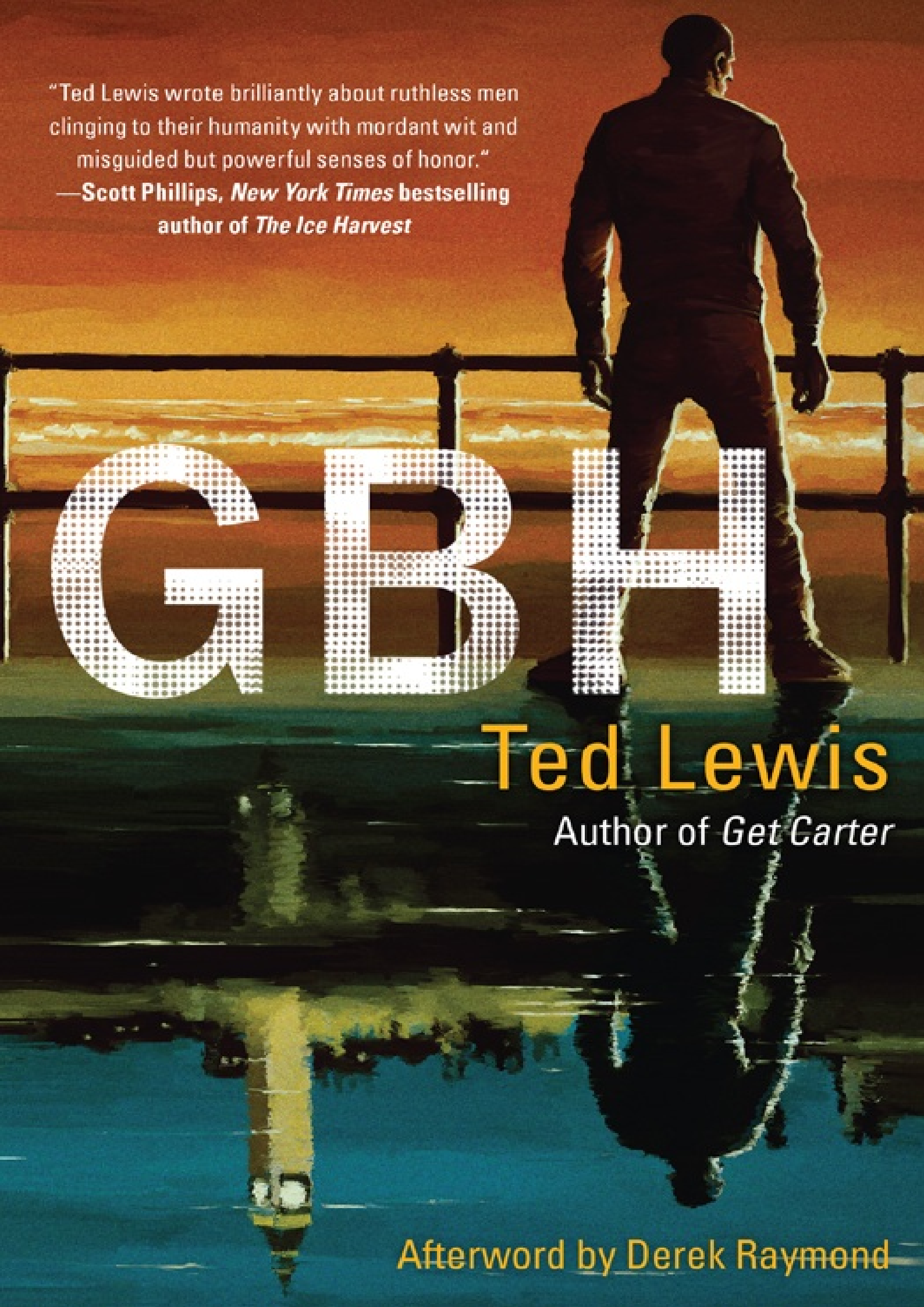


"Ted Lewis wrote brilliantly about ruthless men clinging to their humanity with mordant wit and misguided but powerful senses of honor."

—Scott Phillips, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Ice Harvest*



GET BURN

Ted Lewis

Author of *Get Carter*

Afterword by Derek Raymond

ALSO BY TED LEWIS

Get Carter

Jack Carter's Law

Jack Carter and the Mafia Pigeon

GBH

Ted Lewis



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Afterword

G.B.H.

