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1

*Separate Ways*



‘I’m sorry, Hawthorne. But the answer’s no. Our deal is over.’

I hated arguing with Hawthorne. It wasn’t just that I invariably lost. He managed to make me feel bad about even trying to win. Those murky brown eyes of his could be quite ferocious when he was on the attack, but the moment I challenged him they would suddenly become hurt and defensive and I would find myself backtracking and apologising even though I was quite sure I was right. I’ve said this before, but there was something childlike about his moods. I never really knew where I was with him, which made it almost impossible to write about him and that, as it happened, was exactly what we were discussing now.

I had followed Hawthorne on three investigations and these had led to three books. The first had been published. The second was being read by my agent (although she’d had it for two and a half weeks and I hadn’t heard a word). I

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would start writing the third at the end of the year and I was confident it wasn't going to be difficult because of course I'd already lived through it and knew what happened in the end. I had agreed to a three-book contract and as far as I was concerned, three was enough.

I hadn't seen Hawthorne for a while. From the amount of crime fiction you'll find in bookshops and on TV, you'd think someone is being murdered every hour of the day, but fortunately real life isn't like that and several months had passed since we had got back from the island of Alderney, leaving just three bodies behind. I had no idea what he'd been up to in that time and, to be honest, he hadn't been very much in my thoughts.

And then, quite suddenly, there he was, on the telephone, inviting me round to his London flat – and that in itself was remarkable because usually if I wanted to get in, I had to ring someone else's doorbell and pretend to be from Ocado. River Court was a low-rise block of flats built in the seventies close to Blackfriars Bridge, and Hawthorne had a space on the top floor. Space was the operative word. There was almost no furniture, no pictures on the walls, no possessions of any sort apart from the Airfix models he liked to assemble and the computer equipment he used to hack into the police database, helped by the teenager who lived one floor below.

This was something that had shocked me when I had first stumbled into Kevin Chakraborty's bedroom and discovered him cheerfully displaying a private photograph of me and

my son as his screensaver. Kevin admitted he had stolen it from my phone and then went on to explain that he had also helped Hawthorne break into the automatic number-plate recognition system used by the police in Hampshire. I hadn't remonstrated with him, partly because he had provided us with useful information, but also because, at the end of the day, how do you pick a fight with a teenager who's in a wheelchair? Nor had I ever mentioned it to Hawthorne. After all, this was a man who had been thrown out of the police force for pushing a known paedophile down a flight of stairs. He might have a moral compass, but he was the one who would decide which way it pointed.

He didn't own the flat, by the way. He didn't even rent it. He had told me that he was a caretaker, employed by a London estate agent who was 'a sort of half-brother'. That was the thing about Hawthorne. He couldn't have a relative who was something simple like a sister-in-law or a first cousin or whatever. He was separated from his wife, but he was still close to her. Everything about him was complicated and it didn't matter what questions I asked because the answers led me exactly nowhere. It was all very frustrating.

The two of us were sitting in his kitchen, surrounded by gleaming chrome and pristine work surfaces. I had walked down from my own flat in Clerkenwell: we only lived about fifteen minutes apart, which made the emotional distance between us all the more striking. Hawthorne was wearing his usual combination of a suit with a white shirt, although,

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just for once, he had put on a grey round-neck jersey instead of a jacket. The casual look. He had offered me a cup of tea and he had been thoughtful enough to provide biscuits: four of them, to be precise; two-finger KitKats criss-crossing each other on a plate as if set up for a game of noughts and crosses. He was drinking black coffee with his ever-present packet of cigarettes close by.

He wanted me to write a fourth book. That was what the meeting was about, but I had already decided against it. Why? Well, first of all – and ignoring the visits I had made to the casualty wards of two London hospitals – Hawthorne had never been very kind to me. He had made it clear from the start that this was going to be a business relationship. He wanted someone to write about him because he needed the money and, to make matters worse, he had let me know that I wasn't even his first choice. For my part, I'd made my decision before I'd come here. Enough was enough. I was fed up of being treated like an appendage. There were lots of stories I wanted to write where I would be in charge and this was something he would never understand. Authors don't write their books for other people. We write for ourselves.

