

King's Ransom

Laurence Cowley

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About the Author

Laurence Cowley was born in Cardiff in 1946. He will readily admit that he hadn't read a book from cover to cover until his mid-sixties, and even now no more than a few crime novels, so there are no outside writing influences.

'King's Ransom' is his fourth novel.

He is currently working on two new novels as well as a series of children's stories. Laurence says that everyone should attempt writing, it is very therapeutic, but as a story grips you...and often takes over your life...even though it becomes all-consuming, it is very enjoyable, very rewarding and very satisfying.

He believes that his books are not about academic achievement, or clever words, but about the story.

He says that his stories and characters are drawn from a varied work and business career, having worked as a salesperson, a manager, and a director, in more than one company. Having created his own textile business and having owned an up-market 'rosetted' country house hotel for ten years, he has converted many properties, been involved in financing other businesses, and has owned 13 funeral businesses.

He says that he may be called an opportunist or even a risk-taker by friends and acquaintances, but he's alive and kicking to tell the tale.

One small achievement he is very pleased with, which he says he is still 'milking' is that for his 70th birthday, despite suffering from chronic leukaemia, he completed the London Marathon (in 6hrs 20mins) and has the gong to prove it!

As ever to my lovely wife Tricia,
for her never ending patience.



PROLOGUE

At just after seven thirty in the morning, Franklin James was awoken by his secretary, Annette. She sobbed down the phone, informing her boss of the horrendous find in his office as she arrived for work that morning. A body! A dead body! The dead body of a member of parliament. That was over twelve months ago.

His instructions to her were simple. Lock the office. Place a sign on the door saying that the whole office floor was closed until further notice due to ‘emergency maintenance’ (or anything she cared to use as a notice to stop prying eyes). Do not phone the police. In fact, do nothing else until he got there.

The motionless body remained there, cold and stiff, going nowhere. It must have lain on the office floor like a sleeping dog overnight, or most of the way through the night. The police would have to be called. It looked like the poor, unfortunate man had committed suicide. The clues: a spilled glass tumbler, an empty bottle of Gordon’s, and several empty bottles of pills, were a pretty conclusive indication that this man had taken his own life. Heaven knows why. He was an MP no less – a successful government minister. He had property and wealth, a family. What could possibly make him want him to take his own life...unless there was something deeper in the life of Geoffrey Balfour MP. Something that nobody knew about?



CHAPTER 1

At eight o'clock in the morning, Jerry Blake was sat up relaxing in bed. With his pillows plumped up nicely behind him and his lovely Gill bringing their first morning cup of tea, he thought this was definitely the life.

Gill slipped in beside him. Her lovely thick blonde hair falling nicely over her shoulders, revealing her soft warm shape as she leaned over to pass him his favourite mug. They enjoyed the warmth of the moment, just quietly sat sipping their early morning cuppa.

“Jerry, did you pick up that message left on the answerphone for you? Though I don't know why whoever it was couldn't get you on your mobile phone. It didn't say much other than could you ring the number back urgently. It seemed a bit strange to me. I could be mistaken. I thought the voice said it was the mayor. I was still a little dozy when I picked up the message. I only half-listened to the playback.”

Jerry, laid back, stretched out and responded to Gill. “I'm not sure I want to take it. It just sounds as if I'm being offered a new case, and in my mind, I'm winding down to retire from the Met. So, I'm in absolutely no rush to return this call, or any calls for that matter, Gill, my darling sweet girl! I just want to spend the rest of my life quietly enjoying my retirement with you!”

Gill poked Jerry playfully in the ribs and planted a kiss on his cheek. “Jerry, you old flanneller.”

Jerry finished his last sip of tea, swilling it around and draining the dregs from the bottom of the cup. He headed to the bathroom and peered through the mirror into his eyes, reflecting. Having listened to the answerphone message, he shrugged his shoulders and outstretched his arms in a questioning manner, half talking to himself.

“So, you get an urgent message left at your new home by the *Mayor of London*, insisting that you call back without delay. You’ve finally made your decision to retire gracefully with a half-decent pension and start living a more sedate life with the lady of your dreams. Of course, you’re intrigued; who wouldn’t be? So, what’s it all about? Why the urgency? Do you really want to know when you’re happily winding down, after what you believed was your final case?”

He left himself with those thoughts, got dressed, and headed downstairs. He glanced at himself in the mirror as he entered the hall. *Mmm*, he pondered, *I wouldn’t have seen myself in tweeds a year ago.*

He called to Gill, “Gill, sweetheart, I’ll be out with the dogs for the next couple of hours. I’ll have breakfast when I get back. If anyone phones, particularly the mayor, tell him I’ll call back. Thanks, see you later.”

With that, the back door closed, and Jerry headed to the hills for his morning constitutional. The dogs, two Irish Setters, obediently stayed to heel. Jerry took in the fresh, cold, dry air of a Cumbrian morning. The sun, half-risen and intermittently hidden and showing itself between the fast-moving, almost galloping clouds, moved as if playing hide and seek with its worshippers.

