

WHITE LIES

By STEPHEN LEATHER

‘It’s the ultimate earner, mate, better than drugs, better than guns, better than anything.’ The speaker was a dark-haired man in a black pea-coat. Alistair Coatsworth, Ally to his friends. He was forty-nine years old but looked a decade older. ‘People pay thousands to get into the UK. Thousands.’ His nose and cheeks were flecked with broken blood vessels, the result of years at sea and a taste for strong liquor.

There were three men sitting at the table listening intently as they finished off their plates of steak and chips. They were on their second bottle of red wine and a third had already been opened. They were in a small restaurant in a coastal village between Calais and Dunkirk, close to the border with Belgium. They had a table by a roaring fire that had shadows flickering over the roughly plastered walls.

Coatsworth waved his knife in the air for emphasis. ‘It’s the Wild West over here, mate. You can make money hand over fist if you know what you doing. I’ve got a pal who smuggles them on to trucks for a grand a go. He pays the driver two hundred of that and keeps eight hundred for himself. Gets maybe five on a truck. He makes four grand and the driver gets one. They almost never get caught but, if they do, the driver just says they snuck on and he knows nothing.’

‘Sound good,’ said the man sitting opposite him. His name was Andy Bell. He was a few years younger than Coatsworth, his face burned from exposure to the sun. He was wearing a heavy green polo-necked jumper, combat trousers and Timberland boots.

‘He’s got an even better deal with trucks that have been built with

secret compartments. Usually when the driver owns his own rig. You can build a compartment that holds three or four and they'll never be found. He can charge four grand a go for that and the driver takes half. So that's two grand a person, six grand a run.'

'Why the fifty-fifty split?' asked Bell.

'It's obvious,' said another of the men at the table. Bruno Mercier was an Algerian, short and stocky with a crew cut and a diamond stud in his left ear. 'Because if they get caught in a secret compartment, the driver can't say he didn't know.'

'But most trucks aren't checked, right?' asked Bell.

'They don't have time,' said Coatsworth. 'Dover would grind to a halt if they searched every vehicle. The only problem is finding the right driver. That's not easy. At least doing what we're doing, we're not beholden to anyone. No one can let us down. And more importantly, no one can grass us up.'

Bell nodded and popped another piece of steak into his mouth.

Coatsworth emptied his glass and refilled it. He tried to pour more into Bell's glass but Bell put his hand over the top. 'It'll help keep out the cold,' said Coatsworth. 'The English Channel gets bitter at night.'

'Go on, then,' said Bell, taking away his hand.

Coatsworth topped up Bell's glass. 'I'll have some of that,' said the fourth man at the table. Frankie Rainey was in his late twenties. He'd hung his fleece jacket over the back of his chair and had rolled up the sleeves of his denim shirt to reveal a tattoo on each forearm: a galleon in full sail and a dagger with a snake wound around it. One of his front teeth had gone black and the rest were stained from coffee and cigarettes. Coatsworth filled his glass.

'Business is good, yeah?' said Bell.

'That's why we need you,' said Coatsworth, putting the bottle back on

the table. 'I was getting backed up.'

'Where are you getting them from?' asked Bell. 'It's not as if you can advertise smuggling runs to the UK, is it?'

'I pay some middlemen to cruise around Calais and the other jumping-off ports,' said Coatsworth. 'We need a particular sort of refugee. Ideally some government official or army guy from Iraq or Afghanistan or Syria who's managed to grab a decent wad before running away with his family. We're looking for the happy medium. We don't want the ones with no money. And if the guy's got megabucks he can just buy his way into the UK by paying for passports.'

'What, real ones? Real passports?'

'Depends,' said Coatsworth. 'The really rich ones get the red-carpet treatment; invest a million quid in the UK and you and your family can all get passports. But twenty grand or so will get you a genuine passport, probably from some UK-born Asian who's never left the country. He applies for a passport then sells it and forgets about travelling for ten years. But passports aren't easy to get and we offer a cheaper way in. The trick is to find the ones with cash. It's just a matter of separating the wheat from the chaff.'

