

**ROB
RINDER**

**THE
PROTEST**

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Prologue

It was a warm summer's evening in June, as the guests arrived at London's Royal Academy on Piccadilly for what purported to be the hottest night of the year.

The great and the good were here, chatting, chinking glass; old friends, new networking opportunities. A steady stream of waiters, dressed in black Nehru jackets, served elegant pink curls of smoked salmon on transparent trays etched like chessboards. Flutes of chilled champagne were stacked up like pyramids on black velvet-covered tables, and a small jazz band was playing to the right of the red carpet, just as the sun dipped low in the sky. There were sequinned jackets, high heels, nipped-in waistcoats, flowing trousers, pantsuits; the beau monde was out in force. Newspaper diarists circled, pens poised for any gossip. Benedict Cumberbatch, Taron Egerton: simply everyone was here.

This was Art, with a capital A. And the Max Bruce retrospective was one of the most exciting events to be held at the RA in almost a decade.

Natasha Fitzjohn fiddled with her platinum necklace, nervously scanning the cobbled courtyard, waiting for the main

THE PROTEST

event to arrive. As curator of the exhibition, she had been working up to this moment for the past three years. But the painstaking diplomacy and relentless negotiations had finally paid off and she'd managed to secure the loan of Max Bruce's famous masterpiece *Primal Scream* for public viewing for the very first time.

A vast, imposing oil of the birth of a baby. It was regarded as one of the finest examples of the chaos of childbirth, motherhood and the earliest gasps of life. It was Bruce's first major work, and it had catapulted him to fame, and possibly infamy; and, almost as soon as it had been so well received, it had disappeared. It had reappeared some decades later, only to be snapped up by a reclusive Russian oligarch who lived in Surrey.

But here it was, at last, inside the gallery, awaiting the big reveal. Natasha smiled to herself; the only person missing was the artist.

'He's a bit late,' declared Alexandra Williams, checking the time on her phone. It was 7.28 p.m. Known as Lexi to everyone, she was Natasha's unpaid 21-year-old intern, who'd been helping with the exhibition. 'Doesn't it say six-thirty on the invitation?'

'I am sure he wants to make an entrance,' replied Natasha, with an irritated rattle of her bracelets, as she ran her hand through her sleek dark bobbed hair. She was an elegant, put-together woman in her early forties who bristled with ambition and focus. 'But it is, frankly, verging on rude, bearing in mind it's his party.'

Finally, an explosion of flash-blubs announced Max Bruce's arrival in the street outside. The conversation at the party lulled, as all eyes turned towards the stone archway, the black-and-gold

gates, as Max Bruce and his entourage walked into the courtyard. Natasha allowed herself the briefest of exhales. The 62-year-old Bruce crossed the cobbles, a symphony of primary colours in a red suit, yellow shirt and pale blue shoes. He was playing to the crowd, waving and posing like a peacock. Behind him were his two partners, commonly known as his 'wifies', who stood either side of him, creating the effect of a perfect bohemian throuple. Camilla, on his right, was the elder and first wife. A great beauty in her youth, she was now sixty years old and was working a fuchsia turban and a matching Zandra Rhodes kaftan, with scarlet nails and Andrew Logan mirror rings. Her signature ebony cigarette holder had been replaced with a lengthy vape. To his left was wife number two, Elisa. Tall, thin, blonde, thirty-five years old, inscrutable, she was dressed entirely in black with red lipstick and dark glasses, looking every inch like a backing singer for Robert Palmer. Fanning out behind them, also posing for the photographers, was Bruce's ever-expanding brood of nepos, who mostly appeared to have come straight from the skate park. The oldest and best known of these was Loughton. Wearing a backwards baseball cap, with baggy trousers and bowlegs, he stood next his father and his mothers, two fingers together under his chin, as if he were auditioning for James Bond (which he might have been). For Loughton was one of those nepo children who seemed to chop and change and alter their careers without any transferable, or indeed obvious, skills.

'Loughton!' shouted the paparazzi. 'This way!'

Loughton pulled out a small sauce bottle from his trouser pocket and waved it at the press. Currently a famous graffiti artist, he was also flogging his new hot sauce range at Aldi, and

he had clearly been told to use any marketing opportunity possible, even his own father's retrospective.

Max Bruce sailed through the crowd, to a ripple of applause. His thick white hair stuck up and his sharp dark eyes scanned the sea of faces, as he walked towards Natasha, who was standing at the entrance to the gallery.

'Over here! Mr Bruce!' yelled a photographer.

'Here, Max! Max!' shouted another.

Natasha smiled politely from the lectern at the entrance to the gallery. She stood in front of the microphone, waiting for the noise to die down. Eventually, she tapped her champagne glass and coughed.

