

THE DARKEST WALK OF CRIME

Malcolm Archibald

For Cathy

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PRELUDE

Lancashire, England: August 1847

Sir Robert Trafford pulled at his cheroot and allowed the tip to glow bright red before slowly exhaling blue smoke above the heads of his companions. They watched him carefully, their expressionless faces hiding the rapacity of hunting hounds. Eventually one spoke.

“Are you going to play?”

“I will play when I am ready.” Sir Robert eyed the pile of money and promissory notes occupying the centre of the table. He smiled, lifted the glass of brandy that stood at his elbow and drained it in a single swallow.

Standing at his shoulder, a slender woman pressed against him as she glanced at his cards. When he ignored her, she pouted and walked to the fireplace, emphasising the swing of her hips so the rustle of her dress competed with the low crackle of the fire in an otherwise hushed room.

“Play then, damn you!” The speaker leaned across the table, his face florid with tension and drink.

“As you wish.” Sir Robert flicked the ash from his cheroot into the fireplace, then placed his cards on the table, one at a time. Every man in the room counted the numbers. Only the

woman appeared unconcerned. He held the last card for an agonising moment before displaying it with a sneer.

The woman smiled as the florid man threw down his hand. The cards splayed across the smooth green baize.

“Damn you! Damn you Trafford! You’ve ruined me!”

The woman’s laugh mocked him. “You ruin yourselves, I think, chancing all your possessions on the turn of a card.” She brushed past each of the four players in turn, stopping opposite Sir Robert.

He looked up, smoothing a hand over his unfashionably long hair.

“What is life without adventure? The fun of the game is being prepared to risk everything, or gain nothing.” Scooping up the pile of money and documents from the centre of the table, he lifted his eyebrows. “These are all mine, I believe?” He rose from his seat and paced the length of the room, stopping only to pour himself another glass of brandy from the crystal decanter on the sideboard.

“Without adventure, Sir Robert, there is no life.” The woman did not conceal her interest as she allowed her hand to momentarily rest on his arm while her eyes roamed slowly from his face to his feet.

“Will you at least give us the chance to win something back?” the florid man asked. He followed Sir Robert to the sideboard, sloshing brandy into an empty glass.

“No.” He was dismissed with a shrug. “What can you possibly have that I should want? I already own everything you ever had.”

The third man looked up and spoke slowly, “I believe you may be mistaken, Sir Robert. I have something you desire.”

Sir Robert halted under the great chandelier so the light played on the glossy mane of his hair. "And what might that be, Sir Henry?"

"He has me," the woman said simply.

"I can have any number of women," Sir Robert told her.

"You can have any number of bobtails, bunters and hell-cats," the woman corrected his statement, "but not a high flier like me."

Sir Henry laughed then, the sound harsh in the warm room, until Sir Robert fixed him with a venomous stare.

"She has you there, Sir Robert," the florid man said. "You're a ladies' man of note, but your reputation precedes you. No lady of *quality* would touch you, by God!"

"Oh, I would do more than touch him," the woman said, "but only if he proves himself worthy."

She stroked his arm with a gloved hand. Sir Henry smiled while the fourth man, tall, whiskered, and erect as a guardsman, merely looked bored.

"Sir Robert has already won this evening," he said. "There is no need for him to gamble further." He looked over to the woman and smiled coldly. "Besides which, perhaps he is not quite as willing to risk all as he says he is."

Sir Robert might have ignored the challenge, had the florid man not laughed. The sound was short and ugly.

"Not willing?" Sir Robert banged the decanter down on the polished walnut, his voice a whisper. "By God, I'm always willing. Make your wager, Sir Henry. What must I chance to gain your daughter?"

Sir Henry looked at the woman and smiled. "What should we say, my dear? What are you worth?"

“The question is not what I am worth, Father, but rather what value does Sir Robert put on his word?” She swayed over to Sir Robert and leaned against him. “Would you risk everything, as you said?”

The atmosphere in the room changed as everybody looked at Sir Robert. While the florid man was openly triumphant, Sir Henry appeared merely curious, and the whiskered man swirled brandy around his glass.

“Well, Sir Robert?” The woman stepped back, smiling. “I’m sure that you are man enough to keep your word,” she hesitated coyly, “but some of these gentlemen are less certain.”

“Damn it!” Sir Robert’s laugh was explosive. “Shall we have another hand, gentlemen?”

“Let’s make it simpler,” Sir Henry suggested. “Let us have a straight cut of the cards; if you win, my daughter is yours. If you lose, I have all your winnings and the value of your property in hard currency.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Sir Henry,” Sir Robert said.

“Am I not worth it?” Widening her eyes, the woman allowed her hand to drift across Sir Robert’s shoulder.

Sir Robert drained and refilled his glass. “I will have to find out,” he said, handing the cards over to the tall, whiskered figure of the Duke of Maldon. “The game’s the thing . . .” “The game’s the thing. Shuffle the cards, Your Grace, and let fate decide.”

They sat around the table, with the chandelier casting wavering shadows and the woman watching over her father’s shoulder. The Duke shuffled slowly, building up the tension before he handed the pack over to Sir Henry.

“I would be obliged, sir, if you would care to cut first?”

There was a second's pause as Sir Henry accepted the cards. "My dear, your future is in my hands." He winked at his daughter and cut quickly, placing the top card face down in front of him before sliding the pack over to Sir Robert.

"And it soon will be in mine." Sir Robert divided the cards and selected one.

"Turn over your cards on the count of three, gentlemen," His Grace said, and slowly counted. "One . . . two . . . three."

The hiss of a piece of coal shifting in the fireplace was the only sound until Sir Robert flicked over his card. The hooded eyes of a king stared sightlessly upward as he breathed out slowly and looked up in triumph.

"King of spades, by God," he gloated and extended a hand to the woman. "Come here, my dear. I believe you are now my property."

"Not so fast with my daughter, sir." Sir Henry paused, still holding his card. He turned it slowly, grunted, and looked to His Grace. "Well now, there's a pickle. What the devil do we do now?"

The card was the king of hearts; there was no winner.

The Duke decided for them: "You have both won, so the solution is obvious. Sir Henry gains the value of Trafford's property and his previous winnings, and Sir Robert gets Sir Henry's daughter."

"You'll give me time to raise the readies, of course?" Sir Robert accepted the decision with equanimity.

"You may have three months," Sir Henry told him, rising from the table. "I leave you with my daughter, sir. Good day to you." He left the room without a backward glance, followed by the florid man.

Sir Robert was quiet for a long moment, and then he looked up at the woman.

“Winning you has impoverished me,” he said quietly and poured out more brandy. He emptied the glass in a single swallow and refilled it quickly before making an ironic salute to the closed door. “I hope you are worth the price, my dear.”

“You’ll find that I am worth every penny,” she told him evenly. “I have a rich uncle, you see, and he would hate to see his niece live in penury.”

“Indeed?” Sir Robert passed a glass toward her as the Duke silently watched.

“Of course, he will require a favour in return.” The woman took his arm, smiling. “I fear that we must walk a darker path for a while, Sir Robert.”

CHAPTER ONE

London: November 1847

“Ready?” Sergeant Restiaux blinked the drizzle from his eyes and looked upwards to where drab dawn cracked open the terrible dark of a London night. ‘Pray to God that we don’t get lost today, lads.’

