

Sahlan Diver

**For the Love
of Alison**

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Disclaimer: The fictitious political party, "Making Sense", characterised in this novel, is not intended to be a representation of the similarly named real-life UK political party, "Common Sense". As a resident of the Republic of Ireland, the author was not even aware the latter party existed until halfway through writing the work. Any resemblance between the real and fictional party is therefore purely coincidental.

*Tout étant un carnaval constant,
il n'y a plus de carnaval qui reste*

“Everything being a constant carnival,
there is no carnival left.”

Victor Hugo

For A Trusted Friend — In Confidence

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PART 1
TRAPPED

Chapter 1

Not Guilty,

by Reason of Sanity

Question: What's the perfect way to commit murder?

Answer: Get someone who doesn't exist to do it for you.

Firstly, they don't exist, so there's nobody for the police to catch.

Secondly, if the police did, by some miracle, manage to catch them, well they don't exist, do they? So they can't tell on you.

Does that sound a bit mad? Does it sound like I'm mad? That's what they want me to admit, that there are serious questions regarding my sanity; that these things did not play out as I describe.

I had to write it down, just as it happened. Maybe then I could work it out. Maybe you can work it out. Perhaps I'm insane and witnessed only an illusion. Perhaps I'm sane but taking everyone for a ride. Or perhaps I'm the unfortunate victim of someone else's business — in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or, perhaps the whole thing is a trick and none of what took place that evening can be relied upon.

The problem is only I know what is true. But that is the problem. I don't know the truth. I only know what I saw. Even that is too strong a statement. I only know what I *thought* I saw.

And don't say it could never happen to you. Exactly what I would have said a few months ago. An average

citizen, leading an ordered life. How could I find myself trapped in such a preposterous situation?

Chapter 2

Alison

The end is as yet unknown. The beginning is not. It started with Alison, with her phone call to my office. Alison, who had shaped my youth and abandoned me, I thought forgotten me. Alison, whom I had not seen for thirty years. Alison wants to meet up.

I almost didn't go to work that day, feeling shaky, a recurrence of my old illness. It comes every so often, then passes. If I'd done the sensible thing and called in sick, I wouldn't have been there to receive the phone call; I wouldn't have been there to fit in so neatly with the diabolical plan apparently being devised for my future.

I have to assume timing was critical. That day. That time. The window of opportunity. Another day? Too late! She even told me herself on the phone: "Tomorrow's out. I'm going to Paris for a week. Come this evening. We'll have a good few hours to talk before my husband comes home. Then you'll have to go. I don't think you and he should meet."

Early morning: my regular weekday Bromley commuter train to London. Early afternoon: an express racing up north. Nothing regular about that: because of Alison.

The train's only just started off and the ticket inspector's already doing his rounds. I offer the ticket apologetically. "Is it OK? I intended to get the three o'clock but saw this one would get there thirty minutes earlier. Do I owe any money?"

He scrutinises my ticket. “No, that’s fine, sir. You can use it any time you want, including the last train back to London at midnight.”

I thank him, saying I’m planning to return by the ten o’clock.

How did Alison know I can’t drive? Most people assume I’ll be visiting by car and immediately launch into a mass of directions relating to motorway names and exit numbers, which might as well be a foreign language to my ears. I’m obliged to hastily interrupt and ask what’s their nearest train station and how far are they from it. I didn’t need to with Alison. She’d even found out the times. “Get the three o’clock. Don’t bother with a taxi — they go round the one-way system, which they use as an excuse to rip you off. We’re literally walking distance. Take the hill directly opposite the railway; ignore two right turns; next right, past the evangelical church, is us. We’re the third cottage along, the only one with a gnome outside the front door.”

I laughed. “You won’t believe this! I also have a gnome outside my front door! So it’s third right, third cottage, gnome. I’ll be there.”

I hear the clatter of the buffet trolley approaching from the next carriage. Normally, on a longish journey like this, I’d order something but my thoughts are elsewhere. I hardly notice the steward asking, “Any drinks or snacks?”

It’s funny; I can’t remember the occasion on which I met Alison. I mean, I remember the occasion. I could tell you the date precisely. I have a clear impression of the room as I entered but, much as I try, I can’t recall the actual moment of seeing her, nor of how we were introduced.

Perhaps because we became such good friends, shared so many good moments together, my recollection of that first time faded by comparison. Or maybe my illness blocked it out, a memory too painful to keep in view of what subsequently occurred.

We met at the opening session of the student drama society. I went along as potential scriptwriter. Alison attended as a performer, though not as an undergraduate — she worked as a student nurse at the nearby hospital. Because of the proximity of the university to the medical school, the drama society offered membership to both institutions. I do remember her audition. She did a skit, playing members of the royal family, including the male members. Hilariously funny. She was a first-class mimic, very good at voices. At some point, we found we had common ground politically, though she even more left wing than I. We went arm in arm on protest marches, sat together at political rallies, joined expeditions sticking posters on lamp posts.

I don't wish to denigrate nursing in any way but I felt Alison to be wasting her talents. I once told her there were any number of careers in which she might be successful *and* make more money. She replied by mocking me, saying she hadn't noticed me putting a high priority on earnings, with my sole ambition of becoming a published poet and playwright.

An hour out from London, we're pulling in to the first stop. Two hours to go. I'm nervous. More than that: turned on. I'm remembering the time I'd planned to bed her.

Alison slept around and didn't mind anyone knowing. Nice-looking, with thick blonde hair and a pleasant

personality, you might even say gorgeous. She worked through an easy succession of short-term boyfriends. Not difficult with the university's ready supply of randy young males, living in halls of residence, unfettered by the behavioural constraints of living at home. Only once did her supply dry up. I took my chance. Our hall had a dance on — we used to call them “discos” back then. Naively, I mistook Alison's delight, when I invited her, as confirmation she too wanted what I wanted.