'You can't stop now,' Hawthorne said. He thought for a moment. '*The Word is Murder* was really good.'

'You read it?' I asked.

'Some of it. But the reviews were great! You should be pleased with yourself. The *Daily Mail* said it was splendidly entertaining.'

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‘I don’t read reviews – and that was the *Express*.’

‘Your publishers want you to do more.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Hilda told me.’

‘Hilda?’ I couldn’t believe what he’d just said. Hilda Starke was my literary agent – the same agent who had advised me against getting into all this in the first place. I could still remember her face when I’d told her I would be sharing the profits fifty-fifty with Hawthorne. She’d met him recently at Penguin Random House and I’d seen him charm her, but it was still a surprise that the two of them had been having conversations without me. ‘When did you talk to her?’ I asked.

‘Last week.’

‘What? You rang her?’

‘No. We had lunch.’

My head swam as I took this in. ‘You don’t even eat lunch!’ I exclaimed. ‘And anyway, what are you doing meeting Hilda? She’s *my* agent.’

‘She’s mine now too.’

‘You’re serious? You’re paying her fifteen per cent?’

‘Actually, I managed to knock her down a bit.’ He moved on hastily. ‘She reckons we could get another three-book deal. And a bigger advance!’

‘I don’t write for the money.’ I didn’t mean to sound so prim but it was true. Writing for me has always been a very personal process. It’s my life. It’s what makes me happy.



‘Anyway, it doesn’t make any difference,’ I went on. ‘I can’t write another book about you. You’re not working on any new cases.’

‘Not at the moment,’ he admitted. ‘But I could tell you about some of my past ones.’

‘When you were with the police?’

‘After I left. There was that business in Riverside Close in Richmond. A man hammered to death in a posh cul-de-sac. You’d like that, Tony! It was my first private investigation.’

I remembered him talking about it when we were both in Alderney. ‘It may be a great story,’ I said. ‘But I can’t write about it. I wasn’t there.’

‘I could tell you what happened.’

‘I’m sorry. I’m not interested.’ I reached out for one of the biscuits, then changed my mind. They were somehow unappetising. A chocolate hashtag. ‘Anyway, it’s not just about the crimes, Hawthorne. How can I write about you when I know almost nothing about you?’

‘I’m a detective. What else do you need to know?’

‘We’ve already been into this. I know you’re a very private person. But you’ve got to see things from my point of view. You can’t have a main character who doesn’t give anything away, and frankly, being with you, I feel I’m up against a brick wall.’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Are you being serious?’

‘Ask me!’

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‘All right.’ About twenty questions arrived at the same moment, but I asked the first one that came into my head. ‘What happened at Reeth?’

‘I don’t even know where that is.’

‘When we were in that pub in Yorkshire, a man called Mike Carlyle said that he knew you from Reeth, although he called you Billy.’

‘He’d got the wrong person. That wasn’t me.’

‘And there’s something I didn’t tell you.’ I paused. ‘When I got back from Alderney, a postcard came. It was from Derek Abbott.’

Abbott was the convicted child pornographer we’d met in Alderney. He was the man who’d supposedly fallen down the stairs while he was in police custody.

‘He wrote to you from hell?’ Hawthorne asked.

‘He wrote to me before he died. He told me to ask you about Reeth.’

‘I don’t know anything about Reeth. It’s a place. I haven’t been there.’

I knew he was lying, but there was no point in challenging him. ‘All right, then,’ I said. ‘Tell me about your wife. Your son. What about your brother, the estate agent? How old are you really? You said you were thirty-nine in Alderney, but I think you’re older.’

‘That’s not very nice.’

I ignored him. ‘Why do you make all these models? What’s that all about? Why don’t you ever eat?’

Hawthorne looked uncomfortable. His hand edged towards the cigarette packet and I knew that he wanted to light up. ‘You don’t need any of this,’ he complained. ‘That’s not what the books are about. They’re about murder!’ He made it sound attractive, as if violent death was something to be desired. ‘If you really want to put in stuff about me, why don’t you just make it up?’