“I thought you knew this place like the back of your hand?” Constable Mendick nodded towards the ugly morass of the Holy Land, whose foul stench only enhanced the feral reputation of the inhabitants.

“As well as any man on this side of the law,” Restiaux agreed and quickly qualified his statement, “Well enough to have no desire to linger.” He lifted a black-gloved hand. “Listen.”

Mendick heard the chimes of St Giles, an oxymoron of hope beside the seething slum that crowded its walls. Unconsciously, he counted out loud, feeling the familiar hollowness in his stomach, “Four, five . . .”

Restiaux nodded and slowly intoned the old words, “Lord, I shall be very busy this day; I may forget thee, but do not forget me.” He exaggerated his wink. “These are good words to remember at times like these.” He turned to the silent man who stood at the back. “What do you think, Foster?”

Foster nodded. “Anything that helps is worthwhile.”

The only man among them who did not wear the blue uniform of the police; he straightened his arm and brandished the blackjack he carried in lieu of a truncheon. The foot-long sausage of reinforced linen was weighted with sand and tipped with solid lead.

“Now, I’ve chased this man to Manchester and back, so let’s make sure that he doesn’t escape this time.”

“We’ll do our best.” Restiaux lifted his head as St Giles clattered its final message. “Seven o’clock. And in we go!”

Raising his voice to a yell, he rose from the shelter of the scarred brick wall. For a second he was silhouetted against a candlelit window, his prominent nose verifying the French ancestry his name suggested, and then he was moving forward, head up, booted feet splashing through the unthinkable filth on the ground.

The two constables followed, checking that their long staffs were secure in their pockets and directing the beam of their bull’s-eye lanterns to illuminate Restiaux’s path. The lights jinked over walls weeping tears of dirt, passed windows blank with despair and settled on a repellent door.

“God knows what depravity is hiding behind that,” Restiaux muttered. Mendick sighed. Was this what his life was reduced to? Crawling about in the dark chasing insignificant criminals through the back slums? Surely all those hours poring over books as he painfully learned to read and write must have had more purpose.

“Keep the light steady there!” Constable Williamson slammed himself against the wall beside the door, waiting for Restiaux to take the lead and Foster, the Scotland Yard detective, to follow.

Restiaux lifted his foot. "No point in knocking politely," he explained, "not in the Holy Land." He smashed his massive boot against the bottom panel, which shook but held so he kicked again, putting his entire weight behind the blow. Candles began to flicker in the adjoining windows.

"The Holy Land is awakening," Mendick warned.

Dogs began to bark, their racket echoing in the crooked street.

"For Christ's sake, boot that bloody door in!" Foster looked around in some apprehension; nobody wanted to linger in the Holy Ground.

Taking a step back, Restiaux tried again, this time grunting with satisfaction as the wood splintered. "That's it! Light!"

Mendick's lantern illuminated the panel, and in a series of short, savage kicks, Restiaux created a jagged hole. Kneeling, he thrust his arm through and withdrew an iron bolt.

"Stand aside, sergeant!" Williamson pushed past, staff in hand.

"Be careful, you young blockhead!" Restiaux warned, but Williamson clattered ahead, his boots echoing on a flight of stone steps that led downward to a black abyss. The stench of dampness and human waste rose to greet them. Restiaux shook his head.

"Shine that light just ahead of me, Mendick, and don't stray. God alone knows what's down here." He produced a pistol from his pocket. With its four inch barrel and wide muzzle, the weapon would be deadly at close range. "This barker has a three quarter inch bore, so it can stop an elephant dead, but let's hope we don't need it." With the pistol held in his right hand, he began the descent.

“Blake’s the most efficient forger you’ll never want to meet,” Foster said quietly, “but I need him alive, not face up in a coffin.” He glowered at Restiaux. “He’s far too valuable.”

“So are my men,” Restiaux said bluntly. “So if he is a threat to any of us, I won’t hesitate to shoot him.” Turning his back on the detective, he nodded to Mendick. “Ready?”

“Aye.” Mendick looked into the darkness ahead. He did not feel ready, but did it really matter?

The lantern light picked out crumbling stone steps descending through darkness into a stink that seemed so tangible it could be cut up and packaged. There was a loud cry ahead, a hollow shout that echoed for agonisingly long seconds.

“Williamson!” Restiaux yelled, but there was only the sound of scurrying footsteps, followed by solid silence.

“What the hell’s happening?” Foster sounded alarmed as he tapped the blackjack against the wall. He peered narrow-eyed down the steps.

“Williamson!” Restiaux called again, but the empty echo mocked him. He lowered his voice. “It looks like there’s trouble ahead; have you anything more lethal than your staff?”

“Yes, Sergeant.” Mendick patted his shoulder holster, where his pistol nestled uncomfortably but reassuringly against his breast. Emma had never been happy with his choice of profession, but she had insisted that he should at least be prepared for trouble.

Restiaux nodded. “After me then, and don’t worry about taking Blake alive.” He ignored Foster’s savage glare.

Testing each step, they negotiated the remaining twenty stairs with the light flickering and bouncing from chipped stone and crumbling mortar.

“What’s that?” Foster pointed to a darker shadow ahead.

“It’s Williamson.”

The constable lay crumpled across the bottom step, blood oozing from a ragged wound in his scalp. Beyond him, faint light flickered and coarse voices grumbled from behind a closed door.

“I told him to wait!” Kneeling at Williamson’s side, Restiaux checked his pulse. “He’s alive, thank God.” He glanced at the door, and grunted. “Spring your rattle.”

Hauling the rattle from his inside pocket, Mendick swung it around his head. The spring pressed a wooden tongue against a ratchet wheel, creating a distinctive sound that would immediately summon all available police constables.

“Christ, man, that noise will warn anybody for half a mile.” Foster looked behind him to the cruelly crowding dark.

“That’s the idea. Now, follow closely and mind your backs!” Restiaux poised himself then kicked open the door and rushed through, his pistol levelled in front of him.

From the darkness of the stairway they rushed into a scene of which Dante would have been proud. Lit by the guttering remains of three candles, a mass of human bodies covered the floor of a low room and piled onto a grease-darkened bench. There were men and women of all ages from twelve to sixty, some whitely naked, others clad in itching rags and one in the remains of a clerical suit. Some were stirring, rising from torpidity to suspicion as they struggled to see who had entered, but others merely glanced up and returned to the anonymity of the mass.

“He’s not here,” Foster said at once and prepared to move on, but Restiaux placed a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Wait. Somebody will know,” he advised, and raised his voice: “We’re looking for Thomas Blake!”

Mendick flashed the lantern across the chaos, catching a poisonous eye, a scarred back, a tangled mess of lousy hair or the slender curve of breast or buttock.

“Who?” the man in the suit asked, blinking as the light focussed on his face.

“Flash Tom,” Restiaux said. “You know him.”

When the man shook his head, Restiaux sighed. “Remind him, Constable.”

“Yes, Sergeant.” Pulling his staff from its pocket, Mendick stepped forward, ignoring the squeal as his nailed boot thumped on the leg of a teenage draggletail.

“No!” The clerk cowered backward, seeking sanctuary from companions who seemed only too eager to allow him all the attention of the police. “I don’t know him at all!”