Eight o'clock they came down the corridor together: Alison and the guy. I'd seen him around but hadn't twigged anything going on. She asked could they borrow my room. An hour later, at the disco, they gave back my key. I went back upstairs, too peeved to stay. Whatever precaution they'd taken, it wasn't quite enough. On my bed sheet, a small yet tell-tale stain, still sticky, the nearest I'd ever get to sex with Alison.

The train speaker announces the final stop, reminding us to ensure we've taken all our belongings. This is it! At least this time, I can raise no false hopes. Well, she's married, isn't she? What are the chances she's invited me for sex?

Things went from bad to worse. At a party, I introduced Alison to my English Literature professor, Laurence Thompson, the well-known author. They began a passionate affair, difficult to organise due to the inconvenience of his having a wife. When Alison worked nights, they'd meet during the day, squeezing out our friendship. We drifted apart.

After my graduation I moved to London. If you're writing for theatre, that's where you need to be, making

contacts, making connections. Alison's affair couldn't last forever. When my star as writer arose, I'd invite her to live with me, to share in my glory. The news of her wedding put a stop to all that. A university friend told me. Alison had settled down and got married: to a solicitor. Extraordinary! Such a confining, respectable act for a former left-wing activist and sexual libertine.

The train doors beep at me. I press the button and breathe in the decidedly bracing air of this north-eastern town. Through the ticket barrier, out of the station into the forecourt and there, beyond the taxi rank, the long steep hill of terraced houses, just as Alison had described on the phone.

Should I attribute my breakdown to the news of Alison seemingly lost to me forever or to the fact of my writing going nowhere? Whatever, that's when my drug dependency started. First a welcome palliative, a temporary escape from misery, then total immersion in an alternative world. I hallucinated constantly, unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. Luckily, police were called to "the incident", before I did harm to myself or others. Committed for treatment, I became a national health service success story, fully rehabilitated, though not without consequences — even till a few years ago I would get the occasional mental white-out where for five minutes I wouldn't know who I was, where I was, or what I was doing. That's why I'm barred from driving, and why I needed a job that would surround me with people, to keep me grounded in reality, also to raise the alarm and care for me if I had one of my episodes. The bustle of a newspaper office seemed ideal, as the job offered contact with my first

love — writing. I worked my way up from the menial position of storekeeper given to me out of charity and sympathy, becoming a copy editor, then a features editor, finally their chief political columnist whose comments are read nationwide daily. The newspaper even provided a social life: receptions, cultural events, political dinners; the only thing not provided, a female companion. I'd go home at night to sleep alone in my Bromley flat, the life of a recluse, talking to nobody till back at work the next day.

This place isn't Bromley. No denying I'm in the industrial north here, though most of the old industry has either gone or been moved out to green-field enterprise parks. In the damp cold foggy gloom of an early January evening, as I pass by the glow of the street corner pubs, it's as if they're still attended by ghosts of workers past. Two pubs, two right turns — this hill is longer and steeper than Alison led me to believe. Should have got a taxi.

The phone call came after lunch. I'd been away from the office all morning for a briefing on *Death Means Death*, the new populist obscenity announced with a big fanfare by minor political party, *Making Sense*. The receptionist told me a woman had rung several times. Another call came in as she was telling me.

"Shall I take her number?" she asked.

"Tell her if she doesn't mind hanging on while I catch the lift, I'll be back at my desk in two minutes."

I felt in no mood to rush. The persistence of the caller made me suspect an ardent campaigner, or a right-wing troll seeking the opportunity to abuse me.

I picked up the office phone. "David Buckley here."

An unfamiliar voice, the voice of a middle-aged woman asked, "Is that David Buckley, the well-known columnist?"

I confirmed, bracing myself for the expected barrage.

"David, this is Alison. Alison Johnson. Sorry! Stupid habit! I mean Alison Tindell."

For a moment I thought this might not be happening, that I might be experiencing another whiteout. "Alison, is it you? It doesn't sound like you."

The voice on the phone said, "You don't sound like you either. We're a lot older than last time we saw each other. Sorry to remind you of that unpleasant fact."

She told me she knew of my column but never thought the writer might actually be me. The David Buckley she'd known had insisted on dedicating his life to poetry and plays. Compromise for that David was not an option. My recent article, confessing my drug addiction and rehabilitation, had connected the dots.

"Why don't you come and see me tonight?" she said. "The train gets in at six. Last one back to London is at midnight. You'll have to leave at nine anyway, before my husband gets home."

I pass by the looming Victorian façade of the evangelical church. The billboard slogan in the spirit of "Prepare to meet thy doom" seems apt, considering the house I am about to visit. It was when I asked whether there might be a problem my being there without her husband's knowledge that Alison dropped the bombshell. The solicitor she had married all those years ago was the man now notorious as "Honest Jack", my political nemesis, Jack Johnson, founder of the "Making Sense"

parliamentary party and all-round foul-mouthed pub bore, stirrer of political trouble, a man whose opinions I had often lambasted and ridiculed in my daily column.

I reach the third turning right, cross the road and count the houses. Alison had said to look for the third cottage along, the only one with a gnome. Could Jack Johnson and I actually have something in common? Both garden gnome fanatics — the irony of the situation a temporary antidote to the shock of discovering Alison was his wife, shared his bed, presumably allowed herself to be regularly penetrated by that specimen of an extreme right-wing monster.

