



INTRODUCING DETECTIVE INSPECTOR LIAM MCLUSKY

**FALLING  
MORE  
SLOWLY**

PETER HELTON

Falling More Slowly

Also by Peter Helton

*Headcase*  
*Slim Chance*  
*Rainstone Fall*

# FALLING MORE SLOWLY

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Constable • London

Constable & Robinson Ltd  
3 The Lanchesters  
162 Fulham Palace Road  
London W6 9ER  
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the UK by Constable,  
an imprint of Constable & Robinson, 2010

First US edition published by SohoConstable,  
an imprint of Soho Press, 2010

Soho Press, Inc.  
853 Broadway  
New York, NY 10003  
www.sohopress.com



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A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication  
Data is available from the British Library

UK ISBN: 978-1-84901-220-1

US ISBN: 978-1-56947-•••••

US Library of Congress number: 2010••••••

Printed and bound in the EU

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

For Jess



# Chapter One

The ghost of a scream echoed around him. McLusky sputtered into consciousness as he shot upright. He'd screamed himself awake. He hadn't done that for a while, thought he'd stopped doing it. Damn. Blinking rapidly into the twilight while his hammering heartbeat slowed, it took him a while to realize where he was. He groped around on the floor until he found his alarm clock, then brought the thing close to his eyes to read the time on the tiny display.

7.29. Nightmare beat alarm by one minute. His meeting with the super at Albany Road station was at nine, quite a civilized time to start a new job. Which he might do if he ever made it off this mattress.

Liam McLusky hadn't slept well. He'd drunk at the Barge Inn, the pub across the road, until closing time then spent half the night lying on his mattress, sipping Murphy's and listening to the strange creaks and groans of his new abode.

Propping himself up on one elbow he fished a cigarette from a pack of Extra Lights on the floor, lit it and inhaled deeply. He had stopped smoking after the attack because he'd been in a hospital bed for a whole month before learning to hobble around again. It had seemed too good a chance to miss when he was already one month ahead in the cravings department. He'd lasted six months without a single puff.

Yesterday he had started again. New city, new job, new pack of ciggies, extra mild. New first-floor flat, rented. He

took a quick inventory of the bedroom: one mattress, floorboards. Zen-like simplicity though perhaps lacking the style. There was a built-in wardrobe with louvred doors the entire length of one side which, after he had flung his clothes into it, remained half empty; a minute fireplace where a gas fire had recently been removed – he could see the old gas pipe protruding from the floor; four empty cans of Murphy's, one of which he was using as an ashtray. A bin-liner full of clothes in need of a wash completed the furnishings. He twirled the cigarette butt into the can where it died with a hiss.

He pushed himself upright. All his adult life he had slept in the nude yet since his release from hospital he had taken to wearing a T-shirt at night. He didn't like looking at the long, curved post-operative scar. It still felt as though that part of his torso where surgeons had delved to repair the internal damage needed symbolic protection.

But really he was fine. He'd been declared fit. He was ready for duty, more than ready. The enforced idleness had been the most difficult part. A fresh start in a new town was what he needed but most of all he needed a start. In the bathroom he turned on the hot tap, opened the gas valve, struck a match and fed it into the mouth of the old-fashioned gas boiler just as the landlady had shown him. Gas hissed and caught with a loud bark that made him flinch. The shower consisted of two plastic hoses attached to the hot and cold taps of the bath and connected to a droopy shower head fixed to the wall. He could only just fit himself under it. It took a while to get the mix right but it hardly mattered, nothing really mattered at this stage. McLusky kept telling himself that. He sniffed the towel and decided it would need washing. Launderette just a couple of doors down, how good was that? He pulled on his socks, then polished his shoes with his right foot. It would do. Chinos, shirt and tie, black leather jacket. He'd considered the suit, first day and all that, and rejected it. Start as you mean to go on. Then he'd remembered he'd

been wearing it when they ran him over. At the hospital they had cut the trousers off his blood-soaked legs.

No fridge in the kitchen yet but a gas cooker with three rings, grill and oven, the Newhome 45, its feet standing in small glass saucers to save the ancient lino. This was like stepping back into World War II. Looked a bit like a bomb had landed in here too. Boxes with his stuff stood everywhere. Every surface, and there weren't that many, was cluttered with items that had nowhere to go. No furniture here either apart from a red 1950s kitchen cupboard with glass drawers. He'd seen a junk shop round the corner, it would take no time at all to kit this place out. Some old dear had lived in the flat for forty years and died in here too. He didn't mind. These houses were old, of course people had died there. He liked old houses. He wanted to die in an old house too. What were the chances? He liked places with a history, that's why he had rejected the modern flat in Cotham they had offered him 'until he sorted himself out'; too new, too soulless. And since he would never spend enough time there to give it soul himself, he would have to borrow other people's.

Apart from the kitchen there was only the big, oddly shaped sitting room and a spare room just large enough to accommodate a midget. All that could wait.

In the meantime there was the Italian grocer's next door. He'd soon found out why the flat was cheap: noise from the pub until late and the women at the grocer's setting up the vegetable stalls on the pavement at just after six in the morning, talking loudly in Italian. It always sounded like they were having an argument but they probably weren't. Just loud and happy to be alive. The place also sold pastries and coffee to take away, of which he intended to take full advantage. The grey-haired woman behind the counter showed a strong family resemblance to his Italian landlady but he hadn't yet worked out who was who, so many people seemed to work there. The woman furnished him with both coffee and a Danish and called him Mr

Clusky. McLusky set off towards the centre of town. His new town.