“I’m afraid I don’t believe you.” Mendick pressed the rounded edge of his staff, with the VR lettering in faded gold, hard against the clerk’s chin. “Where is Thomas Blake?”

“I don’t know,” the clerk said, but for a second his eyes flickered toward a door at the far end of the room.

“Thank you,” Mendick kept his voice dry as he stepped over the cleric. “This way, Sergeant. You too, Sergeant Foster, if you will.” He treated the Scotland Yard detective with cautious respect.

“I hope Flash Tom kills you both.” Covering herself with what looked like a handful of rags, a woman pointed a long-nailed finger at Mendick. “I hope you die squealing, you Peeler bastard.”

"If there is any trouble from you or anybody else in this room," Restiaux told her quietly, "you'll be in the Bower before this day's finished."

The woman closed her mouth and sat down with a thump, her eyes screaming hatred.

"Right, Constable, lead on." Foster glanced over his shoulder as a cacophony of curses came from the room behind them. "Christ but I hate this job."

They plunged through the door into a short passage, scented with sewage and punctured with three dark openings.

"Which one?" Mendick allowed the beam of the lantern to linger over each doorway in turn.

"The nearest," Restiaux said and barged in the door. They thundered into another room reeking of human misery as huddled children stared up from their rags. One boy, his eyes ancient and evil as Hades, spat at them. The next room held more filth, more destitute people, more sorrow, but no Thomas Blake.

"We're wasting time." Foster sounded worried.

Restiaux shoved the last door. "Locked," he said laconically, and again resorted to his boot. The door shuddered once, twice, and finally gave with a mighty crash. The lantern probed ahead, revealing more steps, spiralling upward.

Foster swore foully. "This place is a maze."

"Tom! Tom Blake!" Restiaux's shout echoed endlessly in the dark. Feeling his way with care, he began the ascent, pistol held ready to fire. Mendick followed, aware of the clinging dankness and the sudden alteration in atmosphere. The foetid stench had metamorphosed into something much worse. He could sense danger, as if unformed evil was hovering above.

“He’s up there,” he whispered, touching the butt of his pistol. Years of experience in the back slums of London had heightened him to the importance of instinct. If he felt that something was wrong, then something *was* wrong.

Restiaux nodded. “I know.”

Restiaux was the expert on the Holy Land. He knew every slithering alley, every crumbling building, every half-human denizen of the ten rat-run acres that huddled between the soaring spire of St Giles and the bulk of St George’s church in Bloomsbury. The name Holy Land was a mockery, taken from the proximity of the churches, but although there were worse rookeries in London, there were few that gave such easy access to the more privileged areas of Leicester Square, Regent Street and the Haymarket. For that reason, the Holy Land was a thieves’ paradise, a devil’s playground of the downtrodden and the vicious, a Satan’s sanctuary for the pickpockets and cockchafers, the coves, cracksmen and queer dealers who scraped a dishonest living by robbing their betters.

“Jesus!” Foster glanced over his shoulder as somebody unleashed a laugh fit for bedlam. “Please God I live to see my retirement and a pension.”

The steps ended at a brick wall pierced by a ragged hole through which a man might just be able to squeeze. A draught edged aside a fraction of the stench.

“Bastard’s escaped again!” Foster kicked the wall with his iron-studded boot.

“Lantern,” Restiaux ordered, and Mendick bent forward, one hand holding his pot hat in place. The light probed the hole and vanished into the unknown beyond.

“After me, I think; this is my parish.” Pushing him gently aside, Restiaux took a deep breath and thrust his head and shoulders through the hole.

The sound of the shot was very loud in the confined space, and he yelled and fell back cursing.

“Sergeant!” Mendick saw blood on Restiaux’s face. “Are you all right?”

Restiaux nodded but suddenly paled and slid downward until he was sitting with his back to the wall.

“Douse the glim,” he said, and Mendick pulled the metal shutter across the lantern. The sudden darkness pressed down on them, thick with menace.

Another shot cracked out, the bullet bouncing from the brick wall behind them and ricocheting dangerously around their ears. Mendick swore, ducking down, as Restiaux flinched and covered his head with his arm.

“Tom!” Foster shouted, keeping back from the hole in the wall. “It’s me, Foster of the Yard. I have other police officers with me. Better come out quiet now.”

“Bugger you, bluebottle bastards! Did I kill Restie?” The voice was surprisingly high-pitched.

“No,” Mendick said. “It’s not the rope yet, Tom. You’ll just get a spell in limbo or maybe a free voyage across the pond.”

“Twenty-one years I’ll get, Peeler, twenty-one years of transportation, slaving under the lash in Van Diemen’s Land. Better the rope than that.” He fired again; the shot splintered the bricks opposite the hole. Dust drifted over Restiaux, who coughed and wiped away the blood that trickled down the line of his jaw.

Keeping his head back from the hole, Mendick eased open the shutter of his lantern to examine the residue left by the

bullet. "Half-inch calibre lead ball," he said, "and judging by the gap between the shots, he probably has a single-barrelled pistol." He raised his voice, taunting. "You're trapped, Tom, there's no escape."

"Then I'll die game, Peeler!"

The pistol cracked again; the ball ripped past Mendick's face. Choking white smoke surged through the hole. Mendick cocked his pistol and raised his eyebrows toward Restiaux.

Standing flat against the wall, Foster shook his head. "I want him alive," he reminded. "I have a particular task for Flash Tom, so a corpse is no use to me."

"We'll try to keep Blake alive," Restiaux assured him. "There are forty seconds between each shot, Mendick, and you're about the most active officer in the force." He jerked a thumb toward the hole. "Could you do it?"

Mendick's shrug was genuine. "I can try," he said, "but not in this hat. Do I have your permission to discard it, Sergeant?"

Restiaux smiled weakly. "Just make sure you protect your head." He put a hand to his head. The blood now covered the left side of his face and dripped onto his broad leather stock.

The rabbit skin hat weighed eighteen ounces and was intended as protection against an assailant's cosh, but in this confined space it was only an encumbrance. As an afterthought Mendick shrugged off his swallowtail coat which would catch on every jagged brick. Taking deep breaths, he crouched at the side of the hole as Foster hugged the wall. The detective swore softly.

"Are you Peeler bastards still there?" Tom fired on the last word. As soon as the pistol sounded, Mendick threw himself into the hole, kicking madly in an attempt to gain momentum. The wall was thicker than he had expected, and rough brick

scraped the flesh from his outstretched hands as he frantically hauled himself through. He had forty seconds to reach the screever before Flash Tom finished reloading. Forty seconds between life and possible death: how long had he already been?

Did it really matter? He hesitated, embracing death for a fraction of a second, but duty forced him onwards. Peering into the darkness, he glimpsed a bearded white face and the blurred hands of somebody urgently working the ramrod of a pistol. The man looked up, his eyes vicious above a rainbow waistcoat. Mendick scabbled with his feet, seeking purchase, as Flash Tom withdrew the ramrod and stepped backward into the dark. There was a solid click as he cocked the hammer.

“Peeler bastard!” The words were followed by a torrent of foul vituperation that echoed repulsively around the dark chamber.

Mendick flinched; with his head and upper body protruding from the hole, he was hideously vulnerable. “It won’t do, Tom. If you shoot me, it will be the gallows. Think, man.”