1861. Section 18. Offences Against the Person Act:

“Whosoever shall unlawfully and maliciously by any means whatsoever wound or cause any Grievous Bodily Harm to any person ... with intent ... to do some ... Grievous Bodily Harm to any person, or with intent to resist or prevent the lawful apprehension or detaining of any person ... shall be liable to ‘imprisonment only’ ... for life.”

Amended 1967, Section 10 (2), Schedule 3.

THE SEA

A DRY LIGHT WIND ripples softly across the coastal plain, murmuring round the bungalow's corners, bound for the sanddunes and the shuddering brittle grass.

From the bed, I stare through the window and watch some shreds of cloud pass luminously across the face of the moon. The clouds move on and the moon is solitary once more, its brilliance sharply defining the bedroom's details. A mile away, the sea is subdued as it tumbles on to the flat, hard beach. I look at my watch. It is a quarter to three.

I pick up the handgun off the bedside table and get up off the bed and walk from the bedroom into the large bare L-shaped hall. The moonlight casts the shadow of the open staircase leading to the loft, deep black on the plain linoleum floor. The floor feels unexpectedly warm beneath my bare feet. I walk towards the front door, my approach causing the moonlight to ripple beyond the frosted glass.

I draw back the bolt, unlock the door and open it slightly, quietly. The warm night wind hesitates in the doorway for a moment, then laps over my naked body. For a few moments I remain motionless, then I slowly pull the door until it's fully open. Then I listen.

There is only the soft noise from the shore and the night rustlings from the gorse and the copses and from the hedgeless water meadows that stretch away as far as the horizon. I step forward on to the tiled steps. I look to my left. Three miles away the lights of the gas terminal are brilliantly clear in the night's stillness, like a city centre without any suburbs.

I go back into the bungalow and lock and bolt the door behind me.

In the large lounge, the curtainless windows make it unnecessary for me to switch on the light. I climb the open-tread steps and walk over to the drinks and pour myself a brandy and ginger. I put the gun down on the piano and in the darkness I light a cigarette.

THE SMOKE

SAMMY OPENED THE DOOR, which surprised me, even though he was expecting me. Sammy goes through life as if he's always expecting both barrels. That being so, I'd expected his old lady. And even when he'd clocked it was me and not a different urban gorilla, his squitty little eyes swivelled this way and that, trying to fathom the Hammersmith darkness beyond the relatively large shapes of Jean and myself. What he expected to be backing us up I do not know.

Sammy stepped back and held the door open and Jean and I removed our shadows from the tatty Georgian columns and entered the yellow light that did not do a lot for Sammy's undecorated hall. Nor, when it came down to it, for Sammy's complexion.

"I got rid of Margaret and the kids," he said. "The place is clear."

"That's right, Sammy," I said. As if it wouldn't have been.

Sammy backed along the wall beyond the foot of the staircase, stopped his slithering against the first door on the left.

"I'm here," he said.

"Thanks," I said to him.

Jean looked at me, signalling her opinion of Sammy with an icy smile, and walked through the doorway. I began to follow her, but my progress was arrested more by the expression in Sammy's eyes than by anything of a more physical nature.

"Mr. Fowler," said Sammy, "I got to tell you. I don't like none of this. No way do I like none of it."

I looked at him.

"I just wanted to tell you that," he said, wishing he wasn't having to endorse what he had already said.

"Why?" I asked, and maintained the look and the longer I maintained it the less inclined Sammy was to reply. Relenting I said to him, "You don't have to stay. You can piss off down the boozier. Tell Harry for you to use my slate. Or then again, you can clear off upstairs and watch the match on TV."

"Oh, no. I wouldn't be able to turn the volume loud enough."

"In that case," I said to him, "it's down to the boozier, isn't it?"

A short silence. Then Sammy said, "Yeah. That's what I'll do, Mr. Fowler. I'll nick off down there and take advantage of your kind offer."

As if he'd come to that conclusion all by himself.

"Good," I told him.

I walked through the door and into the room.

Jean was standing by the bay window, lighting a cigarette. The drawn

curtains were hidden behind the blankets which had been hung from the curtain's ruffles. Also as per instructions, the carpet had been turned right back, and on the bare boards in the centre of the room an upright chair stood on its own. Facing the chair was a cheap divan. Next to the divan was a folding card table and on this table was a bottle of scotch, a bottle of vodka, some tonics, some ginger ales, and some glasses. Also on this table stood a table lamp, providing the room's illumination, the central light socket being, for the moment, otherwise engaged. On the floor, next to the folding table, was an aluminium bucket full of water. Next to the bucket, on the floor, was the other equipment.