Carl Spranger had spent the night asleep behind the wheel of his BMW and woke with a start and a groan. Shit. He had a raging headache and felt sick to his stomach. It was cold in the car, the windows had misted up with his condensed breath. Fucking bitch. Greedy stupid fucking bitch. He searched for cigarettes amongst the crumpled packets and crisp wrappers but knew there weren't any left. He thumped the dashboard. Shit. Everything was shit now. The devious cow. She'd sent a private bloody detective after him to spy on him and Allie. Paid for with his own bloody money of course.

There was an inch of vodka left in the bottle on the passenger seat. Hair of the dog, always worked. He let the liquid burn down his throat. It was answered by a sharp stab in his stomach. He held his breath until the pain eased. Happened more and more often recently. Ulcer probably. Cancer maybe. And why not? What the fuck did it matter now? Twelve years and now she wanted a divorce. Screamed her demands at him. I want a divorce and I want this fucking house. The house. No one gets the house. One affair and she wanted out. She had it all planned already, his replacement waiting in the wings. A chiropodist, very refined, not coarse, like you. Refined, my foot, ha! He wound down the window, spat, wiped the windscreen. Right front wing had a wrinkle in it. He remembered dimly, he'd hit something in the dark. Large dog, small deer, whatever, he didn't get a look at it. Where was this godforsaken place? Lay-by on the A road leading to the motorway. He'd just driven around, had got too drunk though, cars kept blaring their horns at him, letting him know, probably weaved a bit. Stopped here, slept it off. *The house*. He started the car and pulled out into the road doing a U-turn. Two cars braked hard, parping their horns. He

stuck his head out of the window. 'Fuck you too! I'm busy. Fuck you.' *The house*. The house was practically all that was left. She didn't know that, of course. Plant hire business was bad, had been for a long time. He'd had to sell off machinery lately simply to stay afloat. Just him running the place from a Portakabin, with Allie, who had started as a receptionist, manning the phone. Good at telling lies for him, now he was getting more calls from creditors than customers. Lying for him, helping him, consoling him. Allie had more sympathy in her little finger than ... Working late together trying to make sense of the books, trying to salvage something. A friendly word, a hug, a kiss. He'd screwed her in the office. Twice. Twice! And now she wanted the house? She wanted the house for that? No chance. Not-a-fucking-chance. No one was going to get the fucking *house*.

'You can't miss it,' the woman said while eyeing up his almond Danish as though she really fancied a bite. McLusky offered but she just laughed and walked away. Somehow he had managed to get lost, which wasn't good, not for a police officer and not on his first day. Should have called a cab. He checked his watch. Plenty of time.

Of course he'd been to Albany Road station before but not from this direction. He'd looked it up on the A-Z. Easily walkable from his Northmoor Street flat and it would help him get to know the place. Should have brought the map of course. He was in the right district though. The warren of Bristol's town centre had grown over centuries like a rich fungus, the mycelium of its streets stretching senselessly out across the hills behind the harbour area. Dark streets, bright streets, tightly wound streets, steep streets, allowing only brief, surprising glimpses of the harbour basin and the river. The city was built on nothing but hills it seemed. The Romans had vineyards here on the steep, south-facing slopes where the Old

Town had grown up. Or perhaps it was a different hill; he'd read something about it in a guidebook. Some of the houses were tall and narrow timber-frame buildings, a lot of Victorian houses too, but the scars left by WWII bombing had been filled with drab utilitarian concrete buildings, some towering high above their more elegant neighbours.

The most noticeable thing however was always the traffic. These streets had not been built for it and the centre was too busy, too crowded to pedestrianize. Successive traffic schemes had failed. The ever-changing one-way system had become so unworkable half of it had simply been abandoned and the streets handed back to the chaos merchants. The result was a mess of Mediterranean intensity: noisy, polluted, crowded, dangerous and during peak times bordering on anarchy. Delivery vans driving over pavements, taxis going everywhere, car drivers desperate for a place to stop, the usual bikers and suicidal cyclists, the even more suicidal skateboarders, enough scooters for an Italian teen movie and pedestrians dodging the lot. Many cyclists wore dust masks, some wore actual gas masks, probably as a mark of protest against the dense pollution. He had been reading the local paper to get a taste of the place. A campaign was under way to stop motorized traffic coming into the city altogether with protests every Saturday morning, bringing more chaos to the streets. And how were emergency vehicles supposed to get through this, he wondered? How on earth did you move an ambulance through these streets?

McLusky hadn't bought a new car yet, his last having been wrecked in the chase in which he'd been injured. He'd been promised the loan of a plain police unit until he 'sorted himself out' – so much sorting – but taking in this traffic chaos he thought that perhaps roller blades might well have the edge.

He asked directions again, this time of a grey, elderly man rummaging for something in his canvas satchel while pushing an electric bicycle along the gutter. The man

looked up with a closed-off face and seemed to consider ignoring him, then pointed. 'Albany Road station? Down those steps, then turn right. You can't miss it, it's the ugliest building in town. Wants dynamiting.'

'Thanks, I'll bear that in mind.' He crossed the street carefully, remembering too well the sound of his own breaking bones as they'd made contact with the car bonnet. He had no desire to repeat the experience. He didn't really believe he could survive a second time. Or even wanted to. Perhaps this would go away or perhaps the feeling might never leave him. Or it might even help him live, the flat feeling that he no longer minded dying. He didn't want to die. But equally he wasn't sure he wanted to survive at all costs. Living and surviving were different things after all.

A shadowy network of alleys and worn, irregular steps connected some of the Old Town streets. Small shops and artisans' workshops clung on here but the business rates and rents had driven many of them out, making way for the national chains that could afford to pay them.