'The chaff being what?'

Coatsworth laughed. 'The chaff being the morons with nothing, the ones who climb into refrigerated vans and freeze to death. My middlemen make sure that the clients have the cash to pay.'

'Always cash?'

'Mostly,' said Coatsworth. 'Dollars, euros or pounds, no funny Arab money, though. So long as it adds up to three grand sterling, I'm happy. But I've taken gold in the past. And jewellery.' He pushed the sleeve of his jacket up his arm and showed Bell the watch on his wrist. It was gold Rolex. 'Got this off an Iraqi doctor. It's the real thing, it'd cost you

twenty grand in a jeweller's.'

'It's genuine, right?'

Coatsworth scowled and held the watch under Bell's chin. 'Of course it's bloody genuine. I'm not stupid. You can tell by the way the second hand moves. If it's jerky it's a fake. If it moves smoothly, it's real.'

Bell looked at the watch and pulled a face. 'I thought it was the other way around,' he said.

Coatsworth frowned and pulled back his arm. He stared at the second hand and his frown deepened.

Rainey and Mercier burst out laughing but stopped when Coatsworth glared at them. 'I'm yanking your chain,' said Bell. 'It's kosher. You can tell just by looking at it. Quality.'

'Yeah,' said Coatsworth. He tapped the watch. 'We should be heading out soon,' he said. 'We've got to meet the van in ten minutes.'

Bell sipped his wine. 'So you think this is good money, long-term?' he asked.

'Best you'll ever see,' said Coatsworth. He leaned across the table. 'I've been doing this for eighteen months now. During the summer the weather's good enough for maybe twenty-five days. Less during spring and autumn. I've not done a winter yet but even then there'll be days when I can do a run. The summer months, I was doing two runs a day. Eight customers each trip, that's sixteen a day. Sixteen a day is forty-eight grand. OK, I've got costs. I pay the middlemen in France and I pay a guy to handle transport in the UK, and there's fuel and expenses, but I can still clear forty-five grand a day. A day, mate. In August alone I pulled in more than a million quid.'

'So what do you do with all the money, that's too much cash to hide under the bed.'

'I've got a guy who does my laundry,' said Coatsworth. 'He lives on

Jersey, I take a run out to see him every month and leave the cash with him. He gets it into the banking system for a fee of ten per cent.’ He nodded at Rainey. ‘Frankie uses the same guy.’

‘That’s a lot, ten per cent,’ said Bell. He put his knife and fork down and belched. ‘Better out than in,’ he said.

Coatsworth shook his head. ‘It’s cheap as chips, mate. If you ever do get done the first thing they do is to go looking for the money and take it off you. My money’s in shell companies and trusts all around the world, safe from their grubby little hands. It’s worth paying ten per cent for. Trust me.’ He frowned. ‘What do you do with your money, then?’

‘Spend it,’ said Bell. His face broke into a grin. ‘But then I haven’t been earning a million quid a month. Running tourists out to the Holy Island doesn’t bring in the big bucks.’

‘Yeah, well, now you’re with me that’ll change. And you need to start thinking about what you’re going to do with the money you earn. The reason I brought you in is because I’m getting more customers than I can handle myself. It’s a growing market, mate, and you’ll grow with it.’ He looked at his watch again, drained his glass and stood up. ‘Time to go,’ he said, dropping a fifty-euro note on to the table and waving at the waiter, a grey-haired man in his fifties who doubled as the restaurant’s barman.

‘I need the toilet,’ said Bell.

‘Bladder like a marble,’ said Rainey.

‘Be quick about it,’ said Coatsworth. ‘We’ll be in the car.’

Bell hurried off to the toilet while Coatsworth, Rainey and Mercier headed outside and climbed into a large Mercedes. Rainey got into the driving seat and Coatsworth sat next to him. ‘Your mate’s not in there throwing up I hope,’ said Coatsworth.

‘He’ll be fine,’ said Rainey. He lit a cigarette and then offered the

pack to Coatsworth. Coatsworth took one and handed the pack back to Mercier. 'He's short of a bob or two,' Rainey continued. 'He borrowed from the bank to buy his boat and he's having trouble with the payments. Did you see the look on his face when you asked him what he did with his money? He was thinking about selling his boat, things were that bad.'