I clocked all this, and then I looked at Jean, only to find that she was already looking at me. Our gazes, though apparently blank, transmitted our mutual feelings.

In the doorway, Sammy appeared, putting on his overcoat.

"Well," he said, "I'll be on my way then."

We both looked at him.

"I think everything's like what you said."

"Looks like it, Sammy."

"Right then, I'll be off, then."

He paused for a moment, like an amateur dramatic waiting to be cued off stage. Then he disappeared, and there was the sound of the front door closing.

After he'd gone, Jean said, "You think Mickey'll be on time?"

"I'd say so. He put the collar on Arthur at quarter to seven."

Jean looked at her watch. The ash broke from her cigarette and fell to the floor. "I think I'll have a drink while I'm waiting," she said.

I turned to the card table and poured vodka for Jean and scotch for myself. I carried her drink over to her and while I was handing it to her the doorbell rang. Jean didn't look at me as she took the glass from me.

I went out of the room and opened the front door. Immediately in front of me stood Arthur Philips, age early forties, hairstyle late fifties. His open-neck shirt was terylene and the suit Burton modern. Behind Arthur stood Mickey Brice, the yellow light pinpointed in his dark glasses like the eyes of Morlocks.

"Hello, Arthur," I said.

"Mr. Fowler, look—"

"In a minute or two," I told him. "Come inside first."

Behind him, Mickey began to move forward, and when Mickey does that—if you're in front of him—you have no option but to move forward as well, which is what Arthur Philips did. I turned away and Arthur followed me along the hall and into the room. Mickey closed the door behind us all.

"Hello, Jean," Arthur said.

"Arthur," Jean replied.

I stood next to the card table.

"Like a drink, Arthur?"

"Yeah, George. Yeah. I'll have a scotch."

I poured him a scotch.

“Anything with it?”

“No, thanks. As it comes.”

I handed him his drink.

“Thanks.”

He knocked off half of it in one go.

“Want to sit down, Arthur?”

Now Arthur was no longer able to avoid looking at the solitary chair.

“Look, Mr. Fowler, I shouldn’t be here at all. Not at all. There’s nothing I can tell you.”

Mickey Brice went over to the chair and shifted it a couple of inches, underlining the point of my request to Arthur. Arthur knocked off the remainder of his scotch and went and sat down. Mickey Brice remained standing behind the chair. From his new vantage point, Arthur now had a better view of the accessories that lay beside the aluminum bucket.

“Why don’t you start by giving us what you can?” I said, refilling his glass.

Again, Arthur swallowed the first half.

“You know what I can tell you.”

“Why not tell us again?”

Jean walked over to the card table and topped herself up. Arthur breathed in deeply.

“Well. Of course, I know all about the job, I mean. There was Lenny White, Tommy Coleman, Maurice Hutton, Billy McClean. So the job goes right. Well, it would, with them on it, wouldn’t it? And the finance, well, it had to come from you, with that pedigree, right? Your law knows that, and the Heroes, they know it, too. They know who to collar, but of course they can’t, it being Sellotaped up, as always is.”

Arthur punctuated his monologue with another belt of scotch.

“But the Heroes pull in Tommy Coleman anyway, and it’s not just for show because they roll out two witnesses contradicting the time and location of Tommy’s fairy tale. So he’s still down there and him and the Heroes are still talking to each other.”

“Which leads us to suppose?”

“Well, whoever the convener is, it’s got to be one of the workers. Somebody what knows what the rest of the community knows.”

“That’s right. So why should one of the workers want to speak out against the union?”

Nothing from Arthur except silence.

“Arthur?”

“Well, one of the Heroes could go to one of the workers in the way they sometimes do, and say to the worker, look, I know you weren’t on that job, but it was your *kind* of job, and you know who was on it, and if I wanted to, I could fit you up for being on the job you weren’t on, so how about it?”

There was no response from any of us. Arthur broke the silence by downing the remains of his drink.

“Give Arthur another one, Mickey,” I said.

Mickey took the glass from Arthur's hand and as he walked to the card table he brushed against the wires that hung down from the central light socket. They swayed towards Arthur. He leant away from them as though they were poisonous snakes about to strike. Which, in a manner of speaking, they were.