The gnome stands proud but the cottage is in total darkness. I'm beginning to suspect a malicious impersonator has sent me here on a wild-goose-chase. Surely not! How could they have found out about Alison? Then I realise: I caught a different train; I'm half an hour early. I could have forewarned Alison. Why didn't she give me her number?

As I walk up the garden path, I hear a crash, like furniture being knocked over. And an exclamation: "Shit and Blast!"

I ring the bell and wait. No reply, so I ring again. The cottage remains in darkness. After pressing the bell for a third time, I hear soft footsteps inside. The door's opened by a blonde in her early fifties. "Come in, David! Lovely to see you again! Well, it *will* be lovely to see you, when I can find the light switch!" She laughs, the sexy Alison laugh I remember so well.

Chapter 3

The Cottage

We've been talking now for almost an hour and a half. I'm amazed and touched by Alison's vivid remembrance of shared times past, coming out with story after story, most of which had totally gone from my recollection. Were it not for the stories and her sexy laugh, I wouldn't have believed myself talking to the person once a student with me in Birmingham, that with the passing of three decades she could so completely change in appearance and manner — I could have been talking to her mother. Well, of course, the one occasion I met her mother, she would have been ten years younger than Alison is now. Funny, isn't it, when you're in your early twenties, how your parents and your friends' parents seem ancient? Later in life, as you age alongside people, you don't think of them as growing noticeably older. Only when you see someone you haven't seen for years does age hit you and you see its effects with the clarity of your younger self.

Reincarnated as a mature lady, Alison remains gorgeous. Attractive, taller than average at five foot six, the same thick blonde hair, the same tiny beauty spot blemish just above her upper lip (something else I'd forgotten). She's wearing a cardigan and a skirt (which pleases me, because I'm a legs man and Alison's still showing good legs. She has on black tights, no shoes on her feet. Right now, she's curled up on the sofa, informal and relaxed. However, I sense a nervousness, like she's putting on an act. Is she leading the conversation away from controversy because the uncomfortable truth is we

are no longer comrades-in-arms, she's fully gone over to the other side?

This room is obviously part of an old cottage that has been modernised. Oak beams, timbered walls. The front door opens directly into the living room. No space for a hallway because of the building's age. The only illumination the flickering of an artificial coal-effect electric fire and some wall lights turned down on a dimmer to a cosy, intimate light. The décor hints of a homeowner who enjoys success and standing in the community, with a suggestion of big money tainted by vulgarity. I'm surprised. I could understand Johnson showing off but I would have thought Alison a stronger restraining influence against the bad taste that is apparent. Really bizarre is a stuffed ferret mounted on a stand placed on a corner table. Ugly. Menacing. I comment on it. Alison merely laughs, exclaiming, "My husband!"

I ask, "Do you remember Hibbert?"

"Our marching colleague. How could I forget!"

"What happened to him, do you know?"

She sighs. "Prison, I expect."

"You're referring to his 'Robin Hood' tendencies, robbing from the capitalist rich to feed the poor, in every case the poor being himself."

"What was that story about the second-hand books?"

"He'd shoplift from the university bookshop, then take the book back later to sell to them as a second-hand item. He'd have the cheek to haggle over the money they offered, saying 'Look! It's in nearly-new condition!'"

Alison laughs. "Remember the porter at your hall of residence, the one who always got his opposites the wrong

way round. He hated Hibbert being so vocal with his left-wing views. He used to say 'That Hibbert! He's a real *reactionary!*'"

I reply, "Even funnier what he said about Stephen, the gay guy. He didn't like him either. He whispered in my ear once, all intimate and confidential, when Stephen was standing nearby, 'I'm a *homo*-sexual and proud of it!'"

Alison says, "Lucky for him, you didn't take him up on the offer!"

In another room, a telephone rings. Alison tells me she's not answering — a bossy neighbour pressing her to do volunteer work. "It's not that I mind. It's a good cause but the woman keeps you hostage on the phone. She's a non-stop talker."

Alison asks whether I have news of Laurence Thompson.

I say, half-joking, "We none of us stood a chance against the professor, did we?"

She laughs. "I always did have a thing for successful men."

The phone rings again. Alison makes a face. "Some women! Think they have a right to demand your attention. Can't stand being thwarted. I'm not answering. She can stew!"

I'm pondering whether Alison's self-confessed attraction to successful men explains her present situation, in every respect at odds with the Alison of her youth. I say, "When we heard you'd married a solicitor, we all said what a weird conventional thing for Alison Tindell to do. Your affair with Professor Thompson I can understand. A

brilliant man. But Johnson! Alison, I don't want to be rude about your husband ..."

She interrupts me "Why not? You're making a career out of being rude to him."

Now she's thrown down the gauntlet I'm determined to press my point. "Sometimes I think the world's going bloody mad! Look at the pattern of history: religious bigotry superseded by the enlightenment, the exploitations of the industrial revolution mitigated by social reforms, then the labour movement, leading to the national health service, free education for all, then the moral freedoms and sexual revolution of the 60's; women's rights; gay rights. A guaranteed steady liberalisation and progress of the human condition. Now look where we are! I saw a picture at work, a group photo of American politicians, all middle-aged, all men, signing a proclamation to tear up a vital climate-change deal. They had smirks on their faces like a bunch of irresponsible teenage schoolboys whose teacher was temporarily absent from class and who were determined to create as much chaos as they could while they had the chance."

I expect Alison to engage me in a battle of words. She wasn't shy of giving political opponents a battering in the past. Instead, she gently touches my arm. "David, let's not start on an argument. I hope we can still be friends. I need time to explain my newfound philosophy. Next time we meet?"

She gets up from the sofa and goes over to a writing desk. "I've got a surprise for you!"