Gill was a little bemused. She knew Gordon Goodwin, the local mayor, and wondered what he could possibly want to discuss with Jerry. And why not her? She was on the parish council. Maybe it was a security thing. With Jerry being ex-Met – or almost ex-Met – perhaps Gordon wanted to discuss the matter with him specifically. *Well, I wonder what could be so important, discussed with such urgency and in apparent semi-secrecy?* Having said that, Gordon was also the local funeral director. *But no*, she thought, *he won’t be wanting to talk to Gordon about funerals, will he? Maybe*, she thought to herself, *Gordon wanted to offer Jerry a part-time job as a coffin bearer. Surely not.* She dismissed her thoughts, finished making the bed, and made her way downstairs to begin organising the day’s work for the staff at her, and now her and Jerry’s, 15th Century Country Inn in the heart of Cumbria’s walking country.

Jerry enjoyed his hour-plus long walks on the moors with the dogs. He could completely lose himself in his thoughts. He had never

felt as much at ease in his life as out here on the moors. Even more than that, he enjoyed arriving back at the home he had made with Gill in this wonderful part of the country. He could still hardly comprehend his delight at the way he had settled in here with Gill and the community, which seemed to have taken him in as one of their own.

Jerry whistled to Gill's dogs – the dogs that he had adopted as his own. It was a shrill whistle that was lost in the chill damp air. In the rapidly changing sky, as the clouds moved over the horizon, the sun had decided to stop playing games and retire for the day. It was indicative that an angry breeze began blowing, trying to rustle up a storm against the backdrop of craggy outcrops of rock and thunder-clouded mountains. The dogs came running back obediently, and Jerry attached their leads. As the ensuing greyness started to form and cast out a fine drizzle, he strolled back down the hill through the rocky paths, avoiding windswept clumps of heather barely hanging on to their field positions by their wind-torn roots. After his two-hour hillside recreational round robin, Jerry was looking forward to sinking into a comfortable armchair.

He would never have believed that he could ever adapt to this change in his lifestyle. He had agreed to travel up to Cumbria on secondment to help the local force with the 'Art to Die For' case, but he had surprised himself in this, his happily converted state of complete contentment.

Jerry was London-born and bred. Born within the sound of Bow bells, St. Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London, a true Cockney. From Stratford in the East End to Romford, his first beat, he had lived, worked, and walked in every London borough before going back to work where he was born in the East End. It was a tough place to grow up for any kid. He thought of his home as Stratford; from there, he had worked every job in the city and the East End, anything that an aspiring young copper would want. He'd either worked or been seconded to Camden, Islington, or Hackney, as well as all the southern boroughs of Newham, Southwark, and Lewisham. He'd even had special duties at Westminster, and he had enjoyed every minute of it.

There were one or two bad memories and regrets, something that we all have in life: the car accident in which his wife died, the heavy booze sessions in and around Soho with the other young

officers, many now senior to him, and the 'rap' he took for one of his colleagues, who would have been sacked if not for the fact that Jerry had saved his bacon. But that was all in the dim and distant past.

Now he found himself in the rugged environs of windswept, heather-covered hills, glades, mountain streams, and outbreaks of rock, whistling for two dogs that he hadn't even known six months ago. Yet, here he was in his Barbour hacking jacket, thick brown corduroy trousers, and Timberland hiking boots, his tweed flat cap hiding his normally slicked-back greying locks. He now sported a tall walking stick, holding the V-shaped top firmly between the thumb and the palm of his other hand, as if he had been born with it in his hand to support his bounding about on the hillside like a mountain goat.

But thank God the modern world was still out there. His mobile was a great way of tracking exactly where he was, with its built-in GPS and mapping apps that told him he was no more than three miles from civilisation and a hot toddy when he got back to the pub.

The Three Feathers, where Jerry had been billeted whilst on secondment to the Cumbria Police on his last big case, was one of those lovely little pubs you dream about owning. Nestled at the end of a small village, with a babbling millstream nearby running over rocky outcrops, it was surrounded by trees, hills, and greenery. Old, late 1400s, black and white with original beams, the windows had small leaded lights – some of them bowed outwards with time. Tall red brick chimneys trickled out a spiral of wood smoke. It was one of those places you just had to take a photo of, the kind you'd send to Cadbury's for the cover of their next box of chocolates.

The sun was decidedly sinking into oblivion. It was late morning, and the chill was setting in. He had been out walking far longer than he had planned, lost in wonder at the beauty of the hills and mountains that surrounded him. Jerry's long, chiselled face was stinging as he disrobed his outer clothing in the outhouse, which doubled as a log store at this time of year. The guests, which he affectionately referred to as the punters, expected to have a nice log fire to relax in front of while they sipped their locally brewed ale, their G&Ts, a hot toddy, or a warming mug of hot chocolate. He quickly rubbed the dogs down before letting them into the bar.

The smell of the pine logs was sweet and heady. The scent of the wood smoke circulated around the cosy rooms of the pub, lending a comfortable, familiar, and homely feeling and offering a sense of belonging. He removed his tweed flat cap, placed it on his knees, and ran his fingers through his thick grey hair, sweeping it backward in the style that had grown up with him since his twenties, even if his hair was now slowly thinning.

The last of the summer season guests had checked out, and there was a steady stream of guests now arriving for the autumn and winter. They were coming for the hiking walks and moor tours, ancient monuments, and letterboxing out to Yewdale, Newdale, Long Beck, Holmersdale, Skelmersdale, and all the dales beyond – for the sort of healthy outdoor activities that Gill had nurtured and now traded in, with returning steady and valued clientele.

