see it then?’ said Emily. She watched intently. ‘Where was this?’

‘Just down the street here I was training the camera up and down the road from the corner here looking out for something with the long zoom.’

‘And we’ve got the dirty fucking bastard crawling along in the car too!’ Emily said, clapping her hands together. ‘Shame we can’t see his face. No, actually, that’s better. Won’t have to blur him. Very good, boys.’

Sally craned her neck and saw that the car on the screen was the black Jaguar that she’d suspected.

She gatecrashed the gathering and interrupted. ‘Except she’s not a prostitute.’

‘Oh no? What’s she doing, dressed like a tart, hanging around under a street light in a rumoured red light area, going up to men in slow moving cars? For fuck’s sake?’ asked Emily.

‘She was asking directions’ said Sally.

‘Oh yeah. Do you know her?’ asked the cameraman.

‘Yes. She’s Robert Cross’s research assistant, Ana.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said the sound man.

‘Look I was with her. I’m “the other one” and I’m *not* on special offer.’ She gave the soundman a quick, sarcastic grin.

‘Really?’ said Emily, clearly intrigued. ‘Research assistant?’ She said the words slowly and with a slight wink as she finished. ‘Better copy that film into our Robert Cross file.’

Sally continued ‘And the man in the car, you wouldn’t believe he was...’ She tailed off her sentence, coming to the realisation that the journalist and the TV crew were eyeing her like prey. ‘He was, er, really helpful with his directions,’ she added as a deliberate anti-climax.

‘Oh, really? Better crack on with this interview,’ said Emily to the technicians. She gave Sally a hard stare, which suggested she knew Sally was holding back something.

‘Sorry you won’t be able to use those pictures,’ said Sally.

‘What the hell do you mean?’ asked Emily.

‘They weren’t what you wanted them to be,’ said Sally. ‘Of prostitutes.’

‘Do you think I care?’ asked Emily. ‘I’m not going to waste bloody brilliant shots like that...We always blank out the faces before we transmit this kind of thing, if that’s what you’re so worried about.’

‘It’s your ethics I’m worried about,’ said Sally. ‘I’ve not seen any genuine streetwalkers or kerb crawlers tonight and I’ll bet neither have you.’

Emily approached Sally and whispered quietly in her ear. ‘Look, Miss High and Mighty, I don’t know what’s your fucking problem. Those pictures make your friend Robert’s points for him in spades. We edit it to make it look like a couple of faceless tarts on the street and twice as many people will take notice and listen to what

he's saying. Think of it as a spontaneous dramatic reconstruction, like fucking Crimewatch.'

'Bollocks. The inference is there. I'll complain,' said Sally.

'If you want to waste your time complaining, you'll find there's actually no law against filming anyone in a public place – and this subject is squarely in the public interest. So, if you'll excuse me, I've got an interview to do.'

Robert disengaged from a parting hug and kiss with Emily and approached Sally.

'How do you think that went?' he asked, buzzing.

'OK, I suppose,' said Sally.

'Only OK? I thought it was bang on message – showing I'm doing something for all those citizens of Oxford who live on the wrong side of the Cherwell,' he said. 'And then I dragged a few policing commitments out of John. I reckon it's probably the first time he's been down this end of town in years.'

'I wouldn't bet on it,' mumbled Sally.

'Pardon? You've gone a bit quiet, Sally. Shall we head back to the bus stop?' He pronounced the last two words with an air of self-satisfaction, striding off into the dark street towards the Cowley Road. Sally followed, hands in pockets, face staring at the ground.

'That's what you call serendipity – bumping into Emily in the pub. You might be my lucky charm,' he said.

'She's a two-faced, dissembling, manipulative cow,' spat Sally.

He stopped. 'What's brought this on? Do you know her?'

'No... but her crew filmed me and Ana right near here on this road earlier and they're going to use it as stock footage of a pair of Oxford prostitutes – supposedly hanging around under a streetlight and talking to a kerb crawler.'