“Gallows or not, bluebottle, you’re a dead man.” Extending his arm to aim, Tom pressed the trigger just as Restiaux gave Mendick a final push that propelled him through the hole. He gasped as burning powder from the muzzle of the pistol filled the air, but the ball screamed wide and smashed into crumbling brick. Coughing with the reek of shrouding smoke, he instinctively rolled away, but Flash Tom did not attack.

Jerking upright, he glanced around, grateful for the beam of light that Restiaux directed through the hole.

He was in a small chamber with an arched brick roof and walls smeared with flaking white plaster. A small stove emitted residual warmth, while the pot on top still contained the

congealed metal that was the raw material of the coining trade. Half a dozen spoons lay scattered on the ground, together with a number of tools, a pile of documents and a variety of pens and bottles of ink. It was obvious that a master forger worked here. There was no sign of Blake, but there was a small opening in the far corner.

“Sergeant,” Mendick called through, “the bird’s flown. I’m going to follow.”

“Don’t be a fool, man,” Restiaux ordered, but there was no strength in his voice. “You can’t wander around the Holy Land on your own.”

“There’s no choice, Sergeant. We can’t let him escape now.”

Before Restiaux adjusted his advice into an order, Mendick crouched at the opening through which Flash Tom had escaped. Taking a deep breath, he plunged in, to find himself at the top of half-rotted wooden steps descending to a square courtyard piled high with human filth. There was a single exit between two buildings, so narrow he had to squeeze through sideways, emerging into a crooked street of misshapen houses. The dirty light of dawn did nothing to alleviate the dismal appearance of soot-smearred walls, stagnant filth-spilling gutters and shuffling, dull-eyed people. Mendick did not hesitate.

“Police!” he roared. “Stand aside!”

One or two edged aside as he splashed through the street, but others made to block his path. He barged them aside, their underfed bodies fragile before his weight. There was movement ahead, a glimpse of a rainbow waistcoat as Flash Tom briefly turned, eyes bright with malice, before sliding into another narrow alley.

“Blake! Tom! It’s no good, man!”

Slithering on human filth, he eased into the alley, slipped sideways and tottered for a second, swearing as he realised he had walked into a trap.

“Badgered, by God!”

He stood at the edge of a deep cesspit, straddled only by a single greasy plank. Beyond the pit, Blake stood with his arm extended and his pistol levelled directly at his face.

“Bye, bye, bluebottle.”

As Blake pulled the trigger, Mendick ducked, put his boot under the edge of the plank and heaved upward. Heavy with moisture, the timber did not travel far, but it made enough contact with Blake’s shin to distract him so his hand jerked aside.

“Jesus!”

The crack of the pistol echoed around the alley, but the bullet flew wide, flattening harmlessly against the wall.

It was a four-foot standing jump over the cesspit, but with no other choice Mendick leapt, pushing himself onwards with sideways pressure on the wall, and landed just as Blake threw his pistol and turned to run.

“It’s a dead end, Tom!”

Without looking back, Blake scabbled up the broken brickwork of the wall, finding purchase on the ledges of windows and swearing frantically as rotted wood crumbled under his feet.

“Bye, Peeler!”

Ignoring the crowd that had gathered to roar Blake on, Mendick searched for handholds to follow the forger. His fingers slithered across damp bricks, but his childhood as a climbing-boy, a chimney-sweep’s apprentice, stood him in

good stead, and he followed quickly as Blake raced upwards and sideways.

“Nobody climbs that fast,” he muttered until he realised there was a series of iron spikes cunningly set in the brickwork. He grunted; anywhere a screever could climb, he could follow.

The spikes were old and partly rusted through, but he had to trust them, pulling himself across the wall only a few yards behind Blake.

Pausing at an upper window, Blake glanced back, his breath clouding around his head like smoke from some infernal demon. Spitting contemptuously downwards, he hauled himself onto the roof.

“Here! Catch this!” The first of the slates missed Mendick by an inch, the second bounced from a window ledge to splinter on the ground below, and the third crashed onto his right shoulder.

He flinched at the shock, and his right hand slipped so he hung one-handed with that appalling drop sucking at him. Below, the crowd was baying for his life.

“Die, you Peeler bastard!” Another slate hurtled down, turning edge over edge before it splashed into the dung heap below.

With his entire weight dragging agonisingly on his left shoulder, Mendick swung himself against the wall, scrabbling for purchase. He gasped with relief when he found the spike and clung motionless for a second. He sensed the disappointment from the crowd as he dragged himself up and over the gutter onto the roof.

Dawn’s early grey had changed to an arterial red that highlighted the skyline of spires and towers marking the greatest city in the world. Mendick surveyed the litter of

uneven rooftops that lay before him. Blake skidded on damp slates before ducking behind a crazy chimney-breast twenty yards ahead. He followed, balancing his feet either side of the cracked ridge of the roof. When Blake glanced back, the slanting sun caught him, momentarily glittering on narrow eyes in an anxious face.

“You’re a persistent bugger, peeler, whatever else you are.”

Gathering his strength, Mendick leapt the gap between two buildings, felt his boots scrape down the slates and reached down for balance just as Blake turned to descend another ladder of spikes. Mendick followed Blake through an open window into a small room where semi-naked women howled abuse. The building smelled of damp and human excreta, but Blake was only a few yards ahead, thrusting at a door that led outside.

“Hold the bluebottle, girls!” Blake roared, and the human detritus swarmed to obey.

“Police!”

Mendick tried to defend himself from a score of filthy hands. The room seemed full of women, all talons and bile as they raked at his face and grabbed hungrily for his genitals. One was screaming, her voice rising to a maniacal screech.

Reaching for his pistol, he pointed it upward and fired. The shot reverberated around the room and brought down a shower of plaster from the ceiling.

“He’s got a gun! The bastard will kill us all!”

The women backed off, some howling in vitriolic frustration, others gesticulating and promising obscene revenge. Mendick pushed through the door just as Blake disappeared over a stone wall into a neighbouring timber yard.

The wall was easy to scale, but as Mendick dropped down, Blake was twenty yards ahead and easing through the yard gate; outside waited a dark four-wheeler. Cursing, Mendick stumbled past piles of neatly stacked timber. As he reached the gate, Restiaux nodded calmly to him through the open window of the coach. Blood stained the bandage that swathed his head.

“Glad to see you kept up; you drove Blake to me very adequately.”

“You have him?” Mendick leaned against the wheel of the coach, only now aware that his breath grated in his chest and that his legs and shoulder throbbed with pain.

Restiaux nodded. “I knew he would run and that you would not give up. Over the roof and through the brothel is a recognised escape from the Holy Land, so it did not take much to have the four-wheeler waiting.” His grin faded slightly. “In you come. You’ll have to pay for the damage to your uniform, of course.”

“Of course,” Mendick agreed, replacing the pistol in its holster and clambering inside the cab.

His wrists secured by handcuffs, Blake glowered at him from behind the beard. “If I get the chance, Peeler, I’ll kill you. That I swear.” His eyes were acidic.

Sitting at Blake’s side, Foster thumped a meaty hand on his shoulder. “That will not be for a very long time, Tommy Flash. You and I have work to do.”