‘That’s exactly my point!’ I exclaimed. ‘I prefer making things up. I don’t find it easy writing books when I don’t know the ending. I don’t like walking three steps behind you like the murder-mystery equivalent of the Duke of Edinburgh. I’m sorry, Hawthorne. But this hasn’t been much fun for me. I’ve been stabbed twice! I’ve never come anywhere close to getting anything right. And even if I did want to continue, you haven’t got any more cases for us to investigate together – besides which, I made a mistake with the titles.’

‘You should have called the first one *Hawthorne Investigates*.’

‘That’s not what I mean.’ I snatched one of the KitKats after all. I didn’t want to eat it. I just wanted to spoil the pattern. ‘It’s the concept. It doesn’t work.’

I’d decided that all the titles would have some sort of literary reference. After all, I was a writer; he was a detective. *The Word is Murder*, *The Sentence is Death*, *A Line to Kill*. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but I’d already run out of grammatical allusions. *Life Comes to a Full Stop*? It wouldn’t make sense in America, where they have periods.

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*The Case of the Missing Colon?* It would only work if a body part went missing from a morgue. No. Even the titles were telling me that I had agreed to a trilogy and that was as far as it would go.

‘You can find someone else,’ I suggested, weakly.

He shrugged. ‘I like working with you, mate. You and I get along ... somehow. We’ve got an understanding.’

‘I’m not sure I understand anything,’ I said. It was strange. I hadn’t expected this meeting to become so gloomy. I’d thought it was just going to be a simple parting of the ways. ‘It’s not the end of our relationship,’ I continued. ‘There are two more books still to come out. We’ll meet at the publishers. And maybe there’ll be more literary festivals – although after the last one, people may be nervous about inviting us.’

‘I thought we did all right.’

‘Three people got killed!’

I had never seen Hawthorne so defeated. At that moment, I realised that whatever I might have said, some sort of bond had grown between us. At the end of the day, it’s not possible to investigate the deaths of seven human beings without becoming close. I admired Hawthorne. I liked him and I’d always tried to make him likeable when I was writing about him. Suddenly I wanted to leave.

I didn’t eat the KitKat. I finished my tea and stood up. ‘Look,’ I said. ‘If something comes up, another investigation, let me know and maybe I’ll think again.’ Even as I spoke

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the words, I knew I wouldn't. At the same time, I was quite sure he wouldn't get in touch with me either.

'I'll do that,' he said.

I walked towards the door but before I reached it, I turned back. I wanted to end on a more cheerful note. 'My play opens next week,' I said. 'Why don't you come to the first night?'

'What play is that?'

I was sure I'd mentioned it to him. '*Mindgame*. It's a sort of thriller. It's got Jordan Williams and Tirian Kirke in it.' They were both well-known actors but Hawthorne didn't appear to have heard of either of them. 'You'll enjoy it. It's on at the Vaudeville Theatre.'

'Where's that?'

'It's in the Strand ... opposite the Savoy. There'll be a party afterwards and Hilda will be there.'

'So what night is it on?'

'Tuesday.'

'Sorry, mate.' The answer came straight back without a moment's pause. 'I'm busy that night.'

Well, if he was going to be like that, I wasn't going to persuade him otherwise. 'That's too bad,' I said, and I left.

I was feeling a little dejected as I walked along the River Thames towards the bridge, heading back to my flat in Clerkenwell. I knew I'd made the right decision about the books, but still I had a sense of a task that I hadn't completed, of an opportunity I'd allowed to slip away. I really had wanted

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to know more about Hawthorne. I'd even been thinking of making the journey to Reeth. Now it was almost certain that I'd never see him again.

Here's the annoying thing . . .

Despite everything I've just written, it's obvious that there's going to be another murder because if there hadn't been, why would I have written anything at all? The very fact that you're holding this book, complete with compulsory bloodstain on the cover, rather spoils the surprise. It proves how handicapped writers are when they're dealing with the truth, with what actually happened.

There was one thing that I didn't know, however. Although the first three books had caused me enough upsets, this one was going to be much, much worse.