'My lords, ladies and gentlemen, good evening. May I be the first to say what an honour it is tonight to be in the presence of the great . . . the brilliant . . . the extraordinary . . . Max Bruce CBE . . .' She paused, waiting for the cheers of acknowledgement at his newly acquired gong in the King's Birthday Honours list. 'Max Bruce . . . you don't need me to tell you, is Britain's greatest living artist, with a collection of incredible works housed in some of the most prestigious museums and galleries all over the world. And we are particularly proud, indeed honoured, and delighted, to have secured nearly all his works, here today. From the Met to the Tate, to Venice's Guggenheim – they have all travelled far for this first-ever Max Bruce retrospective.' There was more applause. Natasha smiled and surveyed the pleasingly glamorous crowd. 'There is one painting that I know you are all very much looking forward to seeing . . . *Primal Scream*.' There were loud whistles and cheers. 'Firstly, I would very much like to thank Mr Sergei Valutov for his extremely generous loaning of *Primal Scream*.

I know that after the campaign failed to keep the painting in the UK (or “save it for the nation”) we were all a little broken-hearted at the thought it would never be seen again. But thanks to the huge generosity of Mr Valutov, we shall *all*, for the first time since it was painted over four decades ago now, be able to enjoy its extraordinary vibrancy, powerful imagery and its deftly intoxicating use of colour and paint. So, thank you, Mr Valutov.’ She clapped gently to the left and to the right of the lectern. The crowd craned its collective neck, searching for the shadowy figure of Valutov. ‘Sadly, Mr Valutov can’t be here tonight – he is otherwise engaged – but we are eternally grateful for his bounteous generosity . . . Now, without further ado . . . I’d like to invite you all to follow me inside the gallery, where our president, Lord Armitage, will say a few words, as indeed will . . . Max Bruce.’

The excitement in the crowd was palpable. There was a certain amount of shoving and jostling as the guests surged forward, following the main party through the doors to the gallery and into the hall, and on into the large brightly lit side room, where the enormous canvas depicting the bloodied freshly born baby taking its first breath dominated the room. It was awe-inspiring, with its thick, heavy use of oils. Max Bruce’s wives both stood still, side by side, their mouths ajar, as they took in the astonishing image. Some people applauded spontaneously, some just sipped their champagne and stared.

‘Before we hear from our president, I’d like to invite Max Bruce to say a few words,’ declared Natasha, extending her arm. ‘Max Bruce!’

The guests applauded, they shouted, they cheered.

‘Stop the war!’ came a cry. ‘Stop the killing!’

THE PROTEST

Everyone looked frantically around the room at where the chant might be coming from. Suddenly, there was an unholy, guttural scream as a young woman launched herself from the crowd straight at Max Bruce.

‘STOP THE WAR! STOP THE KILLING!’

She screamed and, as she screamed, she sprayed a can of bright blue paint all over Max Bruce’s face. She covered him from forehead to chin, his eyelids, his lips, even the lobes of his ears.

Everyone was too stunned to move.

‘Lexi!’ Natasha shouted from the side of the room. ‘Lexi! What are you doing?!’

‘Stop the war!’ Lexi yelled, pummelling the air with her fist. ‘Stop the killing! Stop the war! Stop the killing!’

A security guard stormed through from the back of the hall, scattering the guests, pushing them to one side. There was the sound of smashing glass as champagne flutes crashed to the ground. But it was the security guard right next to the painting who wrestled Lexi to the ground. She didn’t resist, instead she raised her arms in the air. She’d made her point. Max Bruce had been Blue-Faced. Her work here was done.

The two wives were hysterical. Bruce laughed a little, he was incredulous, as though incapable of processing what had just happened to him. While Loughton swung his phone around filming the attack, his father wiped the blue paint off his face, using the back of his hand, dabbing the sides of his mouth with a white handkerchief that he pulled from his pocket. Meanwhile, the security guard dragged Lexi away through the parted crowd.

‘Stop the war! Stop the killing!’ she still shouted.

Bruce made his way towards the microphone set up in front of his masterpiece.

‘Well, apologies for my appearance,’ he joked. Everyone laughed. ‘I know I like a blue as much as Picasso but—’

He collapsed to the floor. The guests laughed again. Maybe this was all part of the show? And then they stopped as Bruce began to roll around on the parquet, frantically tugging at the neck of his yellow shirt, his heels drumming the ground, his eyes rolled into the back of his head. He gurgled, he retched, he heaved, he vomited, he convulsed. No one knew what to do. Camilla was screaming, her hands clamped to her cheeks; Elisa was screaming for help, and Natasha and Lord Armitage stood near the lectern, rigid, rooted, white with shock, unable to do anything but stare.

It took less than a minute for the aging *enfant terrible* of the art world Max Bruce to die, in front of his two wives, five of his children, the press, the paparazzi, and the great, the good and their guests.

And no one could do a thing about it.