CHAPTER TWO

London: November 1847

Although the single window was closed, the grumble of carriage wheels from Whitehall intruded into the room, combating the crackle of the fire. Above the heads of the people present, the brass chandelier swung slowly, sending shadows across the portly man behind the desk.

“So, Constable,” the portly man leaned back in his leather chair, small eyes shrewd as he slid them over Mendick. “I heard that you did well in the Blake case.” He tapped his fingers on the desk.

“Thank you, sir.” Mendick remained at attention, his top hat under his arm and his face immobile. He was well aware that Inspector Field headed the small group of plain-clothes detectives at Scotland Yard but was unsure of the identity of the man who sat silently against the far wall.

“Sergeant Restiaux informed me that you followed Blake even after he fired at you, through one of the worst rookeries in London.” Field shook a shaggy head. “Why, even Detective Foster praised you, and he’s not the most enthusiastic of officers.”

Mendick said nothing. Foster was the first Scotland Yard detective he had met, and he had been vaguely disappointed. Rather than a dashing man capable of instant decisions, Foster had seemed hesitant, cynical and unenthusiastic.

“Sergeant Restiaux was quick to inform me that you are a constantly persistent constable,” Field said, “and I am also aware that you have twice applied for a transfer to the detective division at Scotland Yard.”

“Indeed, sir.” There was no need to remind the inspector that both his applications had been curtly rejected.

“It was considered that you lacked the necessary experience,” Field explained. He looked up suddenly and leaned forward. “Are you still interested in such a position?” There was steel behind the apparent benignity of his eyes.

“I am, sir.” Mendick fought to control his enthusiasm, reminding himself he was a disciplined constable, not some flighty youth.

“I see.” Field leaned back again, pressing his forefinger against the arm of his chair, a gesture familiar to all who knew him. “You are aware that the detective branch is the most unpopular in London?”

“I am, sir.” Many of the population still resented the uniformed police and were even more suspicious of plain-clothes detectives. To the British public, there was something almost continental about having such spies creeping around the streets.

“And yet you are willing to court such unpopularity?”

“Yes, sir. I have some experience as an active officer.” Each division of the London police deployed a small number of men in civilian clothes, known as active officers. Mendick had enjoyed two spells on such a duty.

“I am aware of that, constable.” The podgy forefinger stabbed again. “As I am aware of your five years experience in police uniform and the ten years you spent in the army before that.”

Again Mendick lapsed into silence. There was probably very little of which Inspector Field was unaware.

Having established the superiority of his knowledge, Field was prepared to be magnanimous. He leaned back again. "I remain unsure if you are quite suitable to be a detective, although I know of your many fine qualities. However, a situation has arisen in the North and Detective Sergeant Foster has persuaded me you might be useful after all."

"Yes, sir." Mendick could hardly believe what Field had just said. He was about to be transferred to Scotland Yard; his opinion of Detective Foster rose tremendously. He kept any emotion hidden; ten years in the army had taught him that every silver lining concealed a dark grey cloud.

"Well now, Constable, I trust that you are pleased with your good fortune?" Inspector Field waited until Mendick assented. "But you will no doubt be wondering to what special circumstances I am referring and who this gentleman is?" He indicated the silent man at the end of the room. "Let me bring enlightenment to the darkness within your mind. Pray join us, Mr Smith, if you would be so kind?"

At first Mendick thought there was something familiar about the man who eased into the circle of warmth by the fire and placed his leather valise at the side of the desk, but a second glance assured him that he was mistaken. He would never have forgotten a face such as that. The eyes alone were memorable, calm as a summer sea, yet with an indefinable quality of intelligence that bored like a drill, probing, questioning, seeing everything. For some reason Mendick flinched, but nevertheless he felt his jaw thrust out in bloody-minded defiance.

“No, you do not know me.” Mr Smith seemed to have read his mind. “But you may have seen me. Inspector Field told me about you a while ago, and I have been watching you. The man in the corner of the Black Bull, remember? And do you recall the face at the hansom cab window three days ago? Aye, that was me.”

“My apologies, Mr Smith, but I am still unaware of your position.” If Inspector Field treated him with respect, the man obviously had influence, but Mendick was not used to deferring to anonymous authority, and he refused to be cowed.

“My name is John Smith.”

It was such an obvious lie that even Inspector Field smiled.

“And I represent Her Majesty’s government.”

“Of course,” Mendick agreed. He should have realised that there was something supremely official about this man: he carried himself with the utter confidence of an aristocrat or a member of the government.

“Sit yourself down, and let’s talk.” Smith dragged over two hard-backed chairs from the far wall.

“Sir?” Mendick glanced toward Inspector Field, who nodded his assent. He sat cautiously, placing his hat on his knee, unused to such informality in the presence of his superiors.

“Drink?” Smith gestured toward the closed cabinet that stood in the corner of the room. “Are you a drinking man? I am sure that Mr Field has a bottle of medicinal brandy somewhere on hand.” The grin was so sudden and so conspiratorial that Mendick could not help but respond, and Field was on his feet in a second, returning with a decanter and a silver tray on which stood three balloon brandy glasses.

Mendick eyed the decanter guiltily before he shook his head. "Thank you sir, but no." He was unsure what was happening, but he knew that he should retain as clear a head as possible.

"As you wish. You don't mind if we indulge?" Smith sloshed generous amounts of Field's brandy into two of the glasses. "Now," he said as he sipped quietly, "no doubt you are wondering why I am here?"

Mendick nodded slowly, watching as Smith swirled the brandy.

"Good, you'd be less than human if you were not. Tell me," his eyes pierced Mendick's impassive mask, "in your opinion, what is the function of the police?"

The question was so unexpected that for a moment Mendick could only stare. He recovered with a start, trying to recall Peel's nine principles of policing that he had learned when he first started tramping the beat.

"To prevent crime and disorder, sir, as an alternative to their repression by military force; to maintain a relationship with the public . . ."

Smith pursed his lips and flapped his hands in the air. "That's the official line, but not what I wanted to hear. Now, Inspector Field, what would you say to the same question?"

Field had not touched his brandy. "We patrol a volatile border, protecting the rich from the desperate and preventing anarchy from overwhelming respectability." He mused for a second. "However, I would say that the primary function of the police is to protect the seclusion of respectable neighbourhoods."

"That may be more accurate," Smith agreed. "A touch cynical, but not far off the mark. So would you both agree,

then, that one purpose of the police force is to guard the respectable and propertied classes from the effluvia of society, the residuum, if you will?" He waited only a second for the answer before continuing. "Or would you say that the police have the task of ensuring that society retains its natural shape and should remain unaffected by those who would wish it otherwise?" Although he addressed the question to both, it was to Mendick that Smith looked for an answer.

"I would say so, sir, but I see my principal duty as a defender of the law, more than as a protector of any particular class of person . . ."

"Ah!" When Smith held up his hand, calloused ridges showed across the base of his fingers. Whatever position he presently held, at one time Smith had known hard manual labour. "Define that word; define that word, *law*."

Mendick found he was unable to look away from Smith's quizzical stare. He struggled for clarity. "Law is the rules by which we live, a collection of regulations that maintain the balance and fairness of society . . ."

"And there you have it precisely, sir." Smith rose from his chair, jabbing a long forefinger at Mendick. "Well done, Constable; you hit it when you said the *balance* of society. We must all do our utmost to *preserve* that balance, or we may see this nation crumble. That is our duty, sir, and that is *your* duty."