From a drawer she takes out a pile of foolscap papers, yellowed with age, precariously held together with a rusted metal fastener through one corner. "Remember this?"

She hands it to me.

On the first page is typed:

HERE BE CLOWNS

A PLAY

BY DAVID BUCKLEY

"You wrote it for me, remember? Though, considering the erotic content, I'm not sure it wasn't simply a ruse to get my clothes off."

I look at my old forgotten script with sadness. "Pity we never had a chance to perform it."

Alison laughs. "The professor banned it! David, here's the good news. We're putting it on in the town next month. The amateur dramatic society."

I leaf through the pages, so unfamiliar they could have been written by a stranger. "I haven't seen this since I wrote it. I hardly remember the plot."

Disappearing into the kitchen, Alison says, "You can read it while I make coffee."

Is this the reason for the sudden invitation, the reason why, underneath the pleasant bonhomie, she has seemed so nervous and apprehensive all evening?

Chapter 4

Here Be Clowns

The phone's ringing again. Must be an extension, because it sounds further away than before. I'm puzzled to hear Alison answering this time.

"Oh! Hello! ... Not now... I've got somebody with me... What does it matter to you? ... A man ... No, I can't ask him ... He might be embarrassed ... You're far too pushy! Has anybody ever told you that? I'll call you back."

She comes in with two mugs of coffee and a jug of milk on a patterned tray. "If I remember right, you don't take sugar in coffee."

"Was that her, the bossy woman?"

"David, this is awkward. I hope you don't think I'm taking advantage. The actor who's playing the part of the clown says he wants to come round and rehearse a scene. We need you to take part. Do you mind?"

I say, "How can I refuse, when it's my play!"

She leaves the room and I hear the push button beeps of a telephone, then a pause.

"He says he'll do it ... Do we have to? ... Can't you make an exception just this once? ... Now it's *me* who's going to be embarrassed ... All right! You win again!"

Alison comes back into the room. "I have to get changed. He insists we do it in costume."

"What's the guy's name?"

"Mister Clown, like in the script."

"His real name."

Alison looks at me strangely. "You're going to have to humour him. He told me not to tell you."

“Is he OK?”

Alison sits down close to me on the sofa. She’s talking in a subdued voice, as if she doesn’t want to be overheard. “He fancies himself as a method actor. He thinks he has to live the part. He’s been running around town for weeks in his clown outfit. Somebody complained to the police. They called him in for an official caution, so he had to stop that tomfoolery. Tonight, he’s insisting we play it for real, like in the script. You’re only allowed to know him as ‘Mister Clown’. If you remember, your corrupt politician character doesn’t know Mister Clown’s true identity, only that he’s being blackmailed by him over a shady business deal. The clown turns up, just as you and I.. ”

I ask nervously, “Is it the sex scene?”

Alison takes my hands in hers. “David, promise me you won’t feel embarrassed or awkward. Otherwise I don’t think I can go through with it.”

From an alcove in the corner of the room she fetches a plastic bag containing a heavy object. “It’s OK. It can’t fire. We’ll be using sound effects in performance.”

I take out a handgun.

Alison thumbs the script till she finds the page. “We’re going from here. I’m your secretary but I’m secretly in league with Mister Clown. He’s tried unsuccessfully to blackmail you, so he’s set me up to seduce you. He breaks in on us to take compromising photographs. You try to grab his camera; he produces a gun; he doesn’t know you also have a gun; you fire, wounding him; then he runs off.”

I read the page and wince. “This sex writing is really dated. It’ll never hold up with a modern audience. They’ll fall about, laughing.”

Alison says, "We've changed it. You don't have to play the super-stud any more. Just sit passively on this chair and leave me to direct the action." She pulls over a dining chair for me to sit on. "Go over your lines while I get changed."

I turn up the dimmer on the wall and read the relevant pages a few times. A dramatic moment in the play. On the other hand, straightforward. Why Mister Clown has singled out this relatively easy bit for special rehearsal, I can't imagine, though from Alison's description he sounds highly eccentric, which may explain a lot.

The lights turn down low again. I look up. Alison Tindell is standing at the entrance to the room. She's changed into a translucent mini nightdress, sufficiently see-through to reveal the outline of her breasts and her protruding nipples, and she's removed her tights, so her legs are bare.

"Wow! Alison, you're like a vision of Venus."

She smiles. "Come on! Let's get on with it!"

"What about Mister Clown?"

Alison looks over her shoulder. "I left the back door open for him. He'll be spying on us at this moment, just like in the play."

From somewhere inside the house comes the slow throbbing music of a seedy striptease club.

I say, "You'll forgive me if I think this is a little creepy."

"Relax!" she replies, "It's only a play. It's *your* play. Enjoy it."

She starts to dance, like a lap dancer. In character, she says, "Mister Barclay? You seem tense. Let me help you unwind." She dances towards me, alternately sliding her

nightdress up her body, then lowering it, teasing me with brief glimpses of her panties. She's good: very good. I feel myself getting rock hard. This isn't a rehearsal. It's a seduction.

"Waaaaaaarrrrrrrggggggghhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Mister Clown leaps into the room with such volume and force he startles us both. He's prancing round the room in clown face mask, bright scarlet wig, baggy check suit, ridiculous black rubber flipper feet and outsize white gloves, taking flash photograph after flash photograph with his infernal camera. "Pay me! Bastard! Pay me! Bastard! Pay me! Bastard!" The voice is brilliantly unpleasant. Mister Clown isn't rehearsing either. He's for real.

Chapter 5

Killing Time

I walk back downhill in the direction of the railway, trying to get a grip. Alison Johnson — Alison Tindell — wants to have sex. Tonight, when her husband is on the way to Paris. Am I hallucinating? Has meeting her revived old traumas, old psychological wounds, such that I'm imagining she propositioned me?