Jerry was getting used to this way of life, thanks to Gill, the landlady. He had fallen in love with her head over heels, and she with him, hook, line, and sinker. This was while he was working on the now-settled ‘Art to Die For’ case – now gathering dust in his memory. However, the criminal court case was still awaiting a date for the commencement of a multi-trial; one involving several incarcerated rogues, vagabonds, and murderers. It had broken his heart that one of his longest-standing Met mates had been mistaken for Jerry and had consequently lost his life in a case of mistaken identity. There would still be court appearances to follow up on and the giving of evidence, but that was just procedure, and all the hard work had long been completed many, many weeks ago.

His nose was bright red, bristled, and glowed with the warmth drawn toward him from the heat of the fire, which was now starting to take hold in the snug. Jerry added a couple more logs to the crackling, spitting, roaring, and rumbling fire as the draft drew the flames up the twisted chimney above the gnarled timber and charred bricks of the inglenook fireplace.

As the warmth radiated and his body took on the welcome temperature change, Jerry gave a shiver. The dogs scurried straight to the fireplace and curled up, ready for a well-earned rest after giving their new master a good run around the rugged Cumbrian hillsides.

This was the first time in probably the last twenty years that he had felt at home. He poked away at the fire, now taking hold in

the big open hearth. Again, he carefully placed some new logs on the glowing mass of reds, oranges, and blacks, in between the dark curling bark, where delicate blue and green flames flickered and died as quickly as they appeared. Jerry was careful to make sure that the iron rungs of the fireplace kept any logs or large embers from rolling onto the old, gnarled slate hearth and over onto the well-trodden carpets.

Gill was in the kitchen supervising the evening prep for the restaurant, and as they were now just about at the end of the season, Mary the cook and her two assistants were well ahead of the game.

The great thing about a country restaurant is that nothing on the menu really needs a lot of prep on the night. With stews, hot pots, game pies, roasts, and country fare, it's more a case of serving than cooking. All the prep is done during the day, and by the time it comes to serving, it is about taking the food out of the oven and the vegetables out of the steamer. Gill made it sound so easy. It certainly appeared to be a well-oiled machine, and everyone knew how it worked. Clockwork seemed to be the order of the day.

Jerry snuck around the corner and into the kitchen, where Gill was just drying off a couple of large serving spoons. He slipped his arms through the back of hers, just under her elbows and around her waist, and gave her a big hug, kissing her neck and fondling her breasts to her infinite pleasure. She put her head back, feeling Jerry's warm breath, and said in an accentuated Geordie accent, "Here, Bert Kendrick, you're here to deliver milk, not to feel my titties. I'm warning you, my boyfriend Jerry will be after you, and he's the police!"

They both broke out in a giggle as she turned around, and they hugged and briefly kissed, squeezing each other's buttocks like a couple of teenagers. A tittering could be heard from the other end of the galley kitchen from Mary, Annie, and their assistants.

Jerry resisted heading toward the working end of the kitchen, where the smell of Mary's game stew wafted toward his ever-appreciative nostrils and tempted his taste buds, now bristling on his tongue. Before he was further tempted, he headed back to the main bar to check on the fires he had set, both there and in the snug.

He sunk into the big, old, well-worn leather hooded chair,

flexing his back and stretching his legs. Pushing back into the chair alongside the fire, said to have been one of the original fittings in this lovely old establishment – though Gill doubted that somewhat – he reached for his work mobile. He tapped in the access code and checked his messages. Flicking through the endless copies of briefings, training session availability, and vacancies at various levels, he decided that there was nothing much going on. *Thank the lord*, he thought, *maybe they'll let me take the early retirement that I keep hinting at.*

He had pretty much discarded the phone, and his eyes momentarily closed in the warmth of the room, when it started buzzing. He answered, “Jerry Blake.”

“Jerry, my brother Oliver suggested I give you a ring. It’s Franklin James. I’ve recently taken over as London Mayor. I specifically asked him if there were any officers in the Met that I could trust with a delicate subject. I’ve also done some discreet checking of my own, and it seems that you are highly respected at the Met and to be trusted. I didn’t tell him what the subject was; I didn’t want to enlighten him. I just needed to keep this matter ‘in house,’ so to speak.”

“Yes, Mr Mayor. I’ve only just picked up your message, so I apologise for not getting back to you yet,” Jerry replied courteously. “Yes, I know who you are, of course, and your brother Oliver. He and I go back many years; we’ve played a lot of rugby together, and he’s been a good friend to me. So, pray tell, to what do I owe the pleasure of a direct call from a gentleman of your standing?”

“Well, Jerry – you don’t mind if I call you Jerry?”

Jerry was happy, and somewhat prideful, that the recently elected Mayor of London would want to address him by his first name or, for that matter, even knew of his existence.

He answered, “No, sir, not at all. How can I help you?”

The newly elected mayor was hesitant. He was aware that the ‘walls have ears’ and that the matter he was about to discuss, and its introduction to Jerry – even though it was to be only a brief introduction to one of the challenges he faced – was only to be a thumbnail sketch.