'I hope it works out with him,' said Coatsworth. 'With two boats we make twice as much money.'

'Amen to that,' said Rainey. He started the engine.

The door to the restaurant opened and Bell jogged over to the car and climbed in the back next to Mercier. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Better to do it here than at sea, right?'

Rainey edged the car out of the car park and on to the main road to Dunkirk. Bell wound down the window and let the breeze play over his face.

'You've never been a smoker, Andy?' asked Mercier.

'Nah,' said Bell.

'You should take it up, now you're on this crew. We smoke like chimneys.'

'I think I'm getting a nicotine high from the secondary smoke,' said Bell.

They drove to a garage that had closed for the night and parked behind it. 'Where the fuck are they?' asked Coatsworth. He looked at his watch and scowled.

'I'll call him,' said Rainey. He pulled out his mobile phone but before he could make the call a large white Renault van pulled on to the garage forecourt and switched off its lights. It drove slowly around the garage and stopped next to the Mercedes.

Coatsworth climbed out, dropped what was left of his cigarette on to the tarmac and ground it out with his boot. Mercier and Bell joined him.

The driver of the van was a middle-aged Frenchman wrapped up in a sheepskin jacket and a thick red wool scarf wound several times around his neck. He climbed out of the cab and hugged Coatsworth, his breath reeking of garlic and brandy. ‘We have a problem,’ said the Frenchman as he broke away.

‘I pay you so I don’t have any problems,’ said Coatsworth.

The Frenchman looked pained. ‘One of them, he didn’t come up with the money.’

‘He’s in the van?’

The Frenchman nodded.

‘Why the hell’s he in the van? You know the deal, Alain. No money, no passage. If he doesn’t have the cash, he doesn’t get in the van.’

‘It’s complicated,’ said the Frenchman. ‘He’s with his family.’

‘Do I give a shit?’

‘He said he wanted to talk to you. I didn’t see the harm.’

‘You mean you want me to do your job, is that it? Well, how about you give me back the commission for the whole family? How about that?’

‘Ally, my friend, come on ...’

‘Don’t give me that, you fat French fuck. I pay you to make sure that everything goes smoothly, not to bring the problems to me.’ He shook his head. ‘This ain’t right, Alain.’

‘He’s got kids.’

‘Yeah? You’ve got kids and I’ve got kids, we’ve all got kids. Having kids doesn’t get you a free pass in life.’

The Frenchman held up his hands. ‘I’m sorry. You’re right.’

‘I know I’m right,’ said Coatsworth. He gestured at the van. ‘OK, get them out.’ He turned to Bell and Mercier. ‘You need to search them. No weapons and no drugs. One bag each. They know that’s the deal so don’t

take any shit from them.’

The Frenchman pulled open the rear doors. There were sixteen people sitting on the floor of the van: men, women and children. ‘*Sortez!*’ he said. ‘Get out!’

The first man out was a young Somalian, tall and with a wicked scar running down his left cheek. He was carrying a Manchester United holdall.

‘Over there,’ said Coatsworth, pointing to the front of the van.

Three Middle Eastern men were next out, all in jeans and pullovers and wearing heavy overcoats. ‘Where is the boat?’ asked one in a thick accent.

‘We search you, you pay, then we go to the boat,’ said Coatsworth.

‘We want to see the boat first,’ said the man.

‘No, you pay me first. Or you can fuck off. I don’t care which.’

The three men talked among themselves as they walked towards the front of the van. The one who had done the talking looked over his shoulder but looked away when he saw that Coatsworth was glaring at him.

A man and a woman climbed out of the van with a small boy who couldn’t have been more than six or seven years old. The boy was holding a toy dog and looking around excitedly as if he were on his way to a fairground. The woman had a black headscarf and the man was wearing a Muslim skullcap. The man was carrying two suitcases and the woman held the boy’s free hand.