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## 2

# Mindgame



I love theatre. When I look back at my life, I can remember – vividly – evenings when I have felt myself to be in a state of complete happiness; when performance, music, costume, direction and, of course, writing have combined to make an experience that I know will stay with me for ever. The National Theatre’s 1982 production of *Guys and Dolls*. *Nicholas Nickleby* at the RSC. Michael Frayn’s brilliantly constructed comedy, *Noises Off*. Ian Richardson and Richard Pasco swapping parts every night in John Barton’s *Richard II*. I went to that when I was eighteen years old and I can still see them holding the ‘hollow crown’ between them, gazing into the mirror that it has become. Theatre, at its best, is a candle that never goes out and all of these productions, along with many more, still burn in my memory.

In my early twenties I worked as an usher at the National and saw Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal*, Peter Shaffer’s *Amadeus*,

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Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Alan Ayckbourn's *Bedroom Farce* perhaps a dozen times each and I was never bored. Earlier in the evening, I would sit down in the backstage canteen wearing my grey nylon shirt and slightly camp mauve cravat and I might find myself a few places away from the likes of John Gielgud or Ralph Richardson, both of them imperious even in their tracksuits and trainers. Of course, I never spoke to them. They were gods to me. Donald Sutherland once tipped me twenty pence when I was working in the NT cloakroom. I still have it somewhere.

Before I started writing novels, I wanted to work in the theatre. I acted in plays at school. I directed them at university. I went to shows three or four nights a week, often standing at the back of the stalls, which would cost as little as two pounds. I tried to get into drama school and I applied for jobs as an assistant stage manager, which in those days was a recognised way into the profession. It never worked. I began to see there was something about me that not only didn't fit in with the world I so wanted to enter, it somehow barred me from it. '*Ambition, madam, is a great man's madness,*' says Antonio in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, a play I first saw at the RSC in 1971 with Judi Dench in the title role. But it's accepting that you will never achieve your ambition that can really drive you mad.

Perhaps that was part of the reason why I wrote *Mindgame*. I was keeping the flame alive.

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*Mindgame* was actually inspired by another play I'd seen in my teens and which had obsessed me ever since. *Sleuth* by Anthony Shaffer (brother of Peter) was both a parody of Agatha Christie and a completely original murder mystery, as inventive as anything she had ever created. There were only three characters – a wealthy writer, his wife's lover and a lugubrious detective called Inspector Doppler – but in the space of two acts the play managed to pull off a series of extraordinary surprises, doing things on the stage that had never been done before and leaving the audience gasping. It was a huge hit. It ran for over two thousand performances. It won major awards. It was filmed . . . twice. To this day, it remains a theatrical landmark.

It goes without saying that there have been attempts to replicate the success of *Sleuth*, but apart from Ira Levin (*Deathtrap*), nobody has come close. When you think about it, there's not a great deal you can do on the stage. Magic and illusion may have a part to play, but so much of theatre is words: people moving about a space, talking to each other. Shaffer broke the physical rules – just as his brother did with *Black Comedy*, a farce that takes place during a power cut, the stage lights coming on only when the blackout supposedly begins. The trouble is, once the rules have been broken, nobody will be excited when someone else does it a second time. If something is unique, it can't be done twice.

Even so, it had become an obsession of mine to do exactly that: to write a play with a small cast and a series of twists

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and turns in the manner of a traditional murder mystery, but using the stage in an entirely new and surprising way. Whenever I found myself between books or TV scripts, I would scribble down ideas and over the years I had completed three plays before I came up with the idea for *Mindgame*. I had, incidentally, had limited success. One of my works, a one-act play called *A Handbag*, was performed as part of a local festival. The other two were never produced.

*Mindgame* itself would never have reached the stage but for my sister, Caroline, who at the time was running a small but successful theatrical agency, representing actors and actresses. She read it and liked it and, without telling me, showed it to a producer she knew called Ahmet Yurdakul. A few days later, he phoned me and asked me to come round for a chat.