“Jerry, it’s a delicate matter that I want to talk to you about, and frankly, I’m not happy discussing it over the phone. I would

really appreciate it if you could come to see me down here in the city so that I can show you some documents and ask you to cast your expert eye on what I believe could potentially be fraud; or how shall I put it... perhaps I should say mis-accounting, malfeasance on a massive scale. Needless to say, with what is at stake here, I don't believe that I can trust the telephone."

"Mr Mayor, I'm intrigued."

The mayor cut in, "It's Franklin; please call me Franklin."

Jerry, ever the professional, replied, "Thank you, sir. Franklin. I will, sir – Franklin. However, as you may know, I've been up here in Cumbria on secondment for several months, and I'm fast heading toward retirement. It was my intention to try settling into this lifestyle – which, I must say, I am doing quite nicely apart from when I get the odd pang and my mind finds itself drifting in and out of some of my favourite taverns and watering holes in the East End. But hey, I think that's just withdrawal symptoms or pangs, or withdrawal pangs, you might say!"

Franklin cut in. "Jerry, I am the Mayor of London, so I trust that you understand that for me to be telephoning you, this matter is quite disturbing – or perturbing, to say the least. It is so much so that I am phoning you myself. This is how much importance I place on this matter and how I regard your reputation. You're one of the very few people I could entrust with getting to the bottom of something that could bring down the government."

We have already been through this sort of nightmare some years ago, and no one would want to see a repeat of that again – apart from the opposition, maybe. I'm sure they would like to see another government collapse so that they could win a new election. That's another matter. Bearing that in mind, it also has the potential to devalue the respect we have for our high-standing values around the world, which we would never want compromised.

To this end, I am working with the Prime Minister, and there are very few people in this privileged, very tight circle. I trust that I now make myself clear on how much importance I'm placing on your shoulders and how valued you are.

Jerry was both flattered and bemused. He had absolutely no inkling of what the newly elected Franklin James was hinting at or what underlying clouds there were on the horizon, or even the

grapevine. There was no intelligence coming out of London that Jerry knew of which would warrant such an important call. Nothing. Not a glimmer. Not a bubble and squeak.

Franklin James had delivered an impassioned soliloquy and presented it to Jerry as a *fait accompli* – something for him to take up the baton and run with. Not a lot of choice. At any other time, Jerry would have done just that: picked up the baton, briefed his team, and gotten on with the job in hand. No problem, just a touch of the ‘titfer,’ a nod, and a by your leave, before going off and running. But times were a-changing; Jerry was settling down, he loved it up here with his newfound love, Gill – the lovely, lovely Gill. Nice pub, nice home, nice life. Why disturb things? Why disrupt what they had built up these last several wonderful months?

“Franklin, I hear what you’re saying, and I’m flattered, but I’m not sure that I want to go back down to town. It really is time for me to retire gracefully.”

The mayor cut in again quite abruptly.

“Jerry, I’m sorry; perhaps I haven’t made myself clear. I’m not taking no for an answer. This can be your last job, and I will ensure that you are handsomely rewarded for helping out here. You’re the chap I want on the job, and it’s you I must have.”

Now, what I’d like you to do is speak to your lovely lady – Gill, you say – and tell her that you have been offered something that you are unable to turn down as it is of national importance and for the good of the country. As far as your reward is concerned, I will ensure that your rank is lifted to the most senior rank within detection, and all those benefits will automatically follow. Now, do I have your support? Can I rely on you as I have been led to believe?”

“Mr Mayor – Franklin. I think I get the gist. I will need to speak to my fiancée, Gill, and let her know that I have one more job to do before retirement. I’m sure she will be okay with that. May I ring you in a couple of days, sir – say, Monday morning after this coming weekend?”

“Yes, of course, Jerry. Monday. Monday morning then, Jerry, no later. I look forward to speaking to you. Thank you.”

With that, the phone went dead, and Jerry wondered whether he had just had a bad dream. He checked his mobile. Number withheld. Twenty-five-minute call. No number to ring back on. *But*

what the hell, he thought, I'm a detective; I'll soon find that out.

The weekend flew by. The pub was as busy as ever, with walkers taking advantage of the improving weather forecast. Coffee and bacon sandwiches were the order of the day – before the small army of walkers began their treks across the rugged hills all around them and back again sometime in the diminishing light for tea and scones on the return journey; and several hours later, a place by the burning embers of the fire in the pub's cosy and welcoming bar. Sometimes even a hot toddy or hot chocolate would be the order of the day, depending upon how chilled to the bone the returning walkers had become.

The late afternoons soon turned into early evenings, with hot pots, stews, and warm fare being served with hot toddies, mulled wine, and local ales. Jerry was pleased to be immersed in his new way of life: helping Gill run this delightfully busy establishment. The weekend flew by, and suddenly it was 8am Monday morning.

Jerry really hadn't had a chance to talk to Gill about the conversation he had had with the new mayor, and the time when he had promised to return the mayor's call with his decision was pretty much upon him. Gill had returned to their bedroom with their usual cup of tea. This was now the only opportunity to talk to her, and talk he must.

Jerry managed to dress up and summarise what he felt was a commitment he couldn't wriggle out of, but he had assured Gill that it was only to be a short assignment. Then they could get on with their lives. Gill was not ecstatic, particularly as Jerry's life had been threatened in his last case. He was obviously targeted, and that was taken seriously, even though Jerry had shrugged it off. Instead, one of his oldest pals was murdered in his place – through mistaken identity. Gill was reticent but accepting. She realised that Jerry had always played an important role at the Met, and here was one last job he felt he had to take on, particularly as it had come from such an exalted office.