One

Adam Green woke up, tired, in his flat in Islington. It took him a second to remember where he was. He had lived in this modern conversion, just off Upper Street, where the walls were painted a subtle grey, his bathroom gleamed with black mosaic tiles, and his kitchen, confusingly, had no drawer handles, for over six months already. But still, every morning it took him by surprise. He'd woken up before his alarm and, as he sat on the side of his bed, scratching his dark hair and contemplating what might constitute the swiftest breakfast, his clock radio switched on.

'The art world has lost one of its biggest stars,' began the news at the top of hour. 'Max Bruce was killed last night . . . in front of his family and friends at the opening of his hotly anticipated retrospective at the Royal Academy. And we are joined now from the scene, by our arts correspondent, Jenny Jones . . . Jenny . . . what a tragedy . . .'

Max Bruce? Adam had heard of him. He walked into the kitchen/dining room/sitting room of his tiny flat and turned on the television, where they were playing Loughton Bruce's video of his father's death with the final harrowing moments

THE PROTEST

pixelated out for taste and decency and an early-morning audience. But the screaming, and the shouting, and the ‘Stop the war!’ chants were all perfectly audible. Next, there was footage of the protestor, a woman, being dragged away, frog-marched out of the place by two security guards.

What a way to die, thought Adam, staring at the screen while taking a pinch of fish food and feeding the bug-eyed goldfish his mother had given him as a flat-warming present. Having never expressed any interest in pets, or indeed fish of any kind, Adam had convinced himself that his mother’s gift was some sort of early-warning alarm system, like a canary down a mine. If the fish died, it proved to her he couldn’t look after anything, least of all himself. So he fed it religiously every day, if only to prove her wrong.

‘What a terrible loss to the nation this is, and what a terrible way to die,’ declared a woman – CURATOR, NATASHA FITZJOHN it said on the screen. ‘The art world is much diminished in this country after what happened here. We are all in mourning, and in shock.’

In a voiceover the newscaster continued to explain quite how important an artist Max Bruce was. There was some early colour footage of him partying in the 1980s, a montage of his work with thick paints and bright colours, expressive hands, large faces, a close-up of the famous painting, *Primal Scream*, a head shot of the woman accused of the murder, Alexandra (Lexi) Williams – she looked young, defiant and scared at the same time. Then there was more footage of the party, the family’s grand entrance to an explosion of flashbulbs, a few cutaways to Loughton waving his bottle of hot sauce, and one image of Natasha Fitzjohn smiling at her lectern and . . . was

that the Stop the War campaigner, Lexi Williams, standing next to her? Also smiling?

So she had been working at the event? Not someone who'd come in off the street? Adam frowned at the screen, as he took a blueberry Pop-Tart out of his bare breadbin and slipped it into his shiny new Dualit toaster and spun the dial.

They cut back to the studio where Lisa Andrews, the normally sunny-looking newscaster, was sombre and sober-faced.

'Joining us now in the studio is our crime correspondent, David Grave. Dave,' said Lisa Andrews. 'A very sad day for the nation . . .'

'Indeed it is,' agreed Dave. 'Very sad . . . But this murder of Max Bruce is all part of the Blue Face protest that has been sweeping through the country over the past few months. A backlash against an illegal war that is still raging in Khandistan. The "Stop the war, stop the killing" chant that is so familiar to us all and particular to these protesters was heard at the event last night, along with the similar spray-can of blue paint that this group of protesters use. But this, as you know, Lisa, this is the first time that the protest has ended in the actual death of one of its victims.'

'Which begs the question, Dave,' cut in Lisa, 'was the Home Secretary just lucky last week when the protestor missed his face and ruined his suit by spraying it blue, or did he actually escape an assassination attempt?'

'Good question, Lisa,' acknowledged Dave. '"The Lucky Home Secretary", as the Right Honourable Mitchell Hiddleston is now known, might indeed have been "the extremely lucky Home Secretary,"' for he was targeted by this very same

group – and who’s to say that his can of paint was not laced with something? And the protesters just missed?’

‘Is that what the early suggestions are? That the paint was laced with something?’

‘Indeed they are, Lisa. Police sources are claiming that the can used to murder Max Bruce was laced with some sort of poison.’

‘Poison? Can you suggest, at these very early stages, what sort it might be?’

‘This is pure supposition, Lisa. But there are speculations that it might be cyanide.’

Lisa turned to face the camera. ‘Cyanide,’ she repeated. ‘Well, thank you, Dave. That was David Grave, our crime correspondent, and obviously, as this is a rolling story, we’ll keep you updated with any changes.’

Adam sat down on the sofa (one of the only pieces of furniture in his flat), his piping-hot Pop-Tart on a small plate on his lap, staring even more attentively at the TV.

‘We are now joined here in the studio by the leader of the Stop the War campaign, Cosmo Campbell.’

Adam looked up from his plate expecting to see a hirsute, unshaven character in a camouflage jacket wearing a vegan scarf. Instead, a young man in a suit and tie appeared on the screen who looked very much like he could be canvassing in Bristol for the Lib Dems.