"I understand, Mr Smith." Mendick would have liked to look toward Field, but Smith's near mesmeric gaze held him securely.

"Good, then we are in agreement." Smith sat back down, seemingly content that he had made his point. "Now, Constable, you will be attuned to the present unrest in the country? You will know of the repeated demands for the

People's Charter and other subversive nonsense?" Smith had assumed his previous air of chilling detachment, but Mendick was aware of the passion beneath. He nodded. "Nobody in Britain can be unaware of the underlying unease among some of the lower classes, sir."

"So tell me what you know, Constable."

"Yes, sir. The People's Charter was born after the 1832 Reform Act when the middle orders obtained the vote but the aspirations of the workers to achieve the same were discarded. The Charter demands six electoral reforms, including secret ballots, payment for MPs and the franchise for all males over the age of twenty-one. Those who support the Charter are known as Chartists, and in 1839 they presented their demands to parliament in the form of a petition."

"All correct so far, Constable." Smith's eyes never strayed from Mendick's face. "Pray continue."

"Parliament rejected the petition out of hand, but Chartists are persistent, and whenever the economy dips and there is unemployment and distress in the country, there is more support for them."

"That's accurate enough, Constable, as far as it goes." Smith looked toward Field, who gave a brief nod. Mendick realised that Smith was unsure exactly how much information he could safely impart to a lowly police constable.

Helping himself to Field's brandy decanter, Smith recharged their glasses and poured a third, which he pushed toward Mendick. "You may need this before I am finished, Constable." The glass sat on the silver tray, its contents an amber temptation as Smith continued, "There are new developments among the Chartists. You are obviously unaware of the militancy that is increasingly gripping these people. There is

something extremely nasty brewing up north, Constable, something that they term Physical Force Chartism.”

Mendick nodded. He knew of the split in the Chartist ranks. While most of the Radicals believed in Moral Force Chartism and hoped to persuade the government to accept their demands by peaceful protests and great petitioning, others were more militant. Led by Feargus O’Connor, the only Chartist Member of Parliament, the Physical Force Chartists spoke of armed revolution unless the government accepted the six points of the Charter.

Smith sipped at his brandy and continued, “We are unsure exactly what these people contemplate, perhaps a worker’s strike or a *national holiday* as they term it. Perhaps they plan a series of such strikes that may well cripple the economy of the country, or perhaps something even worse, but we would like you to find out.”

Mendick curled a hand around the crystal balloon and swirled the liquid inside. The smell of the brandy was sharp and inviting, but still he desisted. He knew that even a single drink could induce him down the sweet descent to stupidity.

“Me, sir?”

“You, sir.”

Once again Smith was ice-cool. “Mr Field speaks most highly of your resourcefulness and I have witnessed your dedication and courage myself. We need somebody to enter the ranks of the Chartists, pose as one of them and relate their intentions to us.”

“I see, sir.”

Mendick had expected a Scotland Yard detective would investigate murders and serious theft, but he was being asked to act as a spy, the very thing that British people hated most

about the plain-clothes police service. The brandy exploded reassuringly inside his stomach, and he paused for an instant, relishing the sensation even as he assessed Smith's proposal.

"But why me? There must be many other officers with more experience."

"There are," Smith agreed. He glanced at Field again. "Look, Constable, this matter is more delicate than you yet realise. Inspector Field did not select you at random. Firstly, we require an officer who would be at ease in the north, and you are no Londoner."

"No, sir, I am from further north." Mendick could feel the brandy weakening his normal reticence, as he had feared it would. "But there are many established Scotland Yard officers from outwith London." The brandy pushed him into continuing, "There is more to this case than you are revealing."

"Much more," Smith agreed. Sighing, he reached for the valise, placed it on his knee and snapped it open. He looked up, and Mendick chilled at the force of his eyes. "What you are about to see must remain strictly within these four walls, Constable. Is that clear?"

"It is sir." Mendick took another sip of the brandy, closing his eyes as the spirit warmed the inside of his mouth and eased into his system. Strangely, now that he knew what he was being asked to do, he felt neither apprehension nor excitement. He had desired a transfer to the detective branch of the service since his first day of duty, but obtaining it had been an anticlimax. Unconsciously, he placed two fingers beneath his leather stock; he would certainly not miss the constant chafing at the tender skin of his throat.

“Right then, Constable. What do you think of these?” Reaching into the valise, Smith produced a bound notebook and placed it carefully on Field’s desk.

Mendick bent closer. Each page held a pen-and-ink sketch of the head and shoulders of a man, with two paragraphs of detailed description. “These are well executed.” He read the first paragraph.

Mr James Tyler, born 16th January 1810 in Maidstone, Kent. Ten years’ service in G or King’s Cross Division, transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard, on its conception in 1844.

He skipped to the next:

Mr William Gilbert, born 3rd June 1809 in Peckham, London. Eleven years’ service in H or Stepney Division, transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard in 1845.

The third face stared at him, the features familiar.

Mr George Foster, born 13th February 1810 in Carlisle. Fifteen years’ service in A or Westminster Division, transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard on its conception in 1844.

Mendick looked up. “These appear to be details and pictures of Scotland Yard officers, sir.”

“That’s exactly what they are, Constable. Each page gives a picture and a written description of one plain-clothes man.” Smith leaned closer. “But more important is from where this information originated.”

Mendick was already used to Smith’s use of a dramatic pause to highlight anything he considered of importance. He waited and wondered about the significance of the notebook while balancing his mounting desire for the brandy against the knowledge of its subsequent effect.

“A man died to secure this book, Constable. It was recovered from these so-called Physical Force Chartists.” Smith leaned back, watching Mendick’s reaction.

Mendick drew a quick breath. “I understand, sir. How did they get the information about our detectives?”

“We do not yet know that, Constable, but we suppose that they have somebody working within Scotland Yard, perhaps a clerk or similar. Pray stop for an instant and consider the ramifications.”

Mendick nodded. “If we presume that the Chartists have other copies of this book, then they would recognise any established Scotland Yard officer who is sent to them, which means that an unknown man must be used.”

“Precisely,” Smith agreed. “And that is where you come in.” He leaned back once more. “One of our people found this notebook in Manchester and brought it to a local police sergeant named Ogden. Unfortunately, our man died doing his duty.”

“I see, sir.”

“The Chartists butchered him, Constable. He may still have been alive when they tore him to pieces.” Smith waited to allow the information to sink in before he continued.

“Sergeant Ogden seems to be a good officer, but we do not consider him suitable material for this type of undercover work, and we need more information. We require somebody on the inside, somebody the Chartists will trust.” He raised his eyebrows, his eyes intense.

“I see, sir. You want me to take the place of the officer the Chartists killed.”

“There is more.” Inspector Field had been listening, his eyes fixed on Mr Smith. “And it may be the most important point of all.”

Mendick fortified himself with more brandy, waiting for whatever horror Field unleashed on him. He could feel the spirits working on his mind, muddling his thoughts yet simultaneously pressing him to drink more.

“You see, Constable, we think that there is a new mind directing the activities of the Physical Force Chartists. Feargus O’Connor, who, as you know, has led them for years, has advocated force but has never backed his rhetoric with action. Indeed, we believe that the great O’Connor is a spent volcano. We suspect that someone more formidable has taken his place, and Constable, this person seems to have money.”