‘Come on, come on,’ said Coatsworth. ‘We haven’t got all night.’

Three Somalian teenagers climbed out and stood looking around. They were carrying supermarket carrier bags stuffed with clothes. They were all tall and gangly, well over six feet. ‘What’s their story?’ Coatsworth asked the Frenchman.

‘Their father’s already in London. He sent them the money to come over. They’re OK. Good kids.’

Coatsworth pointed for the teenagers to go to the front of the van where Bell was patting down the three in the big coats. Mercier was on his knees, going through a suitcase.

‘This is the guy,’ said the Frenchman. ‘He’s Iraqi.’

A middle-aged man in a heavy leather jacket climbed out of the van. He held up his arms to lift down a small boy, then offered his hand to help down a teenage girl. His wife then handed him three large blue nylon holdalls and one by one he placed them on the ground before helping her down. The wife and daughter were wearing long coats and headscarves.

‘Does he speak English?’ Coatsworth asked the Frenchman. The Frenchman nodded.

Coatsworth pointed at the man. ‘I want a word with you,’ he said. The man hesitated so Coatsworth grabbed him by the arm and frogmarched him over to the Mercedes. ‘Where’s my money?’ he asked.

The Iraqi reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out an envelope. Coatsworth snatched it from him. It contained hundred-euro notes and Coatsworth flicked through them. ‘There’s only fifteen thousand euros here,’ he shouted. ‘That’s not what we agreed. You have to pay twenty thousand. What game are you fucking playing?’

The man’s wife was looking at them anxiously. Her son began to cry and she picked him up and whispered into his ear. The young girl slipped her arm through the woman’s and bit down on her lower lip as she watched Coatsworth argue with her father.

‘I gave him the deposit,’ said the Iraqi, gesturing at Alain. ‘Five hundred euros each. Two thousand euros.’

‘The deposit gets you on the list,’ said Coatsworth, waving the

envelope in the man's face. 'The real money gets you on the boat. The fee is four grand a head. Four thousand pounds. Or five thousand euros. That's the fee and you were told that before you signed on for this.'

'My son is only three years old,' protested the man. 'He is a child.'

'Four thousand pounds a head,' said Coatsworth. 'He's got a head, hasn't he? Four heads, sixteen thousand pounds. Or twenty thousand euros.'

The man held out his hands, palms up. 'I don't have twenty thousand euros. I have fifteen thousand. That's all I have.' There were tears in his eyes and his hands were trembling.

'Bollocks,' said Coatsworth. 'You've got money, you're just trying to cheat me and I'll tell you now that's not going to work.'

The man's wife shouted something in Arabic and the man turned and shouted back at her.

Coatsworth put a hand on the man's shoulder. 'Don't talk to her, talk to me,' he snarled.

'I don't have twenty thousand euros,' he said. 'Not in cash. It's in a bank. I can pay you when we get to England.'

'Yeah, my cheque'll be in the post and you won't come in my mouth,' said Coatsworth.

The Iraqi frowned. 'I don't understand,' he said.

'Then understand this. No money, no trip. You've enough for three people so I'll take three of you. One of you will have to stay behind.' He looked at the watch on the man's wrist. It was a cheap Casio. 'Does your wife have any jewellery? Any gold?'

The man shook his head. 'We were robbed when we were in Turkey.' The man's wife walked towards them, the boy in her arms, and said something in Arabic to the man. He replied, and she started talking faster, her free arm waving in the air.

‘Bruno, get over here!’ Coatsworth called to Mercier. Mercier closed the suitcase he was searching and jogged over.

The Iraqi was speaking to his wife in Arabic. Coatsworth turned to Mercier. ‘What’s he saying?’

Mercier moved closer to Coatsworth. ‘She’s saying she thinks they should wait. And find another way to England. Says she doesn’t like you.’

Coatsworth laughed harshly. ‘Doesn’t like me? Doesn’t fucking like me?’ He pointed his finger at the woman. ‘You can fuck off back to Arab-land for all I care,’ he shouted. ‘There are plenty of people more than happy to pay me. You and your whole family can just fuck off and I’ll get someone else to take your place.’