‘Mr Campbell, do you run a terrorist organisation? Was this in fact a terrorist attack in broad daylight, right in the heart of London’s West End?’

‘Er? What? No . . . Absolutely not.’ Cosmo Campbell’s youthful cheeks flushed with indignation. ‘This is not the

way we work as a group. Stop the War is about ending the killing, ending the war in Khandistan, and ending the slaughter of innocent women and children. We are a pro-life group, not pro-death. Why would we want to kill Britain's most famous living artist? Why would that help us? What would that achieve?'

'Publicity, Mr Campbell? Lots and lots of publicity. Which is presumably why you continue with your extremely dangerous Blue Face protest that has just resulted in the death of this country's most famous living—sorry, most famous artist.'

'A murder is not the sort of publicity we are after.'

'And yet . . . you persist? Even after the Home Secretary was attacked last week. Did your organisation want to murder the Home Secretary, Mr Campbell?'

'No, we did not.' Cosmo Campbell looked anxious. His top lip glittered with sweat under the studio lights. 'This is not the organisation that we are. We are a peaceful organisation. We advocate peace, not war.'

'But Max Bruce is dead, Mr Campbell. How do you account for that?'

'I can't.' Cosmo Campbell slowly shook his head. 'I just can't. It was not supposed to happen like this.'

'Was Alexandra Williams working for you?'

'No one works for our organisation. It is staffed by volunteers.'

'Did Alexandra Williams volunteer for your organisation?'

'Not that I am aware of.'

'Not that you are aware of . . .? Yet she had the spray-can of blue paint – your spray-can of blue paint. And she was shouting your slogans before she murdered Max Bruce.'

Lisa's tone was not hectoring. She was feigning surprise, her voice had gone up an octave, her forehead was furrowed (as much as it could since her most recent trip to Harley Street). She paused and waited for Cosmo Campbell to respond.

'Stop the War did not murder Max Bruce,' was his simple reply.

'Thank you, Mr Campbell.'

Adam started to flick through the channels. The Max Bruce murder was the top story on each and every one. There was wall-to-wall coverage, wall-to-wall talk, wall-to-wall usage of Loughton's video, which either he must have sold to the press or it had been lifted from his Instagram. There were outside-broadcast vans parked up on the verge outside the Home Secretary Mitchell Hiddleston's country house, outside Reading, where the journalists – instead of having the Home Secretary or even, fingers crossed, his wife to talk to about how lucky he'd been to have escaped death by 'Blue Face' – had been forced to stand in front of a hedge, hunched against the summer drizzle as they speculated about whether Stop the War should be banned as a terrorist organisation.

'Who is Lexi Williams?' presenters were asking on another channel. 'And what exactly turns a seemingly normal grammar-school girl into a murderer? Is social media to blame?'

Adam was intrigued by the montage of images that were running across all the news outlets. Someone had gone into Alexandra Williams's social media accounts and had released a heady cocktail of images, mostly of Lexi (as all the press were now calling her) drinking 'heady cocktails'. Pink drinks, yellow drinks, large frosted glasses with

paper umbrellas, shiny red cherries and slices of melon or pineapple. Lexi was now a loutish heavy drinker. She was photographed dancing on a table, sporting a very short skirt and a bikini top. There was one of her smoking an apparently hand-rolled cigarette. All those images that she had posted across her socials, craving likes from her friends, had now been weaponised by the media. Adam sighed. She was now a badly behaved party girl, who drank too much and, very possibly, smoked weed.

Sky News had her Twitter/X account as background for an interview with some of the guests who'd attended the party. *Eat the Rich, Stop the War! Get Rid of them ALL* were plastered all over the TV screen.

Adam shook his head as his Pop-Tart grew cold on his lap. Those photographs, those tweets, the Instagram snaps, the reels, the Facebook likes – they all combined to form an image of a normal young woman who'd had some fun in her life. Yet within less than twelve hours, these same images had been manipulated in an entirely different way. And it had all happened so quickly.

He turned over to GB News where the reporters were vox-popping people along Oxford Street, shoving microphones under their noses, asking what they thought of Lexi Williams.

'It's such a shock,' said one woman. 'I mean, what did her parents do wrong? It's like all these cases of people being addicted to social media. They're radicalised by it. It's a curse.'

'It's such a shame,' added another, nodding in agreement with her friend. 'It's all to do with the social media. All of it. It's all the media.'

THE PROTEST

‘It really does make you think,’ said the first.

‘About what?’ asked the reporter.

‘Bringing back hanging.’

Adam switched off the television. He was late and, suddenly, he felt like he really needed a shower.

Two

Adam was hurrying down Chancery Lane, heading towards Stag Court, clutching a stack of briefs tied with the distinctive pink ribbons of defence cases, when a taxi pulled up in front him at the corner of Fleet Street, and its occupant slickly exited, black court heel first.