In my mind, I re-live what happened from the moment the clown leapt in. We spoke the lines in the script, leading to the argument where he gets his gun out then I pretend to shoot him with mine. In lieu of sound effects, I shouted, "Bang!" whereupon he shrieked, overacted I thought, and went limping out of the room. Alison, who had by now put her cardigan back on to cover herself, followed him out, returning a few moments later. "That's him done!" she said.

I looked at my watch. "It's nearly nine."

Fetching my coat, Alison said, "I don't want you to go."

I asked, "Could we meet again soon, or would that be difficult?"

She turned off the lights and opened the front door. In the darkness, hugging me tight, she said, "David, if you want, you can come back later, after eleven, when my husband has left for Paris. I'm not leaving till tomorrow. We can spend the night together."

I've been wandering around town for an hour, aimlessly killing time. Eventually, to escape the cold damp air, I came back here, to the railway, to wait in the warmth and brightness of the station buffet. A few passengers,

fellow refugees from the unwelcoming night, are sitting huddled at tables, sipping mugs of hot tea. I desperately need normality, to get back to journalism mode, the only environment in which I feel truly safe. I notice the buffet has one of those pay-as-you-go Internet access terminals, so I sit down at it and google Jack Johnson. Wikipedia comes up top. The entry for Johnson is substantial, apart from the "Personal Life" section, which merely claims that, outside of his strident public persona, he is a quiet man who values his privacy and his close friends. The article adds that, in his business, "he enjoys the full support of Mary Johnson", though it makes no mention of Alison. I assume Mary is Johnson's sister, that they are in partnership, a family business, with the father a solicitor before them.

Next, I find newspaper articles on this morning's briefing in London, at which I was present. There's an election coming up. It will be a close-run thing, with the horrifying prospect of Making Sense's tiny band of MPs holding the balance of power. If this happens, they say they will press for a free vote on the restoration of the death penalty. Their campaign, under the slogan, "Death Means Death. It Makes Sense", contains the usual obfuscation of the truth, seizing on the scare opportunity afforded by recent serial killer murders to conveniently ignore the more mundane fact that the murder rate has been consistently falling for several years running. Johnson says they will demand the sentence of death be retrospectively applied to any murder committed from today onwards.

I have to hand it to Johnson. He may be a total sod but he's an accomplished political manipulator. Backdating the threatened law to the day of the announcement, is a *coup de maître*, a way of serving notice to any would-be murderer: "Better not chance it. If we do get our law through parliament in a free vote, that's your head in the noose. Guaranteed!" And should such a threat turn out to be effective, Johnson will point to the statistics: "See! We've proved the death penalty is a deterrent. Look how the number of murders dropped dramatically as soon as we announced our intention to backdate the law." Even should the backdating be ruled untenable by parliament or by the courts, in the mind of the general public he'll still have a powerful argument in favour of restoring the ultimate punishment.

Nearly eleven. The appointed time approaches. I quit the Internet and the station. In the cosy environment of the buffet, I felt assured I had not imagined the events of this evening. Now, as I make my way uphill along the deserted foggy street, doubts are coming back. It seems inconceivable Alison decided on sex spontaneously: the urgency with which she summoned me to the north, the premeditation of working out train times, all suggest the sex has been planned. How did she know she would want me? It's not like she were reviving an old intimacy. She'd never wanted me when we were young. Why now?

Perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps her desire *was* spontaneously aroused. If I think about it there was no hint of sex until the phone call from clown man. Even then, she didn't want to do the scene, embarrassed by the erotic content. Only at his insistence did she perform it for real.

The moment of truth. The cottage ahead. That's funny — no gnome! Actually, it's very funny. Johnson must take in his gnomes overnight, worried they might get stolen. And the cottage is in darkness again.

I'm about to press the bell when I see the door is ajar, confirmation, if still needed, of the illicit purpose of our rendezvous.

I push the door open.

The silhouette of Alison is standing at the far side of the room.

The main ceiling light comes on, momentarily dazzling me.

The woman standing there, in a skirt, has Alison's figure, is Alison's age. On the floor in front of her, what can only be the body of a man, covered by a sheet.

The woman has black hair. She's not Alison.

"David Buckley?"

"Yes. What's going on?"

"I'm arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Jack Johnson."

Chapter 6

Interview

I'm being held for twenty-four hours at the local police station. Considering they arrested me on suspicion of murder, the treatment has been remarkably civil. They took fingerprints, got me a solicitor, got me a meal, then locked me in a cell overnight, Spartan but not uncomfortable. My few personal belongings have been temporarily taken from me. Now we're sitting at a table in an interview room: myself, my solicitor, and the lady detective who arrested me. There's an extremely tall policeman standing at the door — I assume for security. They've already done the usual caution and my solicitor reiterates that I don't have to comment if I don't want to. I say I'm innocent, I've nothing to hide and therefore I'm happy to answer their questions. In response to my urgent enquiry, I'm assured they have found no other dead bodies at the cottage, nor do they expect to find any.

The detective does bear an uncanny resemblance to Alison. Same age, same height, same build, same hair, except for the colour. Similarity of features, minus beauty spot on upper lip. No wonder in the darkness of the cottage I'd mistaken her for my friend. Her voice shatters the illusion. Hard northern vowels. Obviously, a local lass. "Mr Buckley, I'm Detective Inspector Jane Magee. The purpose of this interview is to get your account of the events at Jack Johnson's house. You don't deny visiting his house last night?"

"How can I? You arrested me there."

“Did you visit the house any other occasion, yesterday or any other day?”