“But I thought that the Chartists were impoverished workers, sir.”

“That is precisely my point, Constable. Most can barely afford to live, let alone contribute money to their cause, but the Chartists are buying land. So somebody with more resources must be backing them.”

“I see, sir.” Mendick nodded. “And you wish me to find out whom?”

“I do. And more than that.” Field glanced at Smith before continuing, “The death of our officer is unprecedented and, given the horrendous circumstances, extremely disturbing. We think that he came across something else the Chartists wished to keep hidden, and that is why they killed him. I fear . . . we fear there may be an Irish dimension, Constable, so you may be embarking on a very perilous investigation.”

Mendick nodded. He had seen death enough before, but to willingly enter an operation where a police officer had been

savagely murdered was not pleasant. He sighed, reviewing the facts: the Irish connection with the Chartists was no secret, but years of famine had created a new desperation in that island, and desperate men were capable of terrible acts. This combination of unemployed English workers and starving Irish immigrants may have added a new dimension to the Chartists, but news of a wealthy patron was perhaps even more alarming.

Field rose from his chair to pace the room, stopping to stare out of the window at the bustle of Whitehall.

“You do not have to take the job, Mendick. We know that it will be dangerous. If you are discovered, the Chartists will probably try to kill you too, and we may not be able to help; we may not even be able to admit that you are one of ours. If you decide to refuse, you may replace your hat and return to your duties without anybody ever knowing that this interview took place.”

Mendick hid his smile; the choice could not be more obvious. Either he accepted this perilous position, in which case he would retain his new status as Scotland Yard detective, or he refused and remained a uniformed officer for the remainder of his career. He did not consider for long; he had nothing much to lose anyway. He lifted the brandy glass and took a last loving swallow.

“When do I start, sir?”

“Very shortly.” Smith did not offer to recharge his glass, although he was not loath to help himself. “First you must lose some of your police bearing and tone; you *do* look a typical police officer, you know.” He nodded to Field. “Give him a few days, maybe a week or so, at ease in London, Inspector. And you, Constable, allow your hair to grow longer, forget to shave

for a while, strengthen that uncouth northern accent of yours, and then we will contact you again with further details.” He leaned forward in his chair and scribbled on a scrap of paper. “Here is the address of Sergeant Ogden. You will see that he lives in White Rose Lane, just outside Manchester, where the mainspring of this Chartist nonsense appears to be based.”

Now that the decision had been made, Mendick realised that he still did not feel anything. Inveigling himself into the Chartist network was just another job, something to fill the emptiness of his life.

Smith was talking again. “We have supplied Sergeant Ogden with various items that could be of use to you. Contact him as soon as you can.”

“You have already supplied him?” The brandy made Mendick too loquacious. “I might have refused the position.”

“No, Constable.” Smith was nearly smiling. “You would not refuse. Now memorise and destroy Ogden’s address,” he ordered. “We cannot leave anything to chance.” He nodded at the door. “That will be all, Constable, except for one thing. I would be obliged if you did not tell anybody about this meeting. Best for the nation, don’t you know?”

“I won’t tell anybody,” Mendick promised.

*

As always when he was alone in his home in Bethnal Green, brooding over the dying embers of his fire, Mendick felt utter loneliness seeping over him. His promise to tell nobody had been genuine, for outwith his colleagues in the force, there was nobody else to tell. He lifted the poker and stirred the ashes, watching as the dim redness flared into life again before

immediately beginning to fade. Once, not long ago, he would have enjoyed the evening, basking in the intimacy of his wife's company, creating fanciful images from the flames, planning for a shared future.

Not now.

He looked across to the empty rocking chair at the opposite side of the fire.

"Well, Emma, I'm going away again."

He had spent many hours making that chair, carefully carving the curved rockers on which the framework rested, smoothing the seat with a piece of glass, adding the fixed cushions on which she would rest when nursing their child.

"I would wish that you were coming with me."

The memories were never far beneath the surface, ready to overcome him if he relaxed. When he closed his eyes, he could see her, smiling away her fear as she lay back on their marriage bed, pretty as a picture, plump and pregnant. There had been no warning of any problems: her waters had broken on time, her birth pangs had been normal, and then came the tormented agonies, the moans that would remain with him for the rest of his life. The midwife had shaken her head hopelessly.

"We'll need a doctor," she had said as the sweat streaked her flushed face. "This is beyond me."

Emma had writhed, fighting her screams until the doctor came, and his examination had been thorough. He had taken Mendick aside, speaking in a quiet, serious voice,

"I am afraid your wife is in a critical condition. You might be best to prepare yourself for the worst."

Mendick had blinked away the tears, searching for strength that he no longer believed he had.

“Can you save her, doctor?”

The doctor did not answer for a long minute. “I cannot save them both.” He had waited for the reply.

“Then save my wife,” Mendick pleaded. “For God’s sake, save Emma.”

“It will not be easy,” the doctor told him, “and it will not be painless.”

“Dear God,” he looked to Emma, writhing on the stained bed. “Save my wife.”

“And the cost?” The doctor looked around the room. He knew that a police constable earned a bare guinea a week and few had any savings.

“I’ll meet any expenses.”

The next few hours were the worst he had ever experienced, or, he imagined, ever would. He had watched, holding Emma whenever he could, suffering with her pain, and ignoring the tears that scalded his face as the doctor did his terrible but necessary procedures.

The baby came forth in a gush of bright blood, and for a second Mendick touched his son before he returned all his attention to his wife. Pain had aged her in the last few hours, but there was still a faint light of recognition in her eyes as she looked at him. Her hand reached for his one last time, then the agony twisted her away and she slipped into a screaming white void that no amount of laudanum could subdue.

He had watched Emma die, tortured by her agony and his helplessness. At the end, amidst the blood and the writhing, twisting horror, he had felt great sobs breaking over him but knew that he was not a lesser man for revealing his emotion. When her final spasm came, he was aware only of relief that her suffering had ended, and he hated himself for his own

callousness as much as he hated himself for having caused Emma so much pain.

Now he spoke to the empty chair he had fashioned for her.
"I'm going away again, Emma, up north this time."

He could sense her presence, faintly disapproving of his choice of career but supportive of his endeavours. Emma had always been there for him, ready to encourage while still attempting to guide him to a less hazardous path. Now the danger did not matter; if he lived, he would help keep the country stable, and if he died, why, then Emma would be waiting to welcome him home. That would not be a bad day.

He stared into the dead embers, contemplating his immediate future. He was to infiltrate an organisation of obviously violent men, which would be difficult enough, but then he was to discover who their patron was and what they planned, and relate the intelligence to Inspector Field. At least the latter part would be easy, with the telegraph now covering every city in the country.

Mendick glanced up for inspiration, but the chair remained unoccupied, a void echoing the emptiness within him. He could not look for help from Emma, so he had to work out his problems himself. It was obvious that the Chartists had somebody working within Scotland Yard, but who and why, he could not imagine. To an extent, that situation had worked to his advantage, for it had led to his selection as an unknown face, an officer who had never walked the corridors of Whitehall. It seemed a poor qualification for a man set to take on a position of such responsibility, but he knew that he was only one strand in a tangled web.