He recognized the place instantly. The man had been right, Albany Road police station was quite the most unlovely building he had come across so far, something he hadn't really taken in when he had come for his interview six weeks earlier.

Comparing the station with the surrounding architecture, a small eighteenth-century church and several well-kept Victorian houses, wasn't really fair. It would be like comparing a plastic stacking chair with Chippendale furniture. This was definitely the stacking kind of architecture. He checked his reflection in the window of an electrical retailer's, too late to worry really. Hair a bit wild though. He smoothed it down.

Reaching for the handle of the tinted glass door of the station he hesitated just a fraction – new job, new era, new life, new crew, new town, new day – then walked inside.

The desk officer buzzed him through the next door. 'Morning, sir, they'll be expecting you.' Just the slightest hint of doubt in his baritone. 'Will you find your own way . . .?'

He nodded and the desk officer gratefully returned to what he'd been doing, far too busy to nursemaid freshly minted detective inspectors.

McLusky remembered his way to CID from his interview though he hadn't met many of his new colleagues at the time since most had been off sick with some sort of virus.

Inside, too, the station was undeniably sixties or seventies. Recently refurbished, the super had said. He'd just have to take his word for it. The place was busy, the stairs echoing like a tunnel with footsteps and voices. Eight forty: he was early, his meeting with Superintendent Denkhaus was not until nine. Straight into the CID room and he instantly felt at home. CID rooms were CID rooms: desks, waste baskets, computer screens, phones – several with detectives attached to them – maps of the force area and city centre on the walls, whiteboard, noticeboard, fax machine, photocopier and kettle. The windows were firmly closed against the noise of the traffic below. The place smelled of printer ink, cheap aftershave and deodorant overwhelmed by sweat.

One man looked up, frowned, then tried for a smile and got up. 'Inspector McLusky, sir? I'm DS Austin.' He stretched out a broad and darkly hairy hand. McLusky shook it. The whole man was darkly hairy and broad, probably worked out. Intelligent, open eyes, blinking fast. His soft Scottish accent sounded like Edinburgh to him, but he was no expert. 'Welcome to Albany. Ehm, your office, sir, is just along here.'

His office. He'd never had his own office. He'd not been a DI long enough for them to even find one for him in Southampton before the bastards rammed him off the road. Then came back and ran him over as he staggered from his car.

Austin led the way back into the corridor and to a door right at the end. 'You're taking over from DI Pearce, it's his old office.'

McLusky had read about Pearce, a bent copper, currently on the run with a goodly amount of drug money, probably in Spain. Enjoy it while you can. Spain was no longer a safe hiding place.

He walked straight in. It was about the size of the box room in his new flat – space for second midget here – and smelled aggressively of cleaning products. It contained a dented filing cabinet, two chairs, an empty bookshelf, a metal dustbin and a small battered desk. The window faced out the back overlooking graffiti-covered walls, chaotic pigeon-shit rooftops and the shadowy backs of houses. In the middle distance, between tall buildings, he glimpsed a sliver of the harbour. Apart from in- and out-trays, monitor, keyboard and phone he'd been furnished with a set of car keys sitting on a form for him to sign and an envelope lying across the keyboard which he knew would contain the gaff he needed to log on to the computer.

'Thanks.' McLusky shivered. He thought he could feel the dampness in the fifty-year-old cement bricks on the other side of the plasterboard, could hear the rustle of their slow crumbling. He pointed to the envelope. 'This is precisely the amount of paperwork I can cope with. Can you see it stays like that, please?'

'We'll do our very best, sir.' Austin's lopsided grin acknowledged the avalanche of paperwork heading for the inspector's in-tray.

The phone on his pristine desk rang. He took a deep breath then picked it up. Anyone could make a mistake. 'DI McLusky.'

It was Area Control. 'Sir, I know this sounds like a job for Uniform, but . . .'

 The young male voice hesitated.

'Go on then.'

'The original call was made by a Mrs Spranger, sounded like a domestic at an address in Redland. We've sent two

units so far and both have gone off the air. We always have reception problems in Redland. We've since had a mobile phone call from one of the officers and he seemed a bit incoherent. There was a lot of background noise . . .'

'Okay, we'll deal. What's the address?' He snatched up the keys, turned the form around and snapped his fingers for a pen. Austin unhooked a biro from his shirt pocket and obliged. McLusky scribbled down the unfamiliar address and hung up then pocketed the pen in his leather jacket. Austin opened his mouth then thought better of it.

'Right.' McLusky held up the paper for Austin to read. 'Where is this place? We'll take my car, just lead me to it.'

The car turned out to be a grey Skoda. 'You sure you want to drive, sir?' Austin doubted the wisdom of it but got in at the passenger side anyway.

'Positive. Just give me clear directions and in good time. The sooner I find my way round town the better.' McLusky avoided being driven if at all possible. He hated being a passenger, always had done. 'Never driven one of these before, though.' He pulled out of the station car park. It felt good to be holding a steering wheel again. Skodas used to be joke cars, now the police couldn't get enough of them.

'Go left here. The new Skoda. 180 bhp, they're okay, actually.'

'We'll find out if you're right in a minute. How long've you been at Albany Road?'

'Two years. Bath before that, then a spell at Trinity Road.'

'Your accent?'

'I grew up in Edinburgh but we left when I was sixteen. We moved around a lot. Straight across here, sir, and keep going downhill till the next set of lights, then left and left again.'