I will never forget that meeting. Ahmet worked out of an office near Euston Station, so close to the railway lines that it vibrated every time a train went past, like something out of one of those old black-and-white comedies starring Sid James or Norman Wisdom. He offered me a cup of tea that tasted of engine oil and biscuits that danced on the plate. Ahmet was a small, neat man with jet-black hair. He spoke very quickly and bit his nails. There was a button missing on his suit jacket and throughout our discussion I couldn't keep my eyes off the patch where it should have been, the three threads hanging down. He had an assistant, Maureen Bates,

dressed in a cable-knit cardigan with silver hair and glasses on a chain around her neck. From the way she bustled around him, she could have been his aunt or perhaps an elderly body-guard. She seemed to be endlessly doubtful and suspicious, taking notes in tiny handwriting, but she barely said a word to me. They were about the same age – in their fifties.

The office did not inspire confidence. Situated in the basement of a three-storey house, it had a window too dusty to see through and furniture that was ugly and mismatched. I remember casting my eye over the posters on the walls and wondering if I had found the right home for my masterpiece. *Run for Your Wife*, a farce by Ray Cooney that had opened in Norwich. *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, adapted from the long-running BBC sitcom at the Gaiety Theatre on the Isle of Man. Rolf Harris in *Robin Hood* at the Epsom Playhouse. *Macbeth (Abridged)* performed in the open air at Middleham Castle with a cast of six.

To be fair to him, Ahmet loved my play. When I came into the room, he rose up to embrace me, overwhelming me with the smell of aftershave and tobacco. As we sat down, I noticed the packet of American cigarettes and heavy onyx lighter on his desk.

‘This is a great play. A very great play!’ They were almost his first words to me. The typescript was in front of him and he emphasised his words by striking it with the back of his hand. He was wearing a heavy signet ring that left dints on the first page. ‘Do you not think so, Maureen?’

Maureen said nothing.

‘Ignore her! She doesn’t read. She doesn’t know. Anthony, let me tell you. We will take this play out on tour. Then we will come into town. I love your sister who brought this to me. I cry with happiness to meet you.’

Ahmet was Turkish. I think he quite revelled in the part, using deliberately ornate phrases as if to illustrate his ‘otherness’. Once I got to know him a bit better, I realised that he actually spoke English perfectly well. His parents were Turkish Cypriots who had emigrated to the UK in the seventies, fleeing ethnic fighting and terrorism. Ahmet was ten years old when they arrived, moving into a small flat in Enfield, north London, from where he took the bus each day to the local comprehensive while they set up a clothing business. He mentioned that he’d studied computer science at Roehampton University and that he’d lived with his parents for ten years, working as a software developer for Enfield social services. Every time we met, he told me a little more about himself and I got the feeling that he was hoping I’d write a book about him ... just like Hawthorne. I listened politely, but, to be honest, I was more interested in his plans for the play and his ability to achieve them.

Maureen had already typed up an outline of the tour that they were planning and slid it in front of me. Bath, Southampton, Colchester, York – they were all good-sized cities with excellent theatres, and I should say at once that Ahmet was as good as his word. He managed to entice a well-known

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director, Ewan Lloyd, to come on board and over the next few weeks I received regular updates. The money had been raised. Jordan Williams was interested in the part of Dr Farquhar. The theatres had been signed up. They were starting work on the designs. Jordan Williams had accepted the part of Dr Farquhar. A rehearsal space had been booked. I'm condensing the events of several months into just a few lines because I want to get on to what happened in London, but I can't overstate how exciting this all was for me. It was my earliest dream, my first ambition, still somehow alive.

This is the plot of *Mindgame*:

Mark Styler, a journalist and 'true crime' writer, is visiting a lunatic asylum called Fairfields where he hopes to interview a notorious serial killer, Easterman, for a book he is writing. First, he has to persuade the unwilling and unhelpful director of the institute, Dr Farquhar, to allow him access to his patient. Quite quickly, Styler comes to realise that not all is as it should be at Fairfields. For no good reason, there's a full-length human skeleton hanging in Dr Farquhar's office, and his assistant, Nurse Plimpton, is clearly frightened of something and tries to warn Styler to leave while he still can. As the action continues, the sense of uneasiness erupts into violence until it is revealed that the lunatics have taken over the asylum. The real Dr Farquhar is dead. Styler is trapped.

My big idea – and my nod to Shaffer – was that since nothing was as it seemed, this should be literally true for the audience.