The woman glared at him defiantly. Her husband stepped in front of her and began talking animatedly.

‘What’s he saying now?’ Coatsworth asked Mercier.

‘He’s calming her down,’ said the Algerian. ‘He says they’re to go ahead and he’ll follow once he’s got the cash.’ He listened for a few seconds and then nodded. ‘They’ve got family in Milton Keynes. Her uncle and her aunt. He wants her to stay with them until he gets over. Says he’ll get the money from the bank and come on the next run.’

Coatsworth nodded. ‘Finally he sees sense.’ A small group of men and women were still inside the van, watching what was going on. Coatsworth pointed at them. ‘Get the hell out now and bring your bags with you.’

The Iraqi man finished talking to his wife and came over to Coatsworth.

‘My wife, she is very upset,’ he said. ‘You have to understand, her brother and her cousin were killed this year. Her brother worked for the Ministry of the Interior and the Taliban weren’t happy about what he was

doing with border controls. Her cousin was a teacher and she was killed because she taught a lesson about female political leaders. The Taliban shot her in the face. We had to leave, you understand?’

‘I hear sob stories like yours all the time, mate,’ said Coatsworth. ‘I’m not a charity, I’m a business. You pay, you go, you don’t, you stay. When you’ve got the extra five thousand euros I’ll take you.’ He gestured at the road. ‘Now on your bike.’

‘My bike?’ The Iraqi frowned. ‘My bike? I have no bike.’

‘Get lost,’ said Coatsworth.

‘But how do I get back to Calais?’

‘That’s not my problem,’ said Coatsworth.

‘You have to help me,’ pleaded the Iraqi.

Coatsworth reached inside his coat and pulled out a gun, a small semi-automatic. He pointed it in the Iraqi’s face. ‘I don’t have to do anything,’ he said. ‘Now fuck off.’

The Iraqi looked over at Bell but Bell just folded his arms and stared back at him. Mercier said something to the Iraqi in Arabic and the Iraqi opened his mouth to say something back but then he had a change of heart and walked away, his head down. Coatsworth turned to look at the woman. She put her arms around the two children. ‘Up to you, you can go with him or you can come to England. I don’t care either way.’

The woman nodded slowly. ‘We will go with you,’ she said. There was no disguising the hatred in her eyes, but she managed to force a smile. ‘Thank you, for what you are doing. We do not want to cause you any trouble.’

Coatsworth nodded curtly and put his gun away. ‘Finish searching them,’ he said to Mercier. As the Algerian went over to the refugees, Coatsworth turned to watch the Iraqi walking down the road towards Calais. ‘Stupid bastard,’ he muttered under his breath.

Bell and Mercier finished searching the refugees. They had found two kitchen knives in the suitcase of one of the Arab men and all the Somalians had been carrying knives. Bell tossed the knives into the boot of the Mercedes.

‘Line them up and tell them to get their money out,’ Coatsworth said.

Mercier shouted at the group in rapid Arabic, French and English.

‘Line up and get your money out now!’

The refugees did as they were told. Coatsworth walked along the line, taking the money from them and checking it. Once it was checked, he handed the notes to Mercier, who put them in a black backpack. When he reached the Iraqi woman and her two children, Coatsworth grunted and waved at the van. One of the Somali teenagers helped her up.

When he reached the three Iraqi men, the one who had asked about the boat the first time had his chin up defiantly. ‘We want to see boat,’ he said.

‘Do you see any water here?’ asked Coatsworth.

The man frowned. ‘Water?’ he repeated.

‘The sea? Do you see the fucking sea? We’re two miles from the coast. When we get to the coast you’ll see the bloody boat.’ He held out his hand. ‘Now give me the money or you can walk back to Calais with that other prick.’

The man frowned, clearly not understanding what he was saying, so Coatsworth gestured at Mercier. ‘Tell him what I said and get them in the van.’ He took the backpack from Mercier, thrust in the last of the cash and took it over to the Mercedes. He tossed the backpack on top of the confiscated weapons and slammed the boot shut.