Traffic really was appalling but using the siren sometimes made matters worse, people froze or blundered into each other. 'Keep telling me where I am so I'll learn the streets. I did spend a couple of hours with the A-Z a while back but it's not the same.' After the lights McLusky found

a stretch of miraculously drivable road, put his foot down and got blitzed by two speed cameras in short succession before having to slow right down again.

‘This is Broadmead, still faster through here this time of day.’

‘Trinity Road is district headquarters, right?’

‘Right. I hated it. Keep going, but try and get into the left laaaaane.’ Austin gripped the dashboard as McLusky braked abruptly so as to narrowly miss colliding with a biker who hadn’t expected a Skoda doing fifty across the junction. McLusky accelerated hard again and barged on through the traffic. ‘It does move, this thing. What’s the super like? I mean I have met him, of course, once, but that was formal. To work under?’

‘Ehm, Denkhaus?’ Austin sounded distracted as his DI drove across three lanes, getting snarled in traffic, weaving, bullying his way through. ‘Up Stokes Croft until I tell you. Ehm, he’s a no-nonsense copper, can suddenly become a stickler for procedure when the mood takes him. I have book-shaped indentations on my head to prove it. Someone suggested it always happens when he tries to lose weight. Sugar cravings.’ He pointed across the street. ‘Not a bad takeaway that, by the way.’

McLusky came up behind a bus going at walking pace. He worked the horn, mounted the pavement and managed to overtake in the space between two lamp posts. Just.

Austin kept his eyes firmly shut until he felt the car regain the road.

‘I remember this bit, came down here on my way to the station. But keep up the directions. Albany Road a happy nick?’

‘Depends who you’re working with, but yeah, it’s all right, I suppose.’

McLusky parped his horn at a pedestrian who looked like he might just be thinking of stepping into the road.

Austin hung on tight and gave directions in good time since the inspector was already cornering with squealing

tyres. He didn't know a lot about the man and half of that was rumour. He was about five years older than himself, he guessed, thirty-three or -four. He'd transferred up to Bristol from Southampton after nearly getting himself killed in the line of duty there. University man and difficult with it, someone had said. And something about being a bad team player. Unpredictable. Not exactly what they needed at Albany. He sneaked a glance at the new DI. He seemed utterly relaxed despite driving at speed in a new town and an unfamiliar road system. Some system. 'Next left.'

McLusky didn't slow. 'I live down that street over there, next to the Italian grocer's.' He cornered and accelerated up the hill.

'Above Rossi's? What's it like? Left and directly right again.'

'The grocer's?'

'Your place.'

'Well . . . Quite cheap. Totally unmodernized, wonky floorboards, no central heating or anything.' No heating at all, now he came to think of it.

Austin shrugged. He could only dream of central heating. He and his fiancée had just scraped together enough for a tiny dilapidated end-of-terrace. Heating would have to wait. 'I quite like Montpelier, couple of good pubs round there. Go left, no idea what that's called, and right up the hill.

'Keep going, nearly there. Careful, there's often dopey schoolkids wandering across this street.'

McLusky worked the horn again. Austin had never driven through the city at this speed, not even with Blues and Twos. He hated to think what kind of speeds the DI reserved the siren for. McLusky drove up on the wrong side of the road, overtaking everything, barging through, getting a chorus of angry horn play in return.

'Turn right, that should be it.'

'Very leafy round here.' They certainly had the right place. There was no need to look for the paper on which

he had scribbled the name of the house. Just beyond the crest of the humpback street was the scene of the disturbance, unlike any domestic McLusky had yet attended in his eight years on the force. Spectators had gathered on the opposite side of the road. He pulled up and jumped out. They were intercepted by a distraught-looking constable. McLusky showed him his ID.

'I'm glad you're here, sir.'

'I bet you are. What the hell's going on?'

The drive of the squat detached house looked like a scrapheap. At various angles stood two squad cars, a BMW and what appeared to have been a green civilian Volvo. All four cars were utterly destroyed, their roofs caved in, windows missing, in fact there wasn't a single surface left undamaged on any of them. Behind all the battered metal, on the once well-kept lawn, stood an enormous wheeled digger, its engine growling, its hydraulic arm pivoting left and right, threatening two uniformed constables with oblivion. At the house the curtains were drawn at all the windows.

'It's a domestic, sir. The individual in the cab of the digger is a Mr Spranger and he is the owner of the house. He intends to destroy it.'

'Did he steal the digger?'

'No, he owns that too.'

'He owns the house and he owns the digger? Well, that's all right then. Why don't we let him?' McLusky shrugged. He hated domestics. Everyone hated domestics. There was nothing more tedious on the planet than people who needed the police to sort out their relationships.

'My sentiment entirely, but we can't. It appears Mrs Spranger is still inside. Though that doesn't seem to bother him. He's going to demolish it around her ears. Told us to clear off his property, sir, and when we didn't he attacked our vehicles. The other cars were already totalled when we got here.'

'Any sign of the woman?'

'No, sir.'

'Has anyone tried to enter the premises to see if there really is a woman in the house?' Because if there wasn't he'd pull those constables out of danger and let the lunatic get on with it.

'Constable Hanham tried and got chased right round the house by the digger. That's how the shed and the greenhouse at the back got it.'

McLusky watched as the burly red-faced man operating the digger took another swipe at an officer. He didn't like the odds. Spranger seemed to be shouting continuously though no one could hear what he was saying over the noise. He looked like a man about to explode. Perhaps he was going to give himself a heart attack and save them all some bother. 'Any ideas, DS Austin?'

Austin scratched the tip of his nose. 'Perhaps if we rushed the cab from both sides one of us could get to him and pull him off or snatch the keys out of the ignition.'