Jerry tucked himself into his favourite armchair in the snug. The fire was just starting to crackle from the kindling he had thrown on and the embers that still glowed from last night's roaring fire.

He dialled the mayor's office in the city. The call was

transferred to the mayor.

“Jerry, thank you for phoning. I appreciate your call. Now, tell me, have you been able to extract yourself from your home situation for a while?”

“Yes, Mr Mayor, I have, but with some reluctance. However, I am happy to meet up with you to discuss the matter in more detail. But there are one or two requests I have as part of my coming down to work on this case for you.

“In particular, I would like to bring my colleague DS Rob Wilton, with whom I worked on my last major case up here in Cumbria. Not only did I find him invaluable in his application and processing of facts, but he is also a wholly trustworthy, honest, and reliable individual with whom I can work.

“If, as you say, I am to be dealing with highly sensitive information, documentation, and proceedings, then I would like to be able to work from an office within your headquarters in SW11. It would be my intention to also partially rehome myself at Met HQ, where I still have an office. This will give me flexibility of movement. I am currently without a vehicle, as my Audi was written off in a chase across the Cumbrian hillsides, pursuing the remnants of Lord Freddie De Vere’s bunch of Russian villains. It makes sense to me to have a vehicle that is on your account, so that there is no accountability of movement with the Met carpool systems.

Last but not least, my flat in Romford is let out on a long lease, so I will require some sort of accommodation, ideally not too far from your building on Northcote Road. And, if the budget permits, given that I may have to entertain, then something with some space and quality. That makes sense to me – perhaps with a view of the river. That would be a bonus for me working back in town. Yes, that would be very nice.

Otherwise, I am happy to work with you, and, provided that I can free up DS Wilton from his duties, we will be on the 7:05am train from Carlisle tomorrow morning.”

Franklin James had listened patiently to Jerry’s requests.

“Jerry, okay, I think I know where you’re coming from, and I think I can accede to those requests without too much trouble. Not sure about river views...you are talking serious money for even renting, but I feel that, given the enormity of this inquiry, I am sure

that I can deliver for you. I know that I have a new Range Rover due to come into my pool, so I will ask the dealer to allocate that to you and possibly put it into your personal ownership. If anyone is checking, it will look like your vehicle, and they won't trace it to my mayoral office.

Finally, one more thing to try my patience: I have a city reporter sniffing around, and it's very distracting. There was an incident in these offices some months ago, and I can't get rid of this bloody woman reporter. Her name is Rebecca Lawlor – you'll see some of her articles in the Evening Standard and the Metro. Just keep a lookout for her; she's very adept at chasing a good story. Once these people get a smell of something, they're like rabid dogs with a freshly stripped, juicy bone. I need to get this tied up and out of my hair as soon as possible. I'm sure you know where I'm coming from."

Jerry thanked Franklin James for not creating any barriers or excuses as to why he could not deliver these requests and thanked him for his trust. He and Rob Wilton, who was still employed as a senior detective by the local constabulary and was, in effect, still a working copper, would be on the train to Euston in the morning.



CHAPTER 2

At 10:35am the Carlisle train pulled into London's Euston Station. En route, Jerry had asked for a car to meet him and Rob Wilton at Euston to take them to the mayor's office in Battersea, just off the river.

Both detectives had only brought overnight bags, not knowing what arrangements the mayor's office may have made for them. Jerry suspected that a hotel might be the order of the day for the next few days. However, on arrival at the mayor's offices, an assistant handed Jerry an envelope with a set of property details and keys. The assistant had organised a car to be available on Jerry's arrival. It awaited them at the front of the offices in the private car park and was ready to take them to their new temporary address.

The short journey took them around the river, across the South Circular towards Wandsworth Bridge, along the South Bank, and into Wharf Villas, Chelsea End View, and stopped at their destination.

"Wow," Jerry exclaimed as they alighted from the mayor's staff black Jaguar.

The driver had handed Jerry an envelope with an address, keys, and code instructions for the building.

"Wow," echoed Rob as the glass lift slipped smoothly and silently up the side of the building, stopping almost at the top of this magnificent building that was to be their home for the next few weeks.

"Stunning," Jerry exclaimed again as they opened the door to the spacious luxury apartment, with its breathtaking views across the river to Chelsea and beyond.

"Well, all I can say is we must be worth it. I really am looking forward to seeing his worship, the mayor, this afternoon to see what this really is all about.

Rob, I suggest you choose a bedroom and phone your Mrs, while I phone Gill to let her know we've arrived safely and that I'll ring again this evening."

"Sure thing, Jerry. I'll do that, then maybe we can go and get a coffee and a sandwich."

"By the way, Rob, did you notice that we were followed by two men in a Mercedes from where we were picked up outside Euston?"

"Surely not, Jerry. Who knew we were here?"

"Who indeed, Rob. I think we need to be extra vigilant when we leave our accommodation from now on."

"Sure thing, Jerry. Noted."