'Don't tell me, Ana was wearing her new boots, wasn't she? Oh dear,' he started to laugh. I wouldn't worry. With that kind of stuff they always blur faces out. No one will know you from Adam, or, maybe I should say, Eve. Some of my constituents actually play hell about it – they want to see the grinning faces of the little joyriding hoodies that they normally obscure.'

'You wouldn't think it so bloody funny if it was you.'

'They couldn't use me, I'm a public figure – and that's usually a bloody pain in the arse. Sometimes I wish they'd blur me out for a change.'

'It's the principle. I am *not* a prostitute – and Ana is perfectly entitled to dress however she likes, wherever she likes without others making judgements, particularly another woman. You should have heard the filth the cameramen were coming out with when they were previewing it – obscene sexism.' Sally started walking again.

'If you looked at it in a "glass-half-full" way you might even see that as a tiny compliment, maybe.'

'I hope that's a bad joke.' She glared at him. 'I was half hoping once I told you that you'd be on the phone asking Emily not to use it. Obviously I've overestimated your sensitivity.'

'Sally, I'm sorry you feel that way but if that footage helps get my message across then it's serving the greater good...'

'By that you mean exaggerating a problem that barely exists so you can look like you've done something to fix it when, actually, it was hardly an issue in the first place?'

'Sally, I resent that interpretation.'

'Well, I resent being exploited.'

‘Ha, you exploited? Don’t you think it’s those poor women forced into sex work that are the ones who are more exploited? And my stand on this will at least get them off this street. A lot of them have serious problems. You know, that’s the problem with this city – it’s schizophrenic. Being MP for the shitty side of Oxford really opens your eyes to the divisions that we’ve still got in this country. East Oxford – student streets like this, bloody endless retail parks, the ethnic quarter, drive thru-McDonald’s. But at least we do something productive – we make cars that are sold all over the world. Over there – power, wealth, privilege, money, chocolate-box tourists in twee pubs looking for Inspector Fucking Morse.’

‘I’m not listening. You can’t absolve yourself by preaching your self-justifying cant,’ said Sally.

‘It’s nothing short of cultural apartheid. And what’s even worse is that the elite try to hide their privilege away. Walk past all those yellow stone walls and there’s colleges with beautiful gardens that nearly all of us can’t even see, let alone enter. Vaults of wine cellars where the university keeps the best vintage claret while school buildings rot on the other side of town. Their language is even exclusive – Magdalen? I ask you. Say Mag-da-len, like it’s written and you expose yourself as a bloody pleb. Tell you what, I feel maudlin when I cross Madgalen Bridge and head up into the real world. Do you know Oxford was hardly bombed in the war because Hitler wanted to make it his cultural capital? Shows perhaps how much common cause he had with the gowns.’

‘I can’t believe you just brought Hitler into this.’

‘Must have been the thought of Ana’s boots,’ he turned and winked at Sally.

‘You’re sick,’ she said. They reached the Cowley Road and turned left towards the bus stop. It was the fag end of rush-hour. The traffic ground along in a slow torpor, the buses’ idling engines spewing out a sooty stench.

‘Besides, you’re a journalist. You know how they always take artistic licence.’

‘Maybe that’s why I’m not presenting the news on TV and, instead, I’m scribbling in the wilderness? The wilderness of wine writing. Mind you, when I told her that Ana was your research assistant I thought she might have taken a different tack.’

‘You told her what?’

‘That their supposed whore actually worked for you.’

‘Bollocks, I didn’t realise that,’ he said.

‘Why are you bothered? I thought it was all in the greater good?’

‘Sally. That was a bloody stupid thing to do. First rule of politics: never give the media anything that you’ve not carefully calculated serves your own interest. Emily’s going to file away that footage of Ana dressed up in her bloody boots just in case.’

‘Just in case of what?’ asked Sally.