'Fair enough – you up for it then?'

The constable vigorously shook his head. 'With respect, sir, we tried that. He's locked himself in and I caught a nasty whack on my side when he suddenly swung the thing round.'

'Are you okay though? What's your name? Will you need medical attention?'

'I'll be all right. It's Constable Pym, sir.'

'Okay, Pym. Request an ambulance anyway. This looks like it has the potential to get painful for *someone*. And then make sure you keep those civilians out. And move those cars along.' The number of onlookers on the pavement was growing all the time and several cars had stopped in the lane. There were worried faces at an upstairs window in the house to the left, peering across at the noisy yellow digger swinging its bucket arm wildly from side to side. Pym, in his mud-stained uniform, walked off with a slight limp. The digger churned up the damp lawn with its five-foot wheels, lurching forward another yard towards the

front of the house, the constables jumping back but not prepared to give way. They'd soon be with their backs to the wall.

McLusky didn't like the look of it. 'Okay, we can't play cat and mouse with him all day. I think the fact that he hasn't actually touched the house yet is a good sign, but all the same. Go round to the right and attract the constables' attention and wave them off. As soon as they're clear I'll try and put the Skoda between him and the house.'

Austin scratched his nose harder. 'Do you think that's wise, sir?'

'No, I don't, but I can't think of anything else short of getting Armed Response out and letting them shoot the place up.' It was his first day back at work on a new force and he wasn't going to mark it by calling firearms officers to attend a domestic. He got into the Skoda and lightly closed the driver door. To make sure of getting out again he also wound down all the windows, then started the engine. Automatically he reached up to pull down the seatbelt, then thought better of it. This was one journey where a seatbelt might just be a hazard. He started the engine and patted the dashboard. 'Been nice knowing you.'

It took a moment for Austin to get the constables' attention since they were concentrating hard on not getting caught by the swinging bucket arm. When at last they both ran off to the right the digger swung in their direction, the moment McLusky had been waiting for. He drove on to the lawn, wheels not gripping well at first, then surged in a tight curve round the back and left of the digger. The Skoda's engine whined in first gear as he drove through what was left of brand new bedding plants in a half-moon bed. He was decimating a row of lavenders just as the digger suddenly swung back. McLusky stopped, threw the car into reverse and flew backwards at the huge yellow thing filling his mirrors. Wheel on full lock now but there was just not enough space left to aim the car properly between the front wheels of the monster. His car made

contact with the digger's right front wheel and got bounced back against the other one. The Skoda stalled. Time to get out. He tried the driver door but it wouldn't open far enough for him to squeeze through. The giant wheel blocked his window too. He could see the digger's arm travel up, like a fist drawn back before the deciding punch.

Passenger side. He scabbled across just as the bucket landed a crumpling blow on the bonnet, bouncing him hard against the roof of the car. A jacket pocket caught on the gear shift. He yanked it free. The door was no use. Head first out of the passenger window, chest and groin scraping painfully over the sill, hands first on the ground, wriggling and kicking himself free just as the bucket smashed through the windscreen and the digger bucked and growled.

'Play with that for a bit, my friend.' He made off towards the left, on all fours at first, then ran around that side of the house. Evidence that the digger had come through here once before was everywhere. Wheelie bin, recycling, firewood shelter all tossed aside or splintered, a giant scrape along the flank of the house. Spranger must have seen him but by the sounds of it was taking it out on the Skoda, as he had hoped. Around the next corner. An aluminium greenhouse stood crumpled and glassless, the potting shed a slant of splinters. At the back of the house he was faced with the choice between a large curtained picture window and a kitchen door. He tried both, finding them locked. The key was in the lock on the inside of the half-glazed kitchen door. Having pounded his fist on both doors and neither seen nor heard a thing from inside, he picked up a heavy glazed pot full of sodden compost and heaved it unceremoniously through the glass of the kitchen door, shattering it completely. He reached through and let himself in. The pot had broken too and vomited its contents on to the kitchen floor.

'Mrs Spranger? I'm a police officer. Are you there?' He rushed through the kitchen, the hall and the enormous sitting room with picture window, large modern fireplace and sofas but saw nobody. In the fish-tank twilight produced by the green curtains McLusky kept calling. As he turned to search upstairs a small sound like a grunt or a suppressed groan stopped him. Back in the sitting room he circled the group of furniture. Cross-legged on the floor behind a two-seater sofa sat a middle-aged woman with wild blonde hair.

'Mrs Spranger?'

She was wearing a quilted sky-blue dressing gown and fluffy white slippers and clutched a brimful tumbler of Southern Comfort. McLusky could smell it. He hated the stuff. The woman looked up, lifted one buttock and farted.

'Mrs Spranger, I'm a police officer, Detective Inspector McLusky. Your husband is threatening to demolish the house. I would like you to come with me to a safe place until . . . the issue is resolved.' He sounded like a twit even to himself.

Her voice was hoarse from crying and shouting and heavy with alcohol. 'He can fuck off, the two-timing creep. I'll keep the house, he can fuck off to his tart. Go and arrest the fucking bastard, he trashed my fucking car!'

'We intend to, Mrs Spranger. Only I don't think it is safe to stay here at present. He seems pretty determined to attack the house with a digger. Come with me, please.' He reached out a hand, offering to help her up.

She slapped it away. 'Huh! I bloody won't. Go and take the bastard away, that's what I called you for. Anyway, you could be anybody, couldn't you? Was that you breaking the windows? Show me some identification.'