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So, as the play continues, the set plays a series of tricks. A door that had opened into a cupboard suddenly leads into a corridor and later into a bathroom. The view out of the window is gradually blocked as a wall rises up, brick by brick. The pictures on the walls change subject. The curtains change colour and the furniture is secretly replaced. Originally, the play was called *Metanoia*, a word used in psychology to describe the abandonment of the false self ... but this was quickly jettisoned by Maureen. ‘Why should I pay to see it when I don’t even know what it means?’

*Mindgame* opened in Colchester and did surprisingly well. It got some good reviews in the local press and the audiences loved it. I can say this with confidence because I watched several performances in the first week and got into the habit of slipping into the bar in the interval to hear what people were saying. The first act ends on a knife-edge. Easterman has escaped and assumed the identity of Dr Farquhar. He has murdered Nurse Plimpton. Holding a scalpel, he advances on Mark Styler, who is helpless, strapped into a straitjacket. There seems to be no possible escape. Curtain. And it worked. I listened to people chatting and they really were engaged, wondering what was going to happen next. There were no walkouts.

For the next five months, from November through to March, the play faded into the background as it continued its tour and I got on with my other work. It was easy to forget that it was happening at all unless Ahmet happened

to ring me – which he did occasionally when there were good reviews or when things went wrong. The big news, though, came at the end of February. After going through the box-office receipts with his accountant, he had decided to open in the West End and somehow he had managed to raise the money for an initial twelve-week run at the Vaudeville, a handsome nineteenth-century theatre in the Strand, not far from Trafalgar Square. There would only be three weeks' rehearsal. One of the actors had decided to drop out. But Ewan Lloyd was still on board as director. We would open in the second week of April.

Before I knew it, we were rehearsing in a converted warehouse in Dalston and this time I was allowed to join in. The rehearsal room was exactly what I would have imagined: a large, empty space with a triple-height ceiling and flaking walls, a kitchen area with an assortment of mugs, a kettle, tea and biscuits. Four plastic chairs were arranged in a circle for the director and cast and made me think of an AA meeting. The shape of the set had been chalked out on the bare floorboards, with traffic cones used for the doors and windows. The various props had been arranged on trestle tables. Styler's straitjacket hung on a rail. There were more chairs at the edge of the room for the assistant director, the lighting designer, the costume assistant and various other backstage staff. The atmosphere was always highly charged ... intense.

It was during this time that I got to know Ewan Lloyd and the cast a little better. I won't say I was part of the team.



I was sitting in the outer circle. But we did occasionally have a drink together once we'd finished for the day and something vaguely resembling a friendship sprang up between us.

When I'd first met Ewan, I'd assumed he was gay. He was quite effete, dressing like Oscar Wilde with a wide-brimmed hat and a scarf. If he'd smoked, I could imagine him using an ebony cigarette holder. I was quite surprised when Ahmet told me that although Ewan was now divorced, he had been married to an actress and they'd had four children.

Ewan was in his late forties and completely bald, although it looked as if he had shaved off his hair rather than lose it strand by strand. He was quite fastidious, almost prissy, when he was talking about his work and it didn't help that he spoke with a slight stutter. He wore glasses with very thin frames and he would use them like a conductor's baton, tapping the script or jabbing them at me when he was making a point. Maureen had shown me his CV and I had seen that he had worked in a number of well-respected theatres, although I couldn't help noticing that his CV had become a lot thinner in recent years. He had mounted several productions with a fringe theatre company in Antwerp, but had returned to England to direct *Macbeth* for Ahmet.

We went out for a Chinese meal one evening, just the two of us, and after telling me about some of the plays he'd directed and the awards he'd won, he suddenly launched into an extraordinary tirade. Maybe it was the wine that did it. He'd worked all over the world, he said. He was huge in

Belgium. But he had never been fully accepted in his own country. He had never been given the credit he deserved. He would have liked a spell as the artistic director of one of the good provincial theatres, but he knew that was never going to happen. Everyone was against him.

We were on our second bottle by now and I sat silently, feeling uncomfortable as the anguish poured out.

‘It was all because of Chichester. Bloody Chichester! Theatre people are the worst in the world. There’s so much malice. Everyone’s at each other’s throats. They’re always waiting to get you and the moment they get the chance, they pounce!’