“Just the once. Early yesterday evening. I stayed about three hours and left before nine.”

“And what was your purpose in visiting Mr Johnson?”

My solicitor shuffles awkwardly in his seat. I’ve already told him the story in a private interview. He’s not happy with what I’m about to say.

“I wasn’t visiting Johnson. I was visiting his wife. She’s an old college friend.”

DI Magee seems confused by my reply. “But when you arrived, the wife wasn’t there? Only Johnson?”

“No. Alison was there. Johnson wasn’t. She told me to leave before he came home, so I never got to meet him.”

The detective gives me a puzzled look. “There’s something here that’s not adding up. OK, we’ll come back to that. You’re saying you didn’t see Johnson. Is it possible he was elsewhere in the house? How many rooms did you go in? Take a moment to remember the events as they happened.”

I close my eyes, imagining walking up the hill, turning into the road, observing the gnome, opening the garden gate, walking up the path. Now I’m remembering something I’d totally forgotten. “There *was* someone else there! As I approached the cottage, I heard the loud crash of an object being dropped. Somebody called out ‘Shit and Blast!’ A woman’s voice.”

“Not the woman you came to see?”

“Understand I hadn’t seen Alison for thirty years. It’s only now, thinking back, I know it couldn’t have been her.”

“Three words heard through a closed door isn’t a lot to go on.”

I laugh. “It is if you’d known Alison as I did. If she’d hurt herself, tripped or dropped something on her foot, her spontaneous language would have been a lot richer than ‘Shit and Blast’, a phrase she’d never have used in a million years!”

DI Magee sighs. “So now we have two people in the house: Alison, and a mystery woman who you hear but don’t see. Any other characters you want to tell us about?”

“Not unless you count the silent witness: the stuffed ferret.”

My solicitor asks could we have a word in private. The detective and policeman leave the room. “A piece of advice, Mr Buckley. Don’t joke with the police, especially with a serious charge hanging over you. Either way, whether you’re innocent or guilty, it won’t help your case.”

DI Magee returns. I apologise for the ferret joke. “In bad taste. Like the ornament itself. What a thing for Johnson to keep in his living room!”

The detective gives me her trademark puzzled look. “Mr Buckley, you’re sure you went in no other room in the house? There’s no ferret in the living room.” She calls in the police constable and asks him to go to the house and locate the ornament. “If forensics have finished with it, bring it back here.”

I ask, “Detective Inspector Magee, could you tell me, how did you come to be there when I returned to the cottage? Who contacted the police? Was it Alison? I

assume she wasn't present when her husband was killed, or she'd have already told you I didn't do it."

Magee replies, "We'll come to that in good time. First, I'd like you to tell me everything that happened. You can call me Jane, Mr Buckley. Not strictly by the book but it's a lot easier."

"OK...Jane. Alison let me in. The cottage was in darkness. She was having trouble locating the switch. The wall lights came on. We embraced and hugged. Then we sat together on the sofa and reminisced about old times. While we were talking, a telephone rang in another room. Alison said she wasn't going to answer; a bossy neighbour, a non-stop talker; she'd never get her off the phone and it would spoil our evening. We carried on talking. The phone rang again. Alison ignored it; said it was bound to be the woman. Sometime later, she went to the kitchen to make coffee. The phone rang a third time and I was surprised to hear Alison answering, considering what she'd said earlier."

I carry on, giving a full account of the strange incident of Mister Clown. I know my solicitor isn't happy. He's heard the story before and is convinced it's a clumsy attempt at a cover-up. I told him I have to tell the truth. However, I'm not telling the absolute truth. I say nothing of the invitation for sex, only that I came back to chat with Alison for another hour until the last London train at midnight.

Chapter 7

Questions

They had to let me go. My solicitor pressed them on the evidence. They admitted they had insufficient to bring charges. He wasn't so happy when I dismissed him. I told him only a guilty man needs to retain the services of a solicitor.

The police have requested I stick around, "to assist with their enquiries"; so here I am, ensconced in a modern hotel room with good wi-fi, my laptop having been couriered to me from work. I explained on the phone to my astonished editor, impressing upon him that my name is being kept out of the news so as not to prejudice the ongoing enquiry.

Normally I'd prefer a smaller, more intimate hotel but the impersonal nature of this one is welcome in the circumstances. They have put me on the top floor, a contingency, anticipating the windows may need to be out of range of prying paparazzi. My bedroom is decorated in the modern style, elegantly furnished, having down one side a long wide low shelf with plasma TV, the shelf functioning also as a desk where I can sit and work at my laptop. All my meals are eaten at this shelf also, delivered by room service. I never eat in the hotel restaurant — I don't want to draw attention.

Jane will be here in a few minutes. I'm anticipating her visit like a date with a new girlfriend. No doubt being too cosy with my interrogator could be used to trap me. I don't care. I'm innocent. Why shouldn't I enjoy it? I have only felt this comfortable with one other woman before.

I wonder where Alison is now, what she's feeling, what she's saying. I've been obliged to refrain from phoning her — a condition of my release is I contact nobody outside of work colleagues, also that I stay well clear of the crime scene. The local and national TV news are full of the murder, with rampant speculation on the motive — Johnson was the kind of man who made enemies. No pictures of Alison, though, just a statement read by a solicitor asking the press to respect the privacy of the family at this difficult time.

A knock on the hotel room door. I open it, to admit Jane accompanied by PC Forster, the policeman from the interview room. She asks am I satisfied with the hotel; do they need to find me another? I say it's fine; the important thing is I have good wi-fi. I sit at the shelf with my laptop while Jane sits on the bed, opening her case, methodically arranging various reports and papers across the bedspread. Forster stands at the door, maintaining an inscrutable silence.