In London, along the riverfront, or almost anywhere in the metropolis, you are never more than a few minutes from an eatery or a pavement café – or, for that matter, even an ice cream vendor. However, this area of the river wasn't really a tourist destination. Jerry and Rob wandered out of the building, nodding to the concierge, and made their way along the embankment a few metres to a smart-looking coffee house aptly named The Riverside, with its shabby chic grey-painted metal tables and chairs, and its matching grey awning just rippling in the light breeze. The detectives ordered coffee and a couple of prawn mayo sandwiches on wholemeal bread, enjoying these before they hailed a cab to take them back around to Northcote Road for their arranged briefing with the mayor.

Upon arrival at Mayoral House, the detectives were taken through security and then into a side office. They were issued electronically operated security passes and swiped for entry. They were briefed on security drills and briefly on fire drills, as were all visitors to the building. They then passed through a further manned check and entered the lift, taking it up to the penthouse floor and the mayoral suite, where they were greeted warmly by Franklin James.

The suite was open and spacious, with heady views toward the river and way beyond.

"Gentlemen, come in. Please take a seat."

The mayor sat at a sprawling modern light wooden desk with half a dozen phones on it, as well as PCs with several computer screens. There was a large TV screen on the wall and several CCTV

screens set up in a bank showing various angles of the building. There were comfortable armchairs and a couple of leather sofas facing the big desk, and to one side of the room, a large divider, partly opened, showed a large conference table with up to thirty chairs set around it. There was a wall of soft palm tree plants, some with exotic-looking colourful centres and foliage.

People buzzed in and out of this palatial office with bits of paper and files, placing these in trays on desks, answering the odd telephone call, or asking the mayor to sign a piece of paper every now and again.

Franklin ushered the two detectives into an adjoining room and pushed the heavy dark wood door firmly shut, instructing an assistant not to disturb him for ten minutes or so before he firmly closed the door and turned the key.

He beckoned his visitors to be seated and continued to apologise for the amount of security procedures that he had made them endure. He bent over and knelt at a bureau, pulled a key from his waistcoat pocket, and unlocked a bottom drawer. He produced a faded pink folder thick with papers, notes, letters, and headed paper, with crests representing several countries, and placed it on the coffee table in front of them.

“Gentlemen, this is where I want you to start. You may work in this office. It has this adjoining door, and you can see at the far end of the room, as well as this door to the suite, it has the other door which opens onto the corridor.

I will let you have both sets of keys so that it is totally secure. You can be completely self-sufficient here and fully manage your work. The PC is live, and I have recently had these two phones installed. This will enable you to work unhindered and go about your investigations as you please.

I will let you study the papers here, and we will meet again tomorrow when you have had a chance to understand the magnitude of the task. Now, if you need me, I will be next door for the next couple of hours. In a few more days, I shall be away for a week on foreign visits, meeting my counterparts in France, Spain, Portugal, and Israel.

Do you have any questions at this juncture? If you don't, then I shall leave you to it. And once again, gentlemen, I can't thank you enough for taking on this task. I cannot stress enough the need for

secrecy.”

His final words were to, under no circumstances, let those files leave this office.

At that, the detectives, having said no more than a hello and a goodbye, Franklin James hurriedly left the room to return to the hive of activity that was the mayoral office.

It would be fair to say that at this stage, Jerry and Rob were a little shell-shocked by the whirlwind introduction to this case. They had been left to glean the details from a large file of papers, which looked as if they might take several days of reading, and were forbidden to take them out of the room.

The detectives started shuffling through the papers from the file, trying to put them into some sort of date order when there was a knock on the door. Jerry opened the door, and an attractive, though mousy-looking, woman asked if she could be of any help, offering the visitors coffee or some mineral water. She said her name was Annette.

Annette was around five-foot-four, attractive in that she had a trim figure, shown off by a medium-length grey pleated skirt and a white semi see-through blouse buttoned to the point where her white underwear was just showing. Her hair was tied back in a simple ponytail, and she was wearing red and black-rimmed glasses. Her pleasant legs were dressed in shiny sheer stockings, which fitted nicely into short black court shoes.

The chaps accepted a tray of coffee as well as some sparkling mineral water. These were duly delivered, and the door was closed and the key turned, per the mayor’s instruction regarding security.

Jerry had decided that the best way to make a good start on these papers was to kick it into touch for the night, go and have a Guinness and a good night’s sleep, and start on them early in the morning. Rob agreed.

At seven o’clock that evening, Jerry’s mobile rang.

“Jerry, you old slapper, you’re back in town and you haven’t been in touch. And don’t say you’re not in town, ’cause someone saw you at Euston getting off the train. So, what’s up, buddy? Why haven’t you been to see us?”

Jerry immediately recognised the voice of a long-term colleague and very special, old, and trusted friend.

“Smithy, sorry matey, but you’ve got to give me a chance. I came down on some personal business; I was going to look in on you at the Yard tomorrow.”

“Jerry, come on, personal business – then why did you bring DS Wilton with you?”

“Smithy, mate, don’t get carried away. We are down to tidy up some paperwork from the last case, the ‘Art to Die For’ case, we called it. DS Rob Wilton is with me as it was his case. Nothing sinister in that, is there? So, get a grip, stop playing detective, and we’ll look into seeing you tomorrow after we’ve seen the DPP.”