‘Adam!’

‘Georgina!’ he said, a little surprised to see his fellow colleague taking a black cab to work.

Although they’d both been members of Stag Court now for the past several years, and had started out as pupils together, he would personally never be quite that flash. But Georgina Devereaux came from a different school of thought, mainly private, and her career was flying: she had already made Junior Treasury Counsel, the youngest ever to do so. And they only appointed the brightest, the best, the fairest and the most ethical. On top of that she had charm, charisma, and a dress sense as sharp as her sense of humour. And great hair.

‘Have you heard?’ she began, a smile playing on her lips. She was clearly, and not for the first time, privy to something he was not.

‘Heard what?’ Adam’s shoulders slumped a little. He really should get better at playing chambers politics. He’d much improved since his first couple of years, when he’d dreaded the endless ‘networking events’ he’d been forced to attend, where he’d spent most of his time with his teeth gritted, his hand gently sweating around the neck of a beer bottle, his buttocks firmly clenched with mortification, as he’d walked around desperately searching for subjects that might constitute ‘small talk’. But not being familiar with summers in Tuscany, the boarding houses of Marlborough College, or that lovely little restaurant off the King’s Road, he did not have the easy confidence of Georgina. Ever since Oxford, Adam had never really felt that he belonged in ‘the room’. Any room.

‘Morris is back.’

‘Morris . . .? Morris Brown?’

‘Yup.’ She shook her auburn blow-dry and pursed her lips, pleased that her news had landed.

‘*The Morris Brown?*’

‘Yup.’ She smiled and raised her eyebrows. ‘He’s back from Yale. He’s been teaching some specialist course or other, I’m not quite sure what, and he’s just written this book – well, not quite a book, a sort of pamphlet thing – about the explosion of youth crime in the UK and the reasons behind it. It’s been reviewed in today’s *Times*.’

She whipped out a copy of *The Times*, neatly folded, from under her armpit. Adam managed the swiftest of glances at the article where he noticed that some phrases and statistics had already been underlined in red pen. He sighed inwardly. While he’d been feeding his fish and munching on a tepid Pop-Tart, she’d already been way ahead of him, underlining passages in

The Times while undoubtedly drinking a spinach-and-celery smoothie after forty-five minutes of wall Pilates, or whatever that app was she'd flashed in front of his face last Friday.

'Everyone's terrified of him.' She grinned. 'Even Tony.'

Adam followed her over the road past a humbug-striped Tudor building and the court outfitters, Lipman & Sons, to a heavy black wooden door that led to a hidden cobbled lane beyond. Although just a few steps away from a busy Fleet Street, it was like entering into a hidden world of clipped lawns, fountains and ancient buildings with narrow back streets. This was a part of London steeped in a history and tradition that hadn't changed in centuries. Adam always felt a frisson of excitement as he walked down the lane.

Dressed in their crisp white bands and billowing robes, a barrage of barristers marched past Adam and Georgina on their way to the High Court. A couple were already wearing their horsehair wigs, but the others mostly had them clamped under their arms. Behind them came the clerks, wheeling their hefty trolleys across the old flagstone pavements, groaning under the weight of thick, heavy case files. Opposite the entrance to Stag Court stood the magnificent Middle Temple, where the first performance of *Twelfth Night* had been performed in front of the indomitable Elizabeth I.

Adam stopped and looked at Georgina.

'I doubt that,' Adam eventually replied.

'What?'

'That Tony's scared of Morris Brown.'

Chief clerk Tony Jones was not scared of anyone; in fact, he ran the place. Nothing happened in Stag Court without his say-so. If he asked you to jump, you'd ask how high. He distributed

the cases, decided who could prosecute or defend what, and was in charge of socialising and networking events. Everything went through Tony. Bald, broad and brought up on the bombed-out playgrounds of the East End, he was as sharp as his suits, and his neck was as thick as his Cockney accent.

‘I promise you, I’m not lying,’ Georgina continued, pausing on the flagged steps of Stag Court, worn smooth by hundreds of years of busy lawyers bustling over the threshold. ‘Apparently, Morris Brown’s last junior had to leave chambers altogether he was so run down and exhausted. He ended up working on day-time TV.’

Adam stepped inside the narrow hallway and was surprised to see his ex-pupil master, Jonathan Taylor-Cameron, already standing in the clerks’ room attempting some sort of small talk with Tony, who was sitting behind his desk, dressed in a white shirt with a scarlet tie and a sharp suit with a silver sheen. Jonathan had one hand on the desk and was laughing heartily at his own joke, head back, nostrils to the ceiling. Meanwhile, Tony’s cheeks were puffing a little with boredom.

‘Well, it all sounds very entertaining, Mr Taylor-Cameron. I’d like to say I wish I’d been there, but I imagine it’s not my sort of a crowd.’ He clicked the end of his Parker pen, indicating to Jonathan that he should move on.