‘In case someone decides to do a hatchet job on me – nudge, nudge, wink, wink, you know.’

They reached the bus stop, which was next to a small supermarket. The shopkeepers had started to remove for the night the display of exotic fruit and vegetables that had been meticulously arranged on the pavement.

‘I’m very sorry if I let you down,’ she said sarcastically. ‘Though I did keep my powder dry about who the kerb crawler was,’ said Sally.

‘What? You knew him as well?’

‘Yes, Your mate Sir John, who you actually did the interview with – the Chief Constable. Dirty bastard.’

‘No. You must have got it wrong.’

‘He didn’t seem to know you were there doing the interview until I told him.’

‘I thought Emily had pre-arranged...’

‘Don’t think so...said he was just checking out the problem for himself...I suggested –.’

Robert kissed Sally on the forehead.

‘Don’t. I’m still pissed off with you. What was that for?’

‘You’ve given me one over on the slimy bastard. It doesn’t really matter if he was kerb crawling or not: he’s going to know that *I’ll* know he was cruising around here tonight. One for my locker – psychological advantage Cross. Worth a few favours I think.’

‘So me being broadcast as a hooker has given you a political advantage?’

‘Don’t put it like that,’ he said. ‘In this game you react to events. Make the best of things as they happen. It’s not really cock-up versus conspiracy. It’s chaos theory. We’re not capable of conspiracies. It’s the chaos of cock-up upon cock-up. You ride it as best you can. Smile, try and put your spin on events, hope you’re lucky and get away with it.’

‘Till eventually you get found out. Here’s the bus.’

‘So it’s pretty appropriate for Emily’s piece on Cowley’s red light district to star my research assistant as the prostitute and have the Chief Constable doing a cameo as the kerb crawler. Keep our fingers crossed we’ll get away with that, the police nip the nuisance in the bud, everyone’s happy.’

The bus drew up to the stop. Inside it was busy and clammy. Robert and Sally had to sit separately. When they reached the High Street they disembarked in silence.

‘Better be off then, before I accidentally stumble into any more of your photo opportunities,’ said Sally.

Robert looked at Sally intently; his head close and a little bowed. His eyes looked slightly upwards, keenly focused into Sally’s. He placed one of his hands on each of her arms. ‘Sally. I’m sorry. I’ve really enjoyed your company...and I’ve been thinking. You’ve taught me something.’

‘Really. What’s that?’ she asked, becoming interested.

‘You talked straight to me. Most of the people I mix with are those who I employ or who want something out of me. The only people who normally give me a bollocking are obsessed with what’s on the next news bulletin – and reacting to the last one. And I see how people get used, hurt, lied to – even people I like a lot. I sometimes feel like I’m prostituting *myself*.’

‘All in the pursuit of the greater good, though?’ she replied, breaking his gaze.

‘Better find my bus to the park and ride,’ he said, letting his hands drop and turning his back.

‘Yeah,’ she said.

Sally stood still as he started to walk up the High Street. After a few yards he turned, looking at the traffic. She caught his eyes momentarily. They seemed downcast and introspective. She impulsively ran along the pavement, then grabbed his arm just before he was about to cross the road.

‘Robert,’ she said, a little out of breath.

‘Sally.’

‘I want to tell you how much I admired the way you worked for your constituents today.’

He smiled broadly. ‘Thanks. That means a lot to me Sally. We don’t often get much recognition for that.’

Michael Clarke

‘And I’d never have guessed you had such passionate political views. You’re quite an old lefty at heart aren’t you? It’s pretty much what I believe in too.’

‘A political soul mate?’ he asked. ‘That’s a rare thing.’

‘Mate will do,’ she said.

‘Fancy another quick drink?’ he asked.

‘What about a nice glass of Cabernet Sauvignon – a little austere and impenetrable at first but, on further acquaintance, develops a beguiling complexity?’ she suggested.

He placed a kiss on her cheek, took her arm and led her up the High Street back towards Carfax.