With Emma gone, only duty gave him a purpose in life. The rocking chair remained empty, an accusation of his failure. He

sighed; he knew that Emma was not blaming him. She would never do that. Only his Calvinistic conscience pointed the poisoned finger, but the sensation of guilt remained strong. Ultimately, it had been his lust that had killed Emma, and that was something for which he would spend the remainder of his life in atonement. By concentrating on his work he could forget his loss, at least for a time. He knew his position would be precarious; the murder of the last man who infiltrated the Chartist ranks was a stark warning, but he had lived with danger most of his life; it was the least of the demons that crouched on his shoulder.

The knock at the door broke his train of thought. Foster entered, nodding dourly beneath his low-crowned hat. He carried a large canvas bag in his hand.

“Mendick.”

“Foster.” Mendick ushered him to the chair by the fireplace.

“I won’t stay long.” Foster examined Mendick’s furniture with a long stare, lingering over the silhouetted picture of Emma that decorated the far wall. “Your wife?”

“I’m a widower.” He tried to keep all emotion from his voice.

“I see.” Foster nodded without sympathy. “Nice picture.” He lifted the bag high. “There are clothes and documents in here, and a train ticket for Manchester.”

Mendick frowned. “Clothes? What am I supposed to do with them?”

“Wear them.” Foster sounded weary, as if he were instructing an infant. “And use the documents.” He sighed, opened the bag and produced a large packet. “These will come in very useful.”

Breaking the official seal, Mendick unfolded the top piece of stiff paper. It identified him as delegate for the East Indian Branch of the Chartist Federation.

“The East Indian branch does not exist,” Foster explained, “so there is no chance of the genuine delegate arriving. You will say that you helped found the branch when you were in the army.” He stepped back. “You were out East with the army, were you not?”

“I was.”

“Don’t tell me which regiment,” Foster said, “I don’t care; one’s much the same as another to me, but your military experience might come in useful.”

He did not explain further, watching as Mendick pulled out a rectangular piece of pasteboard headed *The National Charter Association of Great Britain* and decorated with beehives and the twin figures of a working man and woman. It again claimed that James Mendick was a member of the East Indies Branch, and Peter McDouall, one of the Physical Force Chartists, had accredited his membership.

“Are you impressed?” Foster had been watching intently. “You should be; I employed a master forger to create that card – none other than Flash Tom Blake.”

“Blake?”

“That’s why I wanted him; he’s the best in the business, and now he’s working for us.” Foster sounded extremely smug. “I’ve been after him for months. This Chartist business has been planned for some time, Constable, so you had better not let anybody down.”

“I’ll try not to,” Mendick assured him. There was a single sheet of instructions, with an illustrated copy of the Charter and a dozen leaflets of Chartist speeches.

“Crib up on the Chartists,” Foster advised. “If you’re meant to be a delegate, you’ll have to know what you’re talking about.” He stood up, placing the bag on Emma’s rocking chair. “The change of clothes will help you look the part.” Reaching inside his jacket, he produced a rolled-up newspaper. “Read this too. It’s the *Northern Star*, the most significant of the Chartists’ own publications. I’d advise you to keep up with the latest copies and memorise everything.”

He stepped away and opened the door, stopping just outside to add casually, “Whatever you do, don’t let them find out that you’re a bobby. Remember what happened to the last fellow.”

Mendick nodded grimly. “I remember.”

“They’re still finding bits of him.”

Mendick waited until Foster walked away before he inspected the clothing that was supposed to transform him into a Chartist.

There was a fustian jacket with the nap worn through at one elbow and two buttons missing, a pair of moleskin trousers with a patch on the left knee, a linen shirt with no collar, and a pair of well-worn boots, beautifully oiled as befitted a one-time soldier of the Queen. Once he donned them, he would appear a northern workman to the life. All he lacked, he told himself bitterly, was the itch.

He had spent years dragging himself out of the mire of poverty, from the utter degradation of unemployment to the routine tedium punctuated with moments of terrible fear that was life in the queen’s army, to his eventual position as a police constable. Now, he reflected as he lifted the fustian jacket, he was reverting to a type he hoped he had condemned to the past. He also wondered whether a delegate of the

Charter would appear so threadbare; surely he should have at least a modicum of respectability?

He looked around the room, wondering what would happen before he returned. Once, this had been a comfortable home, warm with Emma's smile and filled with the promise of a family future, but when she died all that mattered to him had also died. He kept the house as tidy as ever, but the heart had gone. It was stale, nothing more than a place in which to eat and sleep.

He had survived the dismal funeral, the lonely mourning period that the shy sympathy of his colleagues had made more acute, and now he could only face the future if he kept both eyes firmly fixed on his duty. He was a police officer, nothing else.

Lifting his eyes, he examined the silhouette of Emma that hung proudly on the far wall. He was even less of an artist than he was a carpenter, but on their first anniversary he had traced her outline as accurately as his clumsy fingers would allow.

"When I get the promotion to sergeant," he had promised as she made a paper frame for the picture, "I will take you to a real artist and have a proper portrait painted."

She had laughed, telling him that she was quite satisfied with his attempt, but he could tell that she was secretly pleased with the thought of being an artist's model. That dream had died along with her, and now he was left only with the silhouette, which, although imperfect, was the best likeness he had. He smiled across the room to her.

"Say goodbye to your man in uniform," he told her, for the rules stated that a police officer must wear his uniform at all times, on and off duty, and he could never break a rule.

He stripped slowly, removing the issue shirt and the heavy trousers and watching himself in the oval mirror that had been Emma's pride and joy. He remembered her standing there in her favourite cream dress, twirling slowly to admire herself and smiling at him over her shoulder. He remembered the echo of her laughter and the way her eyes had crinkled at the corners whenever she saw him coming.

He remembered . . . no. He must not; it was time for duty, not self-gratification. Mendick blocked the images and instead saw himself in the glass. He watched as the policeman, the very guardian of respectability, slowly disappeared and somebody else took his place. For an instant he saw a naked man standing there, just tall enough to edge into the police force, too slim to be muscular, with a scar to remind him of the wound that had nearly cost him his life and hair as black as Lucifer, and then he hauled on the moleskin trousers and the image altered.

“God save us, Emma, for nobody else ever will.”

The shirt was next, surprisingly soft against his skin, and finally he pulled the fustian jacket over his shoulders. An impoverished working man stared back at him. He eased on the boots, working his feet against the harsh leather, knowing that the heels would rub his skin and the soles would raise blisters, but not caring. And there he was, a budding Chartist, eager to wage political war on the British state and already hating the image he presented.

Lifting the packet of documents, Mendick removed a single foolscap sheet. It had the name *Kersall Moor, Manchester*, the date 2nd December 1847 and the words *Chartist Rally: infiltrate and join the cause*. Just that: simple instructions that could put him in as much danger as his military service ever had. Sighing,

he crushed up the paper and threw it on the dead embers of the fire. He swore softly and took a last look into the room and its poignant memories.

He shrugged; what did it matter if he was wearing a fustian jacket, a police uniform or the scarlet jacket of the queen? Physical Force Chartists? They did not even count beside the loss of his wife.

“Good bye, Emma,” he said to the silhouette, “I’ll be back to see you as soon as I can.”

He softly closed the door behind him then strode to the railway train that would take him north.