Ever since his catastrophic divorce case, when Jonathan had been taken to the cleaners by his livid third wife, losing the house in the Dordogne, the pied-à-terre in Chelsea and the cottage in the Cotswolds, Jonathan had been touting for work with increasing desperation. His wife had also managed to persuade the court that she needed a hefty monthly maintenance cheque, on top of which Jonathan still had five of his children

to put through some form of education. He'd thought that Freddie going to Durham University might have cut him some slack until he'd realised that universities were no longer free.

Added to his woes, Jonathan had made the fatal error of upgrading to a younger, thinner blonde version of his third ex-wife, with whom he was now struggling to keep up. Recently Adam had noticed Jonathan's louche, jaded, boyish charm had given way to a haunted, hunted look. He now went to the gym at 6 a.m., smelt of Tom Ford Tabacco Vanille and had a 'hairstyle', where the strands from the back of his head were brushed forward to hide the receding M-shape at the front. His paunch had also shrunk to its pre-expense-account proportions, but at least he was saving money at the florist.

Adam remembered those heady early days of working with Jonathan only too well, how he'd sent flowers out to Jonathan's various girlfriends and mistresses, making sure they all received the correct message – whose 'milky thighs' he was missing that week; it had been a task in itself. Although it was surely only a matter of time before those bills picked up again. If you married your mistress, as the saying went, you only created another vacancy. Jonathan had yet to marry Pippa, a 'gallery girl' who worked on Bond Street. She spent busy days multi-tasking – flogging paintings, organising facials and holidays in Gstaad – all in office hours.

'Adam!' Jonathan turned round to see his old pupil. 'How are you? Busy?' he asked, looking down at the pink-ribboned briefs.

'Aren't we always?' Adam smiled.

'Some of us are.' Jonathan nodded slowly and then glanced over at Tony and the pile of papers on his desk.

Tony's desk was piled high with incoming cases, some highly lucrative and some pro bono, but the truth, Adam knew, was that Tony didn't entirely trust Jonathan. Jonathan had been riding high since he'd won the Jessica Holby case, but ever since he'd drunk far too much at last year's Christmas party Tony had been holding back. It had been one of those evenings in which Jonathan had started recounting old war stories to anyone who would listen, as he'd propped up the bar in El Vino's just off Chancery Lane. Not only had he done appalling impressions of his clients – including an intricate array of regional accents – he'd finished the whole schpiel, with the line 'We all know that "no" secretly means "yes"' – to a resounding silence.

'Well, you certainly have your work cut out for you,' interjected Tony. 'Your new pupil is waiting for you outside your room, Mr Taylor-Cameron.'

'He is?' Jonathan rolled his eyes. 'I can't believe it's that time of year already – can you, Adam? There's no peace for the wicked . . . just a hefty prison sentence.' He chortled.

'*She* is,' corrected Tony.

'She?' Jonathan perked up.

'Miss Jackson,' said Tony. 'Stacey Jackson.'

'Miss Jackson . . . With the nice ankles? We interviewed a while ago?'

'I couldn't possibly comment on Miss Jackson's ankles, sir,' replied Tony.

'It's an innocent question, Mr Jones, an innocent question. People are so tetchy these days, honestly, Adam. There's no joy in the world today.' Jonathan rolled his eyes again. 'Wish me luck.' He headed off down the corridor in a cloud of expensive

aftershave. He paused and turned round. 'Oh, Mr Jones, is Morris Brown returning today?'

'He most certainly is.'

'The old socialist returns.' Jonathan sighed loudly. 'If only one could afford to be one of those.'

It had just gone 8.45 a.m. and Adam had made a cup of coffee and was getting his feet under his desk, when there appeared to be a sudden drop in temperature and the normally busy, industrious sounds of Stag Court fell silent. It felt as if a north wind had blown through the building. The windows chattered and clattered with the icy blast. There was a rap on his door, it sprung open, and Georgina slipped swiftly in.

'He's here,' she whispered, her eyes wide, as she gripped the door handle.

'Who's here?' Adam whispered back.

'Morris Brown.' She nodded over her shoulder.

'Why are we whispering?'

'Because everyone is shit-scared of him.'

'Why?'

'Because he's brilliant and takes no prisoners, and he's a difficult bastard to please. He's one of the few who take on heads of government. And he fights the fight. All the time. And he's got this odd stare so you never know who he's looking at, which I'm pretty sure is a technique that basically means you have to be on it all the time, otherwise he'll catch you out. I met him once at a literary festival. I queued up for hours, I got him to sign his books.' She gave Adam a grin. 'He's talking to Tony now.'

Adam came slowly out from behind his desk and together

THE PROTEST

they both poked their heads out from behind the door and stared down the corridor. There was a glimpse of a pinstriped suit, and the murmuring tones of two men talking, and the gentle rumble of laughter.