Mickey gave Arthur his glass back.

"Well, that's what you told Mickey previously," I said. "Which is fair enough, because I said you could do that. But now I'd like to hear a different story."

"I can't tell you anything else," Arthur said, looking into my face. "Honest."

"You haven't got a different story?"

Arthur shook his head.

"Pity."

I went over to the drinks and poured myself another one. The silence in the room was terrific. I splashed ginger ale on top of the whisky.

"Take your pants off, Arthur."

"Mr. Fowler," Arthur said, "I'm straight up. Honest I am."

"Do it for him," I told Mickey.

"Listen—"

Mickey cut Arthur's sentence short by going to work on him. When I turned round from the table Arthur's trousers and underpants were round his knees. Mickey took the glass from Arthur's hand and put it back on the card table and then he picked up the short strands of rope from next to the bucket and tied Arthur's ankles to the chair legs and his arms behind the chair back. After he'd done that Mickey moved the bucket a little closer to where Arthur was, causing a few drops of water to jump over the bucket's rim and slop down on to the bare floorboards. Then Mickey taped Arthur's mouth shut with some gauze and plaster.

"We'll give it a go with the gag a couple of times, Arthur," said Mickey Brice. "You'll scream, and you'll want us to take it off so we'll be able to hear you scream and tell Mr. Fowler what he wants to know. But we won't do that at first. Like I say, we'll give it a couple or three goes so you can get used to it."

Mickey took his gloves from his pocket and put them on, then gathered the dangling wires to him, taking hold of them not quite at their naked ends. I was suddenly conscious of Jean's perfume as she moved very quietly to stand by my side. Now the games were over.

THE SEA

EVEN JEAN DOESN'T KNOW about the bungalow.

Didn't know.

It's been in existence for seven years. Nobody in the area knows who it belongs to. Not even the builder, nor the agent I went through. Of course there was a name on the cheques they got, nice cheques that encouraged them to comply with my specifications and furnishings and deadlines. I've only been here four times since it was built, which in a way is a pity; it's really very nice indeed. And when I'm not in residence, the arrangement is that the agent takes care of its maintenance. When I am, a phone call tells him not to, and another phone call reactivates him when I've gone.

In the specifications the safe was naturally of extreme importance, as was the cellar. Over the phone the agent once asked jokingly, when he was informed of the cellar's specifications, if I knew something about the state of détente the President of the United States didn't. I didn't mind him having his little joke. But I did tell him that I considered the amount of money he was being paid entitled me to the rights in his material. After that he maintained a seriousness appropriate to the business in hand.

From the outside, the place doesn't look much, what you can see of it beyond the remains of the copse. There are two bedrooms. The lounge runs the whole length of the house, the side that faces east, looking over the lumpy flatness of the gorse and the mild ripples of the sand dunes beyond and the unseen lapping of the sea made distant by the enormous expanse of unmarked sand that stretches a quarter of a mile from the dunes before it is troubled by the sea's first overlap. All this seen and unseen is witnessed through a window of dimensions similar to the one in the Penthouse. Only the aspects are different.

When you walk into the lounge, this window is to your left, but its sill, if you are of average height, about a foot above your eye level. But then when you cross the room's first space and climb the broad open-tread staircase to the room's second, broader level, the base of the window is level with the welts of your shoes, if you're wearing any. Academic, really. After the builders had gone home, myself apart, only the agent and the agent's man had ever set foot in the place.

Now, from this new elevation, you would be able to glimpse, beneath the soaring eastern light, the sea, made narrow by the preceding breadth of flatness of gorse and beach. And having gained the room's higher level, at the room's far end, you would be faced by brickwork, wall to wall, ceiling to floor and, in this wall, a small open fireplace, aluminium trimmed. The only other

break in this wall's deliberate monotony is a four-foot-by-three-foot painting by Allan Jones and a narrow cupboard door beyond which is a trolley that supports two movie projectors, a sixteen-millimetre and an eight-millimetre. Ranged close to this wall, almost huddled around the fireplace in deference to the impression of coldness caused by the room's lengthy perspectives, is most of the room's limited furniture, low and comfortable. The wall on the right of the room is covered by a shelving unit, which extends from the brick wall to the edge of the drop down into the room's lower level. Apart from a couple of hundred books which, despite the central heating, provide the room's only impression of concentrated warmth, this shelving also supports the drinks supply, the TV and the stereo unit with all its records and tapes. Just in front of this shelving unit is a jet-black grand piano parked almost at the brink of the drop into the lower level and directly beneath the room's raised level is the bungalow's garage, at present housing an unostentatious Marina.