That evening, both Rob and Jerry slept well, particularly after the long train journey and several hours of trying to make sense of the pile of papers that had been handed to them. Their curiosities couldn’t resist taking the briefest of looks at the pile of pink files handed to them by the mayor.

The following day, Jerry and Rob swiped their cards and passed security without a blink of an eye. On arrival at the mayoral reception area, the mayor’s assistant, Annette, handed Jerry a brown envelope, which he placed in his dark blue leather briefcase.

They alighted from the lift on the penultimate floor and walked the short corridor to their new operating base. Jerry took off his white silk scarf and dark blue Crombie, with its lighter blue velvet collar, and hung them on the hook behind the door he had just walked through. Jerry was immediately aware that the coffee tray, delivered yesterday afternoon, had been removed from their ‘secure’ office.

He unlocked the adjoining door to the mayor’s team’s office and gestured to Annette to come over. Jerry asked her for an explanation.

“Oh, I’ve always had a key, ever since that minister locked himself in and took his own life with an overdose here. The mayor thought that someone ought to, just in case it happened again.”

“Well, Annette, I don’t think you’ll be needing the key again for a while, so I’ll take that, thank you. By the way, what was the minister’s name?”

“It was Geoffrey Balfour.”

Jerry enquired further, “And as to his role and why he would be visiting these offices?”

Annette nervously replied, “He was head of the Department of Finance, with a secondary role in Foreign Affairs, and involved with the department that looked after Crown property transactions. I helped him occasionally with the staffing of special receptions and functions. I use an agency that supplies, shall we say, well-educated hostesses and waiting staff. It seems like only a few months ago, but it’s all been hushed up. We were asked not to say anything to anyone, in case the press got the wrong end of the stick before the internal inquiry was completed.”

Jerry was courteously grateful.

“Thank you, Annette. I wasn’t aware of that, and thank you for telling me.”

At that, Annette reluctantly handed back the key and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Rob started to shuffle through the papers they had started on yesterday, sorting them sequentially in date order, then alphabetical order, and then looked at the correspondence, so far going back up to three years. Jerry had opened his briefcase and torn open the brown envelope that had been handed to him on arrival at City Hall. He called to Rob at the other end of the office.

“Rob, get your coat, matey, we’re off.”

“To where, Jerry?”

“Mayfair.”

“And?”

“To collect our new transport.”

The boys left City Hall, headed to Mayfair and the Land Rover main dealers. Franklin James had come up trumps. After a few formalities, Jerry drove out of the dealership in a brand-new Range Rover Sport. It was metallic black, with a black leather interior, and all the whistles and bells you could wish for – including front and rear dash cameras, ostensibly for parking, but a very useful tool to have on board at times of need.

“I think we’ll do our duty and go and see my old colleagues at Scotland Yard; we’re only ten minutes or so away. What do you think?”

“Okay, Jerry, you’re the boss. Besides, that might be an ideal time to ask about that unresolved suicide at City Hall.”

“Yes, my man, let’s go – and don’t spare the horses.”

Jerry trundled through the fairly light London mid-morning traffic, taking in the feel and handling of his new motor: the smell of the leather, the new carpets, how to adjust the electric seats as they travelled, and the mystery of all the gadgetry – the Sat Nav and all the other switches. He arrived at Scotland Yard just before midday and flashed his badge at gate security; having known the bobby on the gate for about twenty years, getting in was never going to be a problem. He parked as discreetly as he could, knowing that there would be someone looking down from one of the windows above them.

Jerry and Rob took the elevator up to the fifth floor to the offices of the Serious Fraud Squad – Jerry’s domain, greeted by many old pals and colleagues. Detective Chief Superintendent Sam Smith, one of his oldest buddies, was pleased to see him.

“Jerry, you’re back, mate. I thought you said you were in love and that you were going to retire and run a pub up in the Cumbrian Mountains or something like that. Why are you here then, matey? Not only that, but you’ve obviously brought an assistant with you. We did hear that you had a DS with you – what’s up, buddy?”

Jerry felt duty-bound to fill in some brief details for his old pal, with whom he had worked on and off for twenty years.

“Well,” Jerry began cautiously, “firstly, we’re down here tidying up the last case for the DPP, which is why Rob is with me. Secondly, I’ve cashed in one of my smaller pensions and come to collect the new dream car I’d always promised myself. Thirdly, our old rugby pal Oliver asked me to speak to his brother Franklin, the new mayor, about some irregularities with banking within his empire.

Nothing special, just a bit of routine detective work, you know, the tedious kind: checking, cross-checking, and re-checking banking records and the like. So, I agreed to do that for a few weeks on a short contract until I retire next spring, maybe summer. Right now, I’m playing it by ear. Can’t be bad – hey, it’s nice to know someone still wants me.

However, we have been instructed by Mayor Franklin that this checking of records has to be handled very quietly, as it may be highly explosive in its potential findings. So, I am swearing you to absolute silence – not even a single dickie bird to anyone, please! I trust that you understand the privileged position I am placing on

your head and the importance of the information I am making you aware of and might need your help with.”

“Fair enough, matey. Well, if there’s anything my department or my boys can help you with, just give me a yell.”