‘I wonder,’ whispered Georgina, ‘if I might ever get to work with him . . .’

Three

An hour later, Adam walked down the corridor towards Jonathan's room – the land that Tony's brisk, smart, upgrading makeover forgot. The door was open and as he approached, he could hear Stacey, talking her new pupil master through the last few weeks of her flat-hunting crisis.

'Quite a few of the places I've looked at have been really quite shabby,' she said. 'And they are very far away from here, and with the amount of rent they're asking, you'd think I was trying to live in a palace. I mean, London prices are something else, aren't they? In Manchester, there's plenty of relatively cheap accommodation, despite it having the biggest student population in Europe. I don't know what I'm going to do. What did all the other pupils do before? I'm crashing with a mate for the moment, but that can't last forever . . .'

Adam could see her eyeing up Jonathan's curling plaid wallpaper, the cracking dark leather swivel chair, the terrifying taxidermy of what was once the family Jack Russell, and the veritable jumble sale of silver photograph frames that cluttered his desk, all boasting some sort of 'Jonathan Taylor-Cameron achievement'. Rowing, shooting, riding, at a wedding, Ascot,

with one of his many children – all taken in the last century, judging by the haircuts and the yellowing hue of the photographs. In fact, the whole place had the appearance of a jaded gentlemen's club that smelt of spilled claret, over-cooked grouse and ancient, post-prandial flatulence.

'Manchester?' Jonathan mumbled, an apparently unpleasant taste in his mouth.

'North,' replied Stacey, with an arched eyebrow.

'There you are, Adam!' proclaimed Jonathan, springing out of his chair with surprising enthusiasm. 'I am not sure if you remember Stacey? The new pupil. Can you believe out of those four hundred applicants that were so carefully sifted through, all those rounds of interviews and advocacy exercises, the pupillage committee found Stacey here? Gosh, she was only just telling me, in riveting detail, the story of her house-hunting in London.'

'Flat-hunting,' she corrected. 'I can't afford a house.'

Jonathan didn't bother to hide his irritation. 'Not yet, dear, no.' He smiled tightly. 'Anyway, Stacey . . . moving on. Or in. This is Adam, Adam Green, he's been a member of Stag Court for . . . er, a while, and he is your new mentor.'

'Hi.' She smiled broadly, possibly with relief.

'So, any problems . . . with stuff.' Jonathan rubbed his hands together. 'Anything that needs mentoring – he's the man. I imagine his door is always open . . . and all that jazz. Isn't it, Adam? Ready for some mentoring?'

'Always open,' agreed Adam.

'Good. In my day there was just a pupil master, now everyone's worried about mental health.' Stacey smiled tightly. Jonathan laughed heartily and then inhaled loudly through his

back-teeth ‘Great. So, now, Stacey, your first job of the morning, every morning, is a nice strong cup of coffee on my desk, with just the tiniest, the *briefest* amount of milk.’

He put his forefinger and thumb together, to show her just how tiny the amount actually was. Adam watched her as her bright blue eyes narrowed and she looked Jonathan up and down. It was obvious she was weighing up whether to tell him where to go, or indeed to go and get his cup of coffee himself. Instead she sighed loudly and turned to walk up the corridor.

‘Every year they get worse,’ declared Jonathan, with an exasperated throw of his right hand towards the door. ‘This one’s about as annoying as having spinach in the teeth, Adam. I would say as irritating as a three-flush floater, but you’re probably not allowed to say that these days. So, spinach it is: no matter how hard you pick at it, it’s still there. I honestly think you were perhaps the last half-decent pupil we had. Even then you weren’t very good, but at least you were happy to get a cup of coffee. You hovered around in the shadows, waiting to be spoken to. This one starts conversations . . .’ He gesticulated towards the open door again. He sighed. ‘I seem to remember she had nice ankles. Do you remember the ankles, Adam?’

‘I can’t say I do,’ replied Adam, a little disheartened that Jonathan only remembered his compliancy rather than his sharp legal mind.

Jonathan was being particularly testy this morning, which, as Adam remembered, was normally something to do with money.

‘This has been a terrible morning; not only have they put VAT on Florence’s school fees, they’ve increased the bastards – and the ex-wife wants a new car.’ He looked at Adam. ‘It makes you

wish you could turn back the clock. Don't ever get married, Adam, and don't ever have children. They will bleed you dry and never say thank you. Is it too early for lunch? You know how much I like the fish-and-chip luncheon at Inner Temple.'

In fact, there was nothing that made Jonathan Taylor-Cameron happier than a Friday fish-and-chip lunch, a large glass of claret, accompanied by the familiar burling baritone of his fellow barristers.

'Unfortunately,' replied Adam, looking at his watch, 'it's Tuesday and only ten a.m.'

'Coffee?'