Jane finds the piece of paper she's looking for. "According to this statement from a neighbour, he took his dog out for a walk last night at ten to six. He says he noticed a man who fits your description waiting outside Johnson's house at that time."

I answer cheerfully, "I expect that was me."

Jane Magee gives me a searching look. "Why only 'expect'?"

"I didn't look at my watch. The station clock said half past five and the walk took about twenty minutes."

"Why didn't you take a taxi? Last night there was a cold mist and a light drizzle. Not pleasant for walking."

“Alison didn’t tell me her address. She said the taxis ripped you off. Better to walk. Her directions were straightforward, though the walk turned out to be longer than I’d expected.”

“If she didn’t tell you the address, how did you know which house?”

“She told me to look for the only house in the road with a garden gnome outside.”

Jane smiles. “Another ornament?”

Forster lets out an involuntary snigger. Jane gives him a disapproving glance. She tells him sharply, “Ask them to locate the gnome.” He leaves the room and I hear him in the corridor on his walkie-talkie.

Jane says, “I have to warn you, we haven’t found the ferret. Do you wish to amend your statement?”

I reply, “Obviously it’s been taken. It was on the small table in the corner. Why would somebody commit murder and then steal an ornamental ferret? There’s no chance of it being a valuable antique?”

Jane laughs. “Mr Buckley, you’re taking ‘cooperating with police enquiries’ to a new level. You’re required only to answer my questions, not try to do my job for me. Before I chase round the country for a stolen ferret, I need to be sure it was there in the first place. The table you describe has a TV on it. We’ve checked with Johnson’s social set, people who’ve been often in the house. They say they’ve never seen a ferret ornament.”

Forster returns and resumes his position as inscrutable door sentry. No doubt the gnome request is causing him considerable amusement but he dare not risk a second lapse in front of his superior.

Jane continues, "Going back to your journey, let's suppose you'd planned to murder Johnson. It's not likely you'd take a taxi direct to his home, is it? Walking the back streets, as you did, would be a far better way to arrive incognito."

I say, "Even better for the murderer to drive to town. Why risk being spotted on the railway's closed-circuit TV?"

Jane stares hard at me. "In your case, Mr Buckley, we know you don't drive. We also know *why* you don't drive."

Chapter 8

Fact v Fantasy

Jane is here again with Forster. Same routine as yesterday. Forster stands at the door, though this time he's holding a leather briefcase. Jane sits on the bed, surrounded by paperwork. I rather like the sight of her sitting on my bed. She's wearing a skirt again — with legs as good as hers, why wouldn't she? She looks up from her documents, catching me ogling her. She crosses her legs and tugs at the garment to pull it down a little.

"Mr Buckley, I'd like to go into your relationship with Johnson. Would it be correct to say you hated the man?"

"I hated all that he stood for. I've attacked his ideas many times in my newspaper column. I can't say I hated him in person. I've never met him."

"But you would have seen him on TV?"

"Yes. Often. Not a pleasant character. Supercilious. Rather too pleased with himself."

Jane reads from one of the papers on the bed. "We've examined CCTV footage from the railway station. We see you returned there at ten. The buffet staff told us you used their Internet terminal and left the premises before they closed at eleven. We find particularly interesting the subject engaging your attention. We've had the machine analysed by a computer expert. Apparently, you spent all your time surfing web sites about Jack Johnson. Isn't that a little obsessive? You're more than three hours at Johnson's house, then immediately afterwards you spend another hour reading about him on the web."

“It was for work. I’d been at the ‘Death Means Death’ briefing in London that morning and wanted to catch up on the detail.”

“Do you normally work late?”

“Not often. On this occasion I needed to do something familiar, to relax...”

Jane interrupts. “Did something happen at Johnson’s cottage that caused you to feel unrelaxed?”

I say nothing. To admit to sexual designs on Johnson’s wife would be the best way to incriminate myself. I can imagine the police train of thought: affair — discovery — argument — fight — murder.”

Registering my silence, Jane continues, “The briefing in London. Johnson wasn’t there?”

“Press only. Their press officer gave it.”

“You stated you’d never met Johnson in person. Not even at party rallies, for example?”

I laugh. “Until recently, Making Sense weren’t worth wasting time on. I used to call them ‘Making Simple’ because of their magic wand solutions: bring back hanging, boot out immigrants, conscript the unemployed, ban the unions. They mouth off about politicians short-changing the public, whereas they are the biggest confidence tricksters of the lot, trading on slogans without the slightest inkling of the complexity of the issues or the likely consequences of their policies.”

Jane ignores my tirade. She’s looking at another piece of paperwork. I suppose her job requires strict impartiality, though I sense she has no taste for politics. She says, “We haven’t located the gnome. According to the neighbours, Johnson never had a gnome in his garden. Mr

Buckley, I could stretch to your suggestion of aggravated burglary of a valuable ornament from inside the house but I draw the line at a garden gnome. Either something very peculiar is going on or you're simply not being truthful."

I reiterate I'm telling her what I saw. I ask why the ornaments matter.

She replies, "Only they could serve to confirm your statements."

Jane picks another report from the bed. "Let's turn to something we *have* been able to verify, something you say Johnson's wife told you, that he was due to fly off to Paris. We asked the wife and she confirmed the Paris trip."

At last: news of Alison. I ask, "Has Alison seen my statement? Surely she can tell you what happened to the ornaments?"

Jane indicates to Forster, "We'll take a look at the main exhibit now."

He unlocks the clasp on his briefcase and takes out a transparent polythene bag containing a gun. Jane motions for him to hand it to me. "Take a good look. Don't open the bag. Is this your gun?"