'Yes, sorry about the window, I couldn't attract your attention, Mrs Spranger. I do think it's urgent that we get you out of here.' The noise and shouting outside had intensified. He held out his ID but she didn't look at it. 'I really think we should leave now, Mrs Spranger.'

She concentrated on her glass of Southern Comfort. 'Bollocks to that. He'll never dare do anything while he knows I'm in here. That's why the house is still standing. The bastard squashed my car. Arrest him. You're useless. You're all useless. Just piss off. He might not love me any more but he loves this house, he'll never do anything to it.'

A crashing and the sound of splintering wood contradicted her. McLusky had had enough. Manoeuvring behind the woman he grabbed her under the armpits and pulled her up. She twisted and screeched her protest, slopping Southern Comfort over both of them. As he bundled her towards the picture window the house shook. He'd intended to get her out by the inset door but she suddenly wriggled free and ran to the hall where clouds of brick and plaster dust billowed. She strutted into it, shouting abuse, throwing the now empty glass at her adversary. McLusky plunged after her, the dust stinging in his eyes and lungs, making him cough. The woman's verbal onslaught had also been cut short by a coughing fit. A large hole gaped where the front door and window had once been and the threatening digger filled the gap, its bucket arm reaching deep into the hall. It jerked up, once, twice, bashing at the ceiling. Mrs Spranger retreated towards him just as the bucket swung sideways and pushed over parts of the first interior wall. He grabbed her arm and hastened her retreat, pushing her in front of him as they were overtaken by another cloud of dust and the crash of falling masonry. In the kitchen Mrs Spranger stalled. 'Look at the fucking mess in here.' The walls shook again. It took considerable strength to push the woman out of her kitchen, even though the ground shook under her feet. Once outside he managed to pull her along by one arm while she clutched at her dressing gown and released a torrent of abuse at him, at her husband and at the constables who took over and ushered her to safety. The street was now full of onlookers, some with cameras and camcorders. The ambulance arrived.

McLusky kept coughing and spitting out plaster dust as he stood on the lawn to watch the end game. One corner of the house had now collapsed, taking large chunks of roof with it. Most of the debris had fallen inwards. It looked like a bomb site. Spranger was still bashing away, but less frantic now, his expression businesslike. He slowly toppled another stack of bricks, then lazily nibbled at the edge of the roof which disintegrated in a shower of tiles.

DS Austin joined McLusky on the lawn. 'Are you all right, sir?'

'Yeah, sure.' He lit a cigarette, offering the pack.

'No thanks, sir, I gave up.'

'Me too.'

'Just the one then.' Austin eagerly lit his and sucked the smoke deep into his lungs. Then he frowned and checked the brand – Extra Lights. It was like smoking stale air. 'That was quite a performance, if I may say so, sir. Wish we had it on video, we could sell tickets down the station, make a fortune.' He jerked his head at the crumpled remains of the Skoda, now lying sideways on the churned-up lawn. 'You didn't get hurt?'

'Nope.' Strange though. He was nervous crossing the street but this hadn't scared him. Proactive. That's what the counsellor had called it anyway. As long as he was acting, taking charge, he was fine. Just standing still waiting for something to happen he couldn't bear. His clothes were a mess.

Austin sniffed. 'Southern Comfort? Did you find time for a quick drink, sir?' For a moment he thought he'd gone too far with this unknown quantity of a DI but McLusky raised a tired smile and brushed half-heartedly at his stained shirt and chinos.

The noise abated as the digger shuddered to a stop, its engine falling silent. Spranger got out and stood for a while staring at it all, trying to take it in. Half of his house had collapsed. Water cascaded where the digger had bit through the bathroom plumbing and the spare bedroom

had now slid into the kitchen. He could see through into the living room where everything was dull and dirty, covered in dust and debris. Only on the coffee table a glass paperweight sparkled in a thin ray of sunlight. He remembered. It had tiny starfish inside it. Probably not real. They had brought it back from a long weekend in Cornwall one autumn. Twelve years. All disappeared. Everything was fucked up. At least his headache was gone now, though his stomach cramps still came in hot waves like his anger. Two constables approached him across the debris-strewn lawn, reaching for handcuffs. God, they looked more like kids.

More Uniform turned up. Two fire engines and the press arrived. Firemen moved cautiously into the rubble to secure water, gas and electricity. The place became very busy all of a sudden. Another ray of sun pierced the fast-moving clouds. 'Oi, no smoking there.' A fireman gestured angrily at McLusky and Austin to put their cigarettes out.

McLusky flicked his cigarette into the lawn where it died with a hiss. 'Let's get out of here, we're no longer needed.' As if in confirmation a uniformed sergeant strutted on to the lawn and started asking questions and dispensing orders in all directions. Mopping up time.

Austin found a likely victim amongst the constables securing the scene. 'Ah, Hanham, glad I found you. You can give us a lift to the station. Our transport is . . . temporarily out of action.'

'Temporarily, sir?' Hanham looked back at the battlefield and the crumpled lump of the Skoda. He'd seen the result of the stunt the new DI had pulled. What a nutter.

Austin shrugged. 'Yeah well, the build quality isn't what it was, they make 'em from tinfoil now.'

McLusky pulled his soiled shirt away from his torso for a better look. 'Drove well though – I'm thinking of buying one myself. I need to change into fresh clothes.' He let himself fall on to the rear seat and spoke to the tidily barbered back of the constable's head. 'Drive us to Northmoor Street first, will you?'