He got back into the Mercedes and watched the refugees climb into the van. The Frenchman slammed the doors shut and got back into the cab. Rainey offered him a cigarette and he took it. Rainey lit it and then

lit one for himself.

Bell and Mercier got into the back of the Mercedes. Rainey gave Mercier a cigarette and then put the car in gear and followed the van down the road. There was no traffic and they reached the small harbour in just five minutes. The van pulled up next to a line of fisherman's huts that had been locked up for the night. Rainey brought the Mercedes to a stop behind the van and switched off the headlights.

Two teenagers in heavy jackets and wool beanies walked over. Mercier wound down the window and spoke to them in rapid French. They answered. 'All good,' Mercier said to Coatsworth.

'Let's do it, then,' said Coatsworth. 'Open the boot, Frankie.'

Coatsworth climbed out of the car and went around to the back. He pulled out the backpack containing the money. Bell and Mercier joined him and retrieved their own bags.

Rainey got out and tossed the keys to one of the teenagers.

Coatsworth gestured at Mercier with his chin. 'Tell them no joyriding and they'd better be here when we get back.'

As Mercier translated Coatsworth's instructions, Rainey went around to the boot to get his bag, a Nike holdall. He slammed the boot shut.

The Frenchman had opened the van doors and the refugees climbed out and gathered together in a tight group like worried sheep.

'Right, get them on to the boats, now,' said Coatsworth. He waved goodbye to the Frenchman, who climbed into the van and drove off.

There was a gap in the sea wall leading to a flight of stone steps. At the bottom of the steps was a wooden jetty where two high-performance rigid inflatable boats were bobbing in the swell. Rainey and Mercier ushered the men, women and children down the stone stairs to the waiting ribs. Each was about twenty feet long with a solid hull surrounded by a flexible inflatable collar that allowed the vessel to stay afloat even if

swamped in rough seas. Each had a single massive Yamaha engine at the stern. There were few faster boats around, and these were certainly faster than anything owned by the UK's Border Force or HM Revenue and Customs. The boats were also virtually invisible to radar, making them the perfect smuggler's boat. Each had dual controls at the bow and a double bench seat in the centre with spaces for eight people and nylon seat belts to keep them securely in place.

Mercier and Rainey dumped their bags in the bow and helped the refugees into the boats.

'You didn't say anything about guns,' Bell muttered to Coatsworth.

'What, you think I'm gonna be wandering around in the dark with thirty grand in my bag without some way of protecting myself?' sneered Coatsworth. He pointed down at the Somalians who were fastening their seat belts. 'For all we know they could be bloody pirates. You think I'm going out to sea with people I don't know without a gun?' He gestured at the group, who were giving him anxious looks and muttering among themselves. 'Look, mate, the meek don't inherit the earth and they sure as hell don't get out of shitholes like Iraq and Afghanistan or those African countries where they chop off each other's arms. Anyone who has made it this far has had to lie, cheat, steal and probably done a lot worse. Thieves, warlords and murderers, the odd torturer or two, they're the ones who get this far.'

'She's a teacher, the wife of that guy you sent packing,' said Bell.

'Yeah, well, she's the exception,' said Coatsworth. 'And how do we know she's telling the truth? For all we know her husband could have been Saddam Hussein's torturer-in-chief. Do you think teachers and farmers and bus drivers can get the money to escape from Iraq and get here? Do you think nice smiley people with a song in their hearts claw their way out?' He shook his head. 'No, mate. The bastards are the ones

who make it out and they do it by climbing over everybody else. They do what it takes to survive.'

'You can't blame them for that,' said Bell.

'No, you can't. But the sort of ruthlessness that got them this far is the sort of ruthlessness that could lead to them knifing me when we're out at sea and throwing me overboard so that they get my money and my boat. That's why we search them before we put them on board and why I carry a big gun. Got it?'

'Got it,' said Bell.

'It's for protection.'

Bell held up his hands. 'I hear you, Ally. It's not a problem.'

'Good man. Now let's get this cargo delivered.'

'When are you going to tell me where we're going?' said Bell.