I say I recognise it as the gun given to me for the play scene with Mister Clown.

Jane's pleased with my reply. "I'm glad you didn't answer in the negative. Makes things simpler for us both — it has your fingerprints all over it. The thing is, it has only your fingerprints, nobody else's."

Making what must sound like yet another fantastical invention, I reply, "Mister Clown didn't touch my gun. He had his own gun. In any case, he had gloves on. Big oversized white clown gloves."

Jane says, "Just so you know, forensics have confirmed this was the gun used to shoot Johnson dead." She holds out her hand for me to return the bag.

Jane sorts through her paperwork. "In your statement you claim this man, 'Mister Clown', called over to the cottage to rehearse a scene from your student play, that the script required you to shoot him, at which point he ran off and you never saw him again."

"That's correct."

"What did you do with the gun afterwards?"

"I put it on top of the writing desk."

"Which is where we found it. Forget Mister Clown. Let's suppose, for whatever reason, you did in fact shoot Johnson. Then, something happened which caused you to panic. Leaving in a hurry, you forgot to take the gun. As a novice, you agonised over whether you should return to the scene of the crime. Fingerprints you weren't concerned about — you don't have a criminal record — but you worried the gun might be traced. By the time you'd made up your mind to return, the body had been discovered."

I ask, "It sounds like you're saying nobody actually heard the gun go off; the body was discovered later?"

Jane replies, "That *would* interest you, wouldn't it? Forensics tell me whoever planned the murder did so with care and forethought. The gun's fitted with a top-of-the-range silencer, obviously leaving nothing to chance. Johnson's chauffeur discovered the body. He arrived at the cottage at ten to collect Johnson for the Paris flight. The front door was ajar and there were no lights on. Thinking that meant Johnson was about to come outside, he went back to the car. After waiting a quarter of an hour, he

worried they'd miss the flight and went inside to warn his boss. Seeing the body on the floor, his first thought was Johnson had collapsed from ill-health, then he saw the blood, and the bullet-hole through the head: an execution-style killing. When we got there, we saw the murder weapon left behind. We took a chance and set a trap. We'd been waiting less than ten minutes when you came back."

I say, "You've only the chauffeur's word for the sequence of events. How do you know *he* didn't do it?"

"We checked up on him, of course. He'd been driving Johnson to meetings, finally taking him to his office round about seven. Johnson said he'd make his own way home. He asked to be picked up later to go to the airport. We have the chauffeur on CCTV in town, going into shops, into a restaurant, leaving from there to collect Johnson at the time he said he did. His alibi's solid."

I reply, "Unless he shot Johnson as soon as he arrived at the cottage."

Jane wags her finger at me, "Mr. Buckley, you're trying to do my job again! We haven't entirely ruled out the chauffeur, although for reasons I'm not allowed to make public we think it highly unlikely the man would have risked it."

I ask, "When I walked in and the lights came on, you said my name. I assume Alison told you?"

Jane smiles. "Nobody told us your name. Johnson had it written in his appointments diary. We found it in the writing desk: 'David Buckley. Nine Thirty'."

I say, "That's impossible!"

She hands me a report from the bed. "See for yourself. We've had the page analysed. It's genuinely Johnson's

writing. They identified the pen used as one from the writing desk."

I scan the report, which runs to two sides and is highly technical. I notice they date the ink, the diary entry apparently made some time in the last month.

I protest, "No murderer in their right mind would make an appointment in their own name!"

Jane looks at me significantly.

I add, "And why would Johnson agree to meet with me, of all people?"

Jane replies, "Only you can tell us that. In your statement you say you were told your play was being put on by the local amateur dramatic society. You claim also you were told the man playing Mister Clown had been running round town in costume, scaring people, in consequence of which he'd got himself a police caution for anti-social behaviour? Have I got that right?"

"That's what Alison told me. I've no direct knowledge of the events."

"Mr Buckley, our town, to its shame, doesn't have an amateur dramatic society. Nor does our police station have, nor does any police station in this county have a record of cautioning a man running around dressed as a clown."

Her studied incredulity is beginning to annoy me. "Look. Why don't you just ask Alison? She'll confirm everything."

Jane says nothing. She's busy making notes. A terrible thought occurs to me. Are the police withholding crucial information? Is Alison in fact the chief suspect? If so, rather than clearing my name, my appeal for her to back

me up serves only to implicate me as willing accomplice. I decide on attack as being the best strategy. "You think his wife committed the murder?"

Jane stands and goes over to the window. It's getting dark outside. Telling Forster to switch on the lights, she pulls the drawstring to close the curtains. She's not satisfied with the way the curtains overlap and fiddles with the leading edges to straighten their appearance. Then she turns to face me.

"We're certain the wife didn't commit the murder directly. Whether she conspired with an accomplice, possibly you, to act on her behalf, we are trying to establish. She denies ever seeing you in her life. We showed her your photograph. We'd like you to identify her, also."

Jane nods to PC Forster. He takes a photograph from his jacket pocket and shows it to me: a full-length colour picture of a woman in her sixties, expensively dressed in a vulgar sort of way.

I say, "I don't know this woman. Should I know her?"

"Her name is Mary Johnson," Jane replies. "She's Jack Johnson's wife. We know she was in Paris at the time of the murder. Johnson was due to fly out that evening to be with her for the weekend."

I'm dumbfounded. "But if what you are telling me is true, then what was Alison doing in Johnson's house and why was she pretending to be his wife!"

Jane gathers together her papers. "We'll see you same time tomorrow. Yes. Alison. Is there an Alison, or is she another figment, along with the stuffed ferret, the garden gnome, the amateur dramatics, and Mr Clown?"