According to Ewan, his problems had begun eight years ago at the Chichester Festival Theatre. He had been directing George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan*, starring Sonja Childs in the title role. We don’t usually see the burning at the stake. This happens offstage. But Ewan had decided to open with a striking tableau of the flames, the smoke, the great pile of firewood, the bare-chested executioner, the crowd. He wanted it to prefigure what was going to happen, to illustrate the fate of the main character.

On the opening night, it had all gone terribly wrong.

‘It wasn’t my fault,’ he told me. ‘It was all so bloody unfair! I did everything by the book ... producer’s notes, control and management procedures, emergency plan. We’d spoken to the police, the local authority, the local fire authority ... I couldn’t have done any more. There was a full investigation

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afterwards. I spent hours being questioned and, in the end, everyone agreed that I was in no way to blame. Of course, the play closed immediately ... not that it mattered. I will never forgive myself for what happened to Sonja. It was horrible.'

'Was she killed?' I asked.

'No.' He looked at me sadly over his glass. 'But she was very badly injured: it was the end of her career. And mine! Nobody wanted to know me after that. I had two productions cancelled even though I'd already signed the contracts. It was as if I'd lit the bloody match! And look at me now. I mean ... Ahmet's decent enough, but he's not exactly Cameron Mackintosh, is he!'

And what of the cast?

I have already mentioned Jordan Williams, who had agreed to play Dr Farquhar and was undoubtedly the star of our show. He was a Native American, the first I had ever met; a Lakota to be exact. I'd looked him up on Wikipedia and discovered that he had been born on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota in the USA. He had spent ten years working in Los Angeles and had received an Emmy nomination for his role as a psychopathic killer in *American Horror Story*. He had married his make-up artist, who happened to be English, and that was what had brought him to the UK. When he had first arrived, many of the newspapers had suggested that he might take over from Peter Capaldi as the first ethnically diverse Dr Who, but this hadn't happened. Instead, he had

taken on multiple roles in theatre, film and TV and if he wasn't quite a household name, he was certainly respected.

I never feel at ease with actors and this was particularly true of him. He was a thickset, broad-shouldered man with extraordinarily intense eyes; I could feel them boring right into me every time we spoke. His face was defined by features that had a sort of mathematical precision, with a very straight nose and a square chin. He had greying hair that wasn't quite long enough to be called a ponytail, but which he still tied back with a coloured band when he wasn't on-stage. He was by far the oldest member of the cast, but he wore his age well, sloping into rehearsals in tracksuits or jeans, his hands deep in his pockets, his thoughts far away. When he spoke, he chose his words carefully, with no trace of an American accent. It was as if he was performing . . . and this was in fact his defining characteristic. It was very hard to tell when he was acting and when he wasn't – sometimes with unfortunate consequences.

We had quite a nasty incident at the end of the first week in Dalston. We were rehearsing the scene when Dr Farquhar attacks Nurse Plimpton and Jordan had grabbed hold of Sky Palmer, the actress playing her. I watched the two of them in the middle of the chalk outline, surrounded by the entire team. He was holding her, his hands clamped on her arms, his face very close to hers. He was shouting at her, in a rage. They must have done the scene a hundred times by now, but suddenly Sky began to scream. At first, I thought she was

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ad-libbing, trying something new. Then I saw the alarm on Ewan's face and realised that this was serious, she really was in pain. At that moment, Jordan had *become* Dr Farquhar and he only released her when Ewan shouted at him to stop and everyone rushed forward to bring the action to a halt. Sky fell to the floor and I saw the bruising on her arms. She had been hurt and she had been frightened. That was the end of rehearsals for the day.

As we left, Ewan told me that this wasn't the first time Jordan had behaved in this way. Apparently, he had quite a reputation. He was a method actor who took his roles very seriously. When he had been cast as the highwayman Dick Turpin in a BBC drama, he had not only learned to ride a horse, he had insisted on recreating the famous two-hundred-mile ride from London to Yorkshire and had almost been killed crossing the M1. On another occasion, playing King Lear at the Hampstead Theatre, he had often spent the night sleeping rough on the Heath.