On the brick wall, close to where it converges with the shelving unit, is a small panel of switches, one of which operates the movie screen that slides down from the ceiling if you want it to.

At the moment, I don't want it to.

I climb the open-tread stairs and go over to where the drinks are and pour myself a scotch and look at Jean's photograph, which I'd forced myself to take from my briefcase and place on the piano a couple of days before.

Up until now, I've avoided looking at it, just as I'd put off taking it out of the briefcase.

The photograph is one I'd taken a few years ago, on our honeymoon, the first time she'd seen the villa in Minorca. She'd been standing by the edge of the pool naked, poised for diving in, and I'd called her name, causing her to turn, but she had already too much momentum from the intended dive and I'd snapped the shutter just as she was going into the point of no return between the edge of the pool and the water. Her laugh is frozen in the warmth of the Spanish sunlight.

I take a drink of my scotch and then stop looking at the picture and walk over to the window and look at sunshine of a different kind as the March wind blusters across the broadness of the sky and the sea beneath.

THE SMOKE

IN THE LIFT UP to the Penthouse, Jean was quiet and tense. She held on to me as if I provided some kind of stabilising quality, as though I was supporting her against some form of vertigo. Although there was no longer any need to discuss what Arthur had told us, the course of action cut and dried and needing only implementation, the silence was not for lack of subject matter; in fact just the opposite. Perhaps the expression of our mutual thoughts could not be achieved fully by mere conversation.

The lift stopped, the doors slid softly apart and we stepped out on to the private landing. Below, very faintly, the sounds of the club murmured upwards like the sound of very well-oiled, precision-engineered machinery. Jean still clung on to my arm as we crossed the landing.

Gerry Hatch rose from the landing's only piece of furniture, a sand-coloured hide armchair. He left the copy of *The Ring* behind him on the dimpled seat.

"Mr. Fowler," he said. "Mrs. Fowler."

He took out his own set of keys and unlocked the double doors that opened directly on to the main room of the Penthouse. He closed them behind us and went back to wait for Ernie Hildreth, the night shift.

I stood just inside the doorway and took off my overcoat. Jean had halted at the top of the steps that led down into the sunken central area of the room, her coat still draped round her shoulders, a negative silhouette against the blackness of the picture window that composed the entire wall opposite her, a window that always seemed a carpark's length away. Lights decorated the rain-speckled glass like paint splashes on an abstract. I joined her at the top of the steps and draped my overcoat over the retaining rail. On the low glass table in the centre of the sunken area, Harold had left salad and a choice of rare beef or chicken, and also champagne.

"You all right?" I asked.

Jean didn't answer. Instead she walked down the steps and sat down in the deepness of one of the long hide sofas that were fitted flush to the area's sides. She sat crouched forward a little as if she had stomach ache, or was cold. The coat was still draped round her shoulders and she stared at the food on the table in front of her.

I walked down the steps and took the champagne from the bucket, flipped the cork and poured some of it into the glasses.

"Your very good health," I said to her.

No response.

"Or should I say to our continuing good health, in view of information received?"

Instead of picking up her glass and drinking, Jean tore one of the legs off the chicken, studying it for a moment before beginning to eat.

I drank my champagne and poured some more. Then I walked over to the phone and lifted the receiver.

“What are you doing?” Jean said.

“Calling Collins. Why?”

“Do it later.”

“You what?”

Jean put the chicken leg down on the table, stood up and walked over to me. Her coat was still round her shoulders and her lips shone with grease from the chicken. She put her hand between my legs.

“Now,” she said.

“I don’t want to miss him.”

Her grip tightened on me.

“No. Do it to me now.”

She was still chewing and a sliver of chicken spilled from the corner of her mouth but neither stopped her from kissing me and putting her arms round my neck and bending her legs so that her dead weight began to overbalance me and tug me down to the floor. I fell on top of her and her legs closed tightly together and then began to slither against me frantically in expectant ecstasy. Her hands almost ripped my zip apart.

“Do it now,” she said. “For Christ’s sake.”

THE SEA

I COME TO THE end of the lane that leads through the gorse to the sand dunes. Then the lane becomes a concrete path that the Ministry of Defence has laid to give access between the dunes to the beach beyond. I automatically read again the sign that warns that if the red flag is flying so is the RAF, strafing the shells of old tanks and army lorries that are dotted around on the beach's vastness. Today the flag is not being flown.