'I've given the GPS coordinates to Frankie,' said Coatsworth. 'Don't take it personal, mate. I'm the only one who knows the drop-off point.'

'Keeping your cards close to your chest? I can understand that.'

Coatsworth slapped him on the back. 'I've been doing this for a while and never come close to being caught,' he said. 'I want to keep it that way. Look, you'll see it on the GPS anyway. We're heading north, up to the Suffolk coast. Near a place called Southwold. It's a quiet beach. I've used it before.'

'That's a long trip,' said Bell. 'Close to a hundred miles.'

'A couple of hours,' said Coatsworth. 'The water's quieter up there and there's almost no Border Force activity. Not that it matters that much, our boats can outrun anything the government has. The only thing that can keep up with us is a helicopter and there's almost zero chance of us coming across one.' He slapped Bell on the back again and led him down the stairs. A thick chain had been fixed to the sea wall to give them something to hold on to as they made their way down.

Coatsworth climbed into the rib with Mercier. All the passengers were on board and Mercier was checking that they had all fastened their seat belts. Their luggage was lying on the floor, close to their feet.

Bell carefully climbed into his rib. It was a few feet longer than Coatsworth's and the seats were laid out slightly differently in four rows of two. His passengers were already strapped in. The Iraqi woman was sitting in the front row with her son on her lap. Her daughter was in the seat next to her.

Bell walked over to her and held on to the back of her seat for balance. 'Your boy needs to be in a seat,' he said.

She shook her head fiercely. 'He is too small. He will fall out.'

Bell looked at the boy and realised she had a point. He turned to Rainey. 'Frankie, there's a cupboard under your wheel with some life jackets in it. There's a kid's one there.'

Rainey bent down, pulled open a hatch, then straightened up with an orange life jacket in his hand. He tossed it to Bell and Bell handed it to the woman. 'Put that on your boy, just in case.'

He went up to the bow and knelt down to reach into the storage bay. He pulled out another seven life jackets.

'Ally never bothers,' said Rainey.

'Yeah, well, I'm the skipper of this boat and I'm bothering,' said Bell.

He went back down the rib, distributing the life jackets. When all his passengers were wearing them, he undid the ropes that kept the rib tethered to the jetty, sat down in the left-hand seat and started the engine. Rainey slid on to the right-hand seat. 'Frankie, you're not carrying a gun, are you?' asked Bell.

Ahead of them, Coatsworth started his engine. Rainey frowned. 'Why?'

'Why? Because I want to know if you're sitting there with a loaded

gun in your pocket, that's why.'

Rainey grinned. 'Yeah, the look on your face when Ally pulled out that gun. I thought you were going to piss yourself.'

'Nobody told me there'd be guns,' said Bell. Coatsworth turned and gave Bell a thumbs-up. Bell grinned and returned the gesture.

'Guns don't kill people, people kill people,' said Rainey.

'People with guns kill people without guns, that's generally how it works,' said Bell. 'Now do you have one or not?'

Rainey shook his head, then reached behind his back and pulled out a large hunting knife with a black handle. 'No gun, but I've got this little beauty if we have any problems.'

'Bloody hell, Frankie. Be careful you don't cut yourself with that.' Rainey grinned and put the knife away.

Coatsworth gunned his engine and his rib moved away from the jetty. Bell looked over his shoulder and checked that all his passengers were strapped in. He noticed that the young Iraqi boy's belt was loose so he waved at the mother and mimed for her to tighten it. She did as she was told, then put up the hood of the boy's anorak. Bell nudged the throttle forward and steered the rib to starboard to move away from the jetty. There was a quarter-moon and the sky was virtually cloudless so visibility was good even at that late hour. Bell pulled a pair of protective goggles from his pocket and put them on. At the speed the rib would be travelling, even a small insect could potentially blind him. Rainey entered the GPS coordinates into the onboard computer. After a few seconds a dotted line appeared on the display, connecting their current position to their destination on the Suffolk coast. Rainey pulled on his own goggles and flashed Bell a thumbs-up. 'Chocks away!' he shouted. 'And don't