'Sure.' Hanham stole a glance at his senior passenger in his mirror. Typical CID. Not a care in the world. The new DI just destroyed a nearly-new car and now he was worried about a stain on his shirt. If muggings here got as much as a dent in the bodywork of this car he'd never hear the end of it, he'd be spending forever filling in forms. If he wrote it off he'd consider his career more or less finished. CID. They lived on another planet altogether. No one had ever suggested to him that he might make detective one day. He'd stay in uniform forever. And between now and retirement there'd be plenty of chances of dying in it, too.

'Find yourself a parking space, the inspector won't be long, I'm sure.' Austin stood in Northmoor Street holding the door on the little panda car, letting his superior get out.

McLusky hesitated on the pavement. He needed another shower but didn't want to leave Austin waiting in the car. Only his place was a shambles. Hanham would be accustomed to being abused this way and probably thought him a prat anyway. He could send them away and walk back to the station but it looked like rain again. What the hell. He'd never keep up the pretence that he led a normal life. 'Here.' He fished a crumpled banknote from his pocket.

Austin touched one finger to an imaginary cap in salute. 'A tip, sir? That's very kind, am I to share with the driver?'

'Get us all a coffee from Rossi's and bring ours up, I'll leave the doors open, first floor. D'you mind?'

'Not at all.'

'Ask them to put them in real cups, I can't stand polystyrene. Tell them we're honest cops and we'll return them.'

Upstairs he stripped off his clothes and threw them into the corner with the rest of the stuff that was heading for the launderette. He opened his spacious wardrobe and rummaged for a clean pair of trousers. All he turned up was a pair of jeans, slightly frayed at the hem. He found a nearly ironed shirt that would have to do.

The gas from the boiler caught with a bark but he was prepared for it this time. The water didn't seem to mix

properly and somehow managed to feel hot and cold at the same time. Plaster dust and grit sluiced from his hair, he could feel it travel down his back. DS Austin seemed all right. Straightforward, didn't ask unnecessary questions and had a sense of humour. Most CID humour consisted of schoolkid pranks and bad jokes which could get tiring after a while but Austin didn't seem the type.

The towel was still damp from his earlier shower and refused to dry him properly. Normal people, *real* grown-ups, probably always had a stack of freshly laundered fluffy bath towels in the airing cupboard. He was still waiting for the day when he'd wake to find he was grown up and mature, the way others seemed to manage so effortlessly, and discover that he had an airing cupboard.

'Room service, hello.'

'Take it into the kitchen, won't be a sec.'

He dressed quickly. A blow-dryer would come in handy, too, now that his hair was getting quite long. It was already beginning to recede a bit and keeping it longer hid that well.

'Real cups, as ordered.' Austin handed back the bank-note. 'And it appears they take a warrant card.'

'You didn't ask for it, though.' McLusky spoke sharply. He disapproved of police officers who solicited free stuff from civilians. Accepting an offer was sometimes the judicious thing to do, asking for it definitely wasn't.

'Course not.' Austin dismissed it. 'Quite . . . minimalist in here. In a cluttered kind of way.'

While they leant against the kitchen counter and drank their cappuccinos McLusky quizzed Austin some more about the area. Downstairs Constable Hanham poured his coffee into the gutter. He hated the stuff but of course no one had thought to ask him what he actually wanted. A simple cup of decent Earl Grey tea is what he would have said, though he doubted you could get such a thing in a foreign shop like that.

Ten minutes later McLusky once more climbed into the

back of the patrol car. He hated being driven so much that he could never stop himself from working imaginary brake pedals, which was why he felt it was safer to keep his feet out of sight in the back. Hanham drove off in the opposite direction to the one he himself would have chosen.

The constable knew that the long way round often saved time. McLusky made careful mental notes, taking everything in like a camera as Austin continued to point out the landmarks, Queen's Road, the Triangle, Browns. Sitting behind Hanham McLusky peered right up a side street and glimpsed a dirty mushroom of smoke growing skywards from among the trees. Half a second later the sound wave of an explosion hit the car like a roll of thunder.

'What the fuck?' Hanham flicked on Blues and Twos and cut across traffic, raced up the narrow street. 'It's in Brandon Hill, this side of the tower.' He drove as far as he could towards the park, then braked sharply. All three officers bailed out of the vehicle and ran along the paths, then uphill across the grass towards the source of the explosion. The plume of smoke now had a ball of fire in its centre, licking twenty foot high towards a stand of trees. People were shouting. Hanham on his radio was breathlessly calling for back-up, ambulance and fire brigade even before they all came to a panting halt at the scene.

A boy and a middle-aged woman were lying on the path that wound around the rise. A wooden structure blazed on the other side of it, halfway up the hill crowned by Cabot's Tower. Debris of the explosion was everywhere. Several people were sitting or standing, nursing cuts and splinters, dazed with shock. Small children were screaming throughout the park, scared by the sudden noise. McLusky noticed different reactions among the people in the park. The cautious were moving away, distressed, or dialling on their mobiles. Others were shouting, rushing towards the scene from all over the park. Some came intending to help, most stopped at a distance they deemed safe, watching. An elderly woman sat hyperventilating on the grass. The

teenage boy was wailing, hands clutched to his face, blood dripping from between his fingers. Several civilians were tending to him. The shockwave seemed to have set off every car alarm in the neighbourhood. Hanham ran back to the patrol car for the first aid kit. McLusky knelt by the second prone victim. The woman lay motionless among debris and supermarket shopping on the path. Her face was grey. A little blood trickled from her right ear into the straw of her hair. She looked dead. He pulled off her scarf and felt around for a pulse. It took him a while to detect it. It felt weak to him but despite his job he didn't consider himself to be an expert in vital signs. He thought of putting her in the recovery position but didn't like the look of the bleeding ear. What if her skull was fractured?

'Is she alive?'