I walk between the dunes, over the slight hillock made by the concrete path, then I descend the mild gradient and now the dunes are behind me and beyond there is only the sea and the beach.

About half a mile to my left one of the rocket-blasted tanks squats like a fly on the edge of a table. I begin to walk across the flat sand towards it. Here there are no ripples in the sand left by the sea's retreat; they don't even begin until a couple of hundred yards from where I am, approximately where the carcass of an old transporter stands, the only object to give scale against the low line made by the joining of the sea and the sky.

As I walk towards the tank, I walk alongside the undisturbed footprints of my journey of the previous day, and the day before that, and as I walk the thoughts I have are the ones that also remain from the previous journeys, and will continue to haunt me.

One of my interests was office equipment. I'd got four shops, and a couple of warehouses. Not one inch of the business smelt. Not one filing cabinet, not one fifty-pence piece. If anybody working in that particular branch of the business had walked in carrying a box of bent carbon paper, he'd have been out on his arse and his cards slung out into the street after him one and a half seconds later. I had two or three businesses like that one.

It was in the London Bridge branch I met Jean. She was one of the workers. Harris was leaving. Paul Edmonds was in charge of the overall business and he promoted Jean and not only because her promotion was strictly in order. It didn't do him any good though because in due course I met Jean and after that he walked around with pennies in his eyes so nobody'd tell me he'd even looked at her.

Of course, it's not like they'd have you believe in the programmes on the box. You don't go down to the nearest watering hole after you've made your first million and tell the first clippie you set eyes on how you got it. Nor do you talk before you make it ... otherwise you don't. Witness all those sad stories you read about in the newspapers where they were dead unlucky not to hang on to their wages for more than five minutes between stretches.

When I met her, Jean was living in Orpington. She had a house there. The

divorce was under way and the house was to be part of the settlement. At the time he was in California wearing flowered shirts and rediscovering his misspent youth in singles bars. He'd said he wanted to be free. He'd played the field before, of course, but that wasn't the same as freedom. They'd married too young, he'd said. When I met her, when we got to talking that way, she told me that she'd never get over him, not ever. They'd loved each other so much it hadn't seemed possible it could have happened, she told me.

Well, that was all right. I wasn't in any particular hurry. She was thirty-three, and time was on my side, not hers. I took her out, the way bosses take out their employees, not giving her the Kilburn Rush. Other more highly paid employees of mine could satisfy my transitory urges, and on office time. As it happened it was three months before I discovered her hair was not its natural colour, and it was two years before she discovered who I was. That was a week before we got married and by that time it didn't matter any more. There had been other difficulties, though.

THE SMOKE

COLLINS CAME ROUND A couple of hours later and he didn't like it. But how could he do the other thing?

He sat down on the sofa, his fat backside causing ripples of contained displacement on the hide's surface. I poured him some of the champagne that was left, then I sat down on the sofa opposite and looked at him. He was as neat and well dressed as ever.

We both drank.

"How's Jean?" Collins asked.

"Fuck that," I replied.

Collins drank some more champagne.

"Why didn't you get in touch before?" I said. "Before all that shit started going down at the station?"

"It was difficult. There was nothing I could do without drawing attention to our relationship."

"Don't do a number on me, Dennis. Everybody down there knows what our relationship is. That's what you're there for."

"That's the point. After Arthur spoke to Farlow they just stood around waiting to see what I'd do. Collar Terry or phone you. They were running a book on it. Whatever they *know*, I had to collar Terry so that justice was seen to be done. Otherwise it would have given Farlow the opportunity to talk to the Commissioner."

I had a few thoughts about Farlow.

"Ever thought about squaring Farlow with us?"

Collins shook his head.

"I don't trust him."

"We could offer him more than the Shepherds do."

"He wouldn't. It's a matter of principle. Besides ..."

"Besides?"

"If he worked for you, either you or him or the both of you might conclude that I was superfluous."

"How could I ever arrive at that conclusion, Dennis? If I ever gave you to the papers you wouldn't leave me out of your memoirs just for old times' sake."

I poured some more champagne.

"When was Farlow expecting Arthur to write it all down and have it Morocco-bound?"

"I don't know. The good thing for us was that they had me fetch Terry in before he got the statements from Arthur and the other two. He was so