Stacey walked back into Jonathan's room, wearing a wide, fake service-industry smile, like an air hostess who'd just spat in your drink. Which she might well have done. For Jonathan's coffee was the colour of taupe and half of it had already sloshed over the side, filling up the saucer.

'Would you like a little biscuit?' she asked, holding up a small packet of custard creams.

Jonathan winced. He looked like he might actually throw up. He shook his head, and half closed his eyes, as if he were concentrating hard on nice things.

'So . . . what do you think of the Blue Face case?' asked Stacey.

Adam's heart sank. This was clearly going to be a marriage made in hell. He wondered whether he should take her aside right now and give her a few ways to deal with Jonathan, such as keeping out of his way, agreeing with him, and reminding him when he might have a meeting at the Garrick. But with her bright eyes and her quick manner, he suspected that she was one of those people who had to make their own mistakes.

‘The what?’ asked Jonathan, as he pushed his cup of coffee to one side and sat down at his desk. ‘The blue what?’ If he was hoping his imperious attitude might have caused her to take a step back (quake? quiver? or be quiet, at the very least), he was mistaken.

‘The Blue Face case,’ Stacey continued ‘The suspect is this girl called Lexi Williams who sprayed this artist in the face with a spray-can of paint laced with cyanide.’

Jonathan’s heavy lids flickered as he listened to her voice with its Northern tones.

‘It looks like it’s an open-and-shut case to me,’ Stacey said. ‘She was caught red-handed, or blue-handed as it were – ha-ha-ha, that’s a good joke . . . And then there are all these witnesses, plus the son’s video. Loughton Bruce, the graffiti artist – d’you know him? I’ve seen his work. Anyway, that clearly puts her in the frame . . .’

‘No case is open-and-shut, Stacey, unless it’s a suitcase,’ replied Jonathan. ‘Now, if you please, I have something for you which is probably more your level: Bexley Mags.’ He pushed a file towards her with his index finger as if it might be mildly contaminated. ‘Shoplifting – smoked salmon from Marks and Spencer, Bluewater shopping centre.’

‘And they’re prosecuting?’ she replied, with a laugh that made Jonathan wince again. ‘Jeez, what with the cost-of-living crisis, shoplifting has gone through the roof. Why bother? No wonder the system is grinding to a halt and the prisons are full. Did you hear there are only something like seventy to ninety places left in the whole system? They’re letting people out early. I saw it on TikTok last week. The prisoners were all celebrating, drinking champagne.’

‘Yes, well,’ Jonathan said, ‘this was *seven* whole sides of smoked salmon, several packets of frozen prawn vol-au-vents, a bottle of Bollinger, and four boxes of their finest champagne truffles.’

‘What was she doing? Throwing a party?’

‘You could say that.’

‘What are *you* doing going to Bexley, Jonathan?’ asked Adam. Surely his mags days were over? Obviously Stacey would be doing all the work, would have to stand behind Jonathan in the magistrate’s court: she had only just started her ‘first six’ (six months), and was therefore not qualified to do anything else; in her second six months she’d be on her feet doing her own cases, and Jonathan’s work on top. But for now, she had to stand behind Jonathan.

‘The accused’s husband is a dear friend of mine,’ he said to Adam. ‘I’m helping him out. This is not the first time she’s done this. She’s a serial offender. She enjoys the thrill of stealing . . .’

‘She’s a klepto?’ asked Stacey.

‘A what?’ Jonathan knew perfectly well what she’d said.

‘A kleptomaniac?’

‘Something like that.’ He edged the file closer.

‘I was hoping for a . . .’

‘A bigger case?’ Jonathan smiled and laughed a little and looked across at Adam. ‘Don’t they all! It’s the old cab-rank system for you, Stacey, I’m afraid. You have to take what you’re given, if you are free . . . and last time I looked, Stacey, you were most certainly free.’

‘Of course, Jonathan. When is the case listed?’

‘Tomorrow, I think?’ He frowned ‘Or quite possibly this afternoon. You’d better check. Oh, and while you do, could

you possibly pop out and take in my dry cleaning?’ He nodded towards an elegant suit jacket that was hanging off the back of his door.

‘Your drying cleaning, Mr Taylor-Cameron?’

‘Yes, Miss Jackson. My dry cleaning. It’s important to look good in court.’

‘We both know I can’t do that. It’s above my pay grade, Mr Taylor-Cameron. Well above my pay grade.’ She smiled as she closed the door behind her.

Jonathan exhaled sharply at his desk. He’d normally slam his fist down on his leather-topped table in frustration, but Pippa had been making him use a mindfulness app to help with his anger management issues. It appeared to be working, thought Adam; a little, at least. But Stacey Jackson was definitely spinach in Jonathan Taylor-Cameron’s teeth. As he left Jonathan to stew in his own furious juices, Adam checked his watch. Poor man. It was still another two hours till lunch.