“Well, Smithy, as it happens – now you mention it – Rob here is curious about an incident that happened a few months ago at City Hall. It seems that a minister topped himself by taking an overdose in the mayor’s office. No one would talk to us over there when we mentioned it, and frankly, I don’t think it’s that significant, as I didn’t ever hear anything about it. Anyway, it was just a passing interest as far as we are concerned.”

DC Supt. Smith replied, lighting just a glow of interest. “Yes, I remember it. We looked at the case. He did manage to top himself. At the time, I said it needed further investigation, but it was taken off me and put down to a suicide and hushed up. There was a quiet by-election, and a new MP was installed, as I recall. Sounded like a word game we used to play when I was at school. Ah, those were the days. A new Minister was appointed. Lexington was his name. Minister for ‘foreign affairs’ of some description. Part of it was financial, funding various overseas projects, if I remember correctly. Anyway, Balfour’s death was hushed up and written off as a suicide.”

Rob, intrigued, asked whether he might get sight of the file and papers.

“Yes, young man, I’ll dig them out of storage for you, and if you let me have your address while you’re here, I’ll have a driver bring them over. How’s that?”

“Excellent, thank you, sir.”

Jerry hesitated.

“Well, actually, no. I will be back and forth over here, and if a driver knows where I am, I will have all the boys over wanting all-night drinking sessions, and I’m past all that. So, let’s keep it low profile. I know I can count on you. Is that okay?”

“Okay, Jerry, you’re the boss. I’ll have the papers lifted from records by noon tomorrow. How’s that, DS Wilton?”

Rob, still not quite sure how to address this senior officer, answered, “Yes, sir. That’s good. Thank you.”

Having now established a base within DCS Sam Smith’s offices, Jerry felt reasonably comfortable about traversing from

City Hall to Scotland Yard, having spun sufficient of a story to cover his movements.

He and Rob drove back across town to their grand digs at Chelsea View. Despite the mayor saying that the papers they had been handed should not leave that office, Jerry had placed them in his ample briefcase so that they could be studied back at the flat at their leisure.

A steak and a bottle of red were on the cards for that evening, perhaps a nice Chinon, or a Côtes du Rhône, maybe even a jolly Rioja. Jerry would try out his newfound love of cooking and, let's face it, cooking steak and chips was no big deal for him now that he had bought a share in a country pub.

Upon their relatively early return, the boys dutifully phoned their respective partners and decided to set to on the big pink file, still without a lot of clues as to where they were going with it.

Early Wednesday morning, Jerry's phone began buzzing. He answered.

"Jerry Blake."

"Jerry, it's Smithy. I might have something for you."

"Okay, Smithy, go on."

"It's a body!"

"Yes, Smithy, and why is this for me, given that I'm not on Met business down here?"

"Well, yesterday we were talking about a finance minister topping himself, and I think we may have a link for you. The stiff is a pretty young thing, dark hair, mid-twenties I'd say, and in her handbag, amongst other things, is a Member of Parliament's business card. And guess what, matey, he's involved in finance. Maybe it's just a coincidence, but I thought you'd like to know."

"Cheers, Smithy, might be worth a look at. Where is she? I'd like to see the body."

"Well, that's easy, she's just about under your window, just down from Wandsworth Bridge. She washed up with the tide. I've literally just got down here, but my boys say it looks like suicide. Having said that, I can't remember a jumper going off a bridge with her handbag intact, can you?"

Just get down to the river; you'll see the tent. The body didn't get far; it washed up on the sandbank. It must have been put in the

water at fairly low tide to only get as far as Millbank, just in front of Plantation Quay, about a hundred metres or so from the bridge.”

“Cheers, Smithy, we’re on the way.”

Jerry finished the remainder of a cold cup of coffee and beckoned to Rob to don his tweed coat. It looked pretty damn cold out there today. Jerry pulled on his alternative coat. He was known as a slick dresser among his old colleagues, often looking more like a solicitor or a barrister than a copper. It was surprising how many doors his style of dress managed to open. He could always find room in his suitcase for the favourite of his two overcoats: a dark grey Crombie. Jerry wrapped a black scarf around his neck, pulling up his black velvet collar in readiness for the foray into the bitter breeze that was forecast. Despite the sun glittering on the water through a cloud break, the day was looking very grey and gloomy indeed. The forensics team would have their work cut out this morning gathering all they could from around the site before the tide started to turn.

A brisk few minutes’ walk found Jerry and Rob down on the beach – a sandy area of the Thames only created at times of low tide – in the forensic team’s pop-up tent. The tent’s sides were flapping madly as two technicians from the small team looked for any clues that may have been dragged along with the corpse, clues that would enable them to establish where or how the body had entered the water. A third member of the team took photographs of the corpse from all conceivable angles. The woman’s dark hair was wet and straggled around her neck, with a hint of seaweed and blood on her skull. She looked Jewish at first glance, from the shape of her nose and her eyes, and from the hint of a silver chain bearing a Star of David around her neck. Her half-open, peach-coloured outer coat was streaked with mud, bedraggled, and half lying on the sand and shingle beach. One leg was curled up under her. She still had one shoe on her left foot; the other foot was hidden.

Two bobbies and two suited detectives stood on the embankment looking down at the scene, flapping their hands under their arms and occasionally stamping their feet to help ward off the cold. On the sidewalk, people were coming and going, glancing down at the scene, and with nothing to see, moving