He looked up at Austin. 'Barely, I think.' He felt helpless, useless, but pushed the feeling back, swallowing it down. 'What the hell happened here? What was that thing that blew up there?' He gestured with his head at the smoking fire at the centre of the devastation. He was a stranger in town again, he had no idea what this place ought to look like.

'Eh? Ehm, it was just some sort of rustic shelter with benches all round. Kids use it for snogging and cider drinking. Tramps sleep in it sometimes. Uniform move them on.'

'So it was just . . . wooden? I mean, I can see it was, but there was nothing else to it, nothing in it that could blow up like that? It's one hell of a blaze. Can you smell petrol?'

Austin nodded grimly. 'Yeah, that's not a simple wood fire. But it was just a big wooden shelter on a concrete base. Nothing else to it.'

'It was a bomb then. Must have been.' A thin mist of rain began to fall. He looked around him. Constable Hanham was trying to help the howling boy but couldn't persuade him to move his hands off his face. Austin was circling the burning jumble of timber, shooing away some kids. A

young woman had appeared next to McLusky, bending down to the victim. 'I'm a nurse.' She spoke in a matter-of-fact way, as though unaffected by what had happened, and proceeded to check that the woman's airways were clear, and covered her body with her coat.

That's what I should have done, McLusky thought, I'm useless. He could hear the first sirens over the screeching and warbling of the car alarms. A small crowd of onlookers had gathered. People were taking photographs; some had camcorders, every other person appeared to be snapping away on mobiles. He pulled out his own and began to do the same, taking a 360 degree shot of the scene of destruction, confusion, anxiety, curiosity. Where was the bloody ambulance? The first to arrive were a couple of patrol cars at the bottom of the hill. They parked some way off on the grass, knowing that fire and ambulance had to come through soon. Thinking ahead, professional. Next to arrive were the fire engines. By now there wasn't much of a fire to put out; the drizzle had increased, keeping the flames down.

A constable pointed a fireman in his direction.

'You in charge here?'

'For the time being. I'm DI McLusky.'

'I'm Barrett, senior fire officer.' He stood next to McLusky and watched his officers deal swiftly and efficiently with the incident, looking after the victims, damping down what was left of the fire. 'CID? You got here quickly. We usually get to incidents long before you lot. You'd send Uniform to scout first, surely?'

'We were passing, heard the explosion. It was quite a bang. I'm no expert but I suspect it doesn't take much to blow up a wooden shelter. Someone made very sure it would go up properly. We could feel the shockwave. Some people got blown over standing twenty yards away.'

'My guess is some kind of accelerant was used, too. There was no warning?' There was suspicion in the man's voice. 'You weren't here because you got a call . . .?'

'Nothing like that. My DS would have mentioned something if things were likely to go bang in this town.' *My DS.* He indicated Austin who was locked in an argument with a tourist about relinquishing the memory card of his camera to him so they could examine the images on it. Camcorder man didn't look happy. 'I think I'd have been made aware of any bomb threats, even though it's my first day here.'

'I know.'

McLusky widened his eyes at him.

'It might be your first day but you do keep busy, DI McLusky. You attended the Nunnery Lane incident earlier but then disappeared before I could talk to you. The house will have to be pulled down, by the way. Let us have your report on that as soon as you can. It's certainly a weird one.'

'Is it?' McLusky didn't think so. People used the weapons that came to hand. If they had sticks they'd use sticks, if you gave them guns they'd use guns. He thought he understood the appeal of a wheeled digger. He squinted with worry into the worsening rain. It would take some creative writing to show that he had made best use of the equipment by stuffing the Skoda under the digger.

'You formed any opinions as to who and why yet, inspector? Terrorism? Here?'

'Strange target for a terrorist. When did they take to blowing up park benches?'

'What then, vandals?'

'Don't know yet. But I intend to find out.'

At last the ambulances arrived, fifteen minutes after Hanham had made the call, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Both the boy and the unconscious woman were stretchered off and driven away very soon with Blues and Twos. Those with minor injuries were being assessed by paramedics on the grass opposite the smouldering remains of the shelter. Most injuries came down to splinters and bruises where wooden debris had thumped into bodies. In the end only two more casualties, both suffering from

shock, were sent up to the Royal Infirmary. The hyper-ventilating woman recovered enough to be collected by a relative in a taxi.

Austin arrived by McLusky's side, holding several memory cards he had requisitioned from cameras and mobiles, and nodded at the large grey Ford coming to a halt behind the collection of emergency vehicles at the bottom of the hill. 'Super's here.'

The arrival of Superintendent Denkhous electrified the constable guarding that end of the road. Denkhous walked straight at him and at the police tape as though neither existed. The constable lifted the tape high over the man's head and the burly policeman walked through without acknowledgement. He was aiming at him, McLusky noticed, but the superintendent's face gave nothing away. After what Austin had said earlier he hoped the man wasn't on a diet.

Denkhous pointed a fleshy digit as he approached and stopped just short of poking his new DI in the chest with it. 'DI McLusky, you had an appointment with me at nine o'clock this morning.' His voice boomed loud enough for several uniforms to turn their heads.

'I know, I'm sorry, sir, something urgent came up.' He put on what he thought of as his reasonable face.

'I heard all about it. You'd be surprised how quickly news of the complete annihilation of police property travels on this force. You chose to intervene in what was clearly not a CID matter even though you had business elsewhere. With me. Next time I ask you to my office, and I think that might happen very, very soon, you'll make it a priority and will get there on time. Clear?'

'Very clear, sir.'

'I bloody well hope so. So what the fuck happened here?'