To be fair to him, he could be generous too. He was mortified by what had happened and when we came back the following Monday, he presented Sky with a bunch of flowers so huge that it filled two vases.

Sky Palmer herself was something of an enigma.

I'd seen her perform many times, but I can't say I knew her particularly well, which was hardly surprising as she was in her mid-twenties – three decades younger than me. Outside the play, we had nothing in common. When I first

met her I had been struck by her intense, dark eyes, her self-assurance and, most of all, by her luminous pink hair – which she'd had to wash out once she'd started playing the part. She'd also lost her nose stud and multicoloured fingernails. She didn't smoke but during rehearsals she vaped, blowing out little clouds of steam that evaporated immediately, leaving a faint smell of menthol in the air. I'd been worried that the part of Nurse Plimpton might be difficult to cast. The way I'd written the character had been undeniably sexist . . . but then I'd deliberately based her on the sort of character who might have appeared in an old Hammer film. Sky didn't seem to care. She never asked me questions. She did everything Ewan told her. It was hard to tell if she was enjoying herself or not.

This was mainly because, whenever she wasn't working, she was plugged into her iPhone. It was the very latest model, the iPhone 8, in rose gold with a protective cover that sparkled with crystal glitter. She played games – Minecraft and Monument Valley – and she was forever checking her Twitter account. I never actually heard her speak to anybody, but she was endlessly texting, obviously in a relationship with someone. Her phone would ping in the middle of a scene and drive Ewan Lloyd to distraction. She would apologise sweetly even as she was firing off a reply. I had never seen anyone's thumbs move so quickly.

Nothing about her quite connected. For example, the sweatshirts and leggings she liked to wear had come straight

out of Sports Locker, but she also had a Cartier watch and her shoes were Jimmy Choo. She talked about popular culture – *Star Wars* and *The Hunger Games* – but I noticed her reading Franz Kafka. The playlist on her iPhone included Björk and Madonna, but finding a piano in the rehearsal room, she sat down and played the first bars of a Bach prelude. I was quite sure there was something she wasn't telling us.

That left Tirian Kirke, playing Mark Styler. He had come in late, replacing the actor who had decided that five months on the road was enough for him, and I'm afraid he was the only cast member I didn't warm to ... but then he and I had history.

A couple of years older than Sky, Tirian had made many appearances on TV, playing a junior case officer in *Spooks*, a police constable in *Line of Duty* and, for three seasons, a footman or some sort of under-butler in *Downton Abbey*. He wasn't quite a household name, but he was well on his way to becoming one, so I had been very pleased when he was cast in a show I'd written called *Injustice*. This was a five-part legal drama starring James Purefoy, screened by ITV in 2011. It was also, coincidentally, the show where I first met Hawthorne. He was our technical adviser.

Tirian was going to play a young offender who falls foul of the prison system and eventually ends up taking his own life. It was a really good role. The character had four or five hefty scenes, plenty of screen time and a memorable death.

He'd done a great audition and had been offered the part almost at once. He had accepted. The contract had been drawn up. But then, at the last minute, he had changed his mind. According to his agent, he had decided that the script wasn't good enough, which hardly endeared him to me. The part was eventually played by Joe Cole, who did a brilliant job and went on to become a major star – but that didn't change my feelings about Tirian. He'd wasted time and money. He'd let us down.

So I was nervous when Ewan told me that he had been cast as Mark Styler. Firstly, I was afraid that my earlier experience might repeat itself, but more to the point, Tirian came across as rather too pleased with himself to play the part, too self-conscious, with his carefully groomed hair, his designer clothes and the Ducati motorbike he drove to rehearsals. I had to remind myself that all of this had come with success and that he was, at heart, a very good actor and we were lucky to have him. The first time I saw him reading the part, he even looked exactly how I had imagined the character: slim and bony, with dark eyes and an unusual, angular face. He had a crooked nose and a lazy, roguish smile, far removed from the anodyne good looks of many young British actors. He was the sort of actor you couldn't help noticing – and this was exactly what had happened. He had come to the attention of the Hollywood director Christopher Nolan, who had cast him in a big-budget production – *Tenet* – which was due to start shooting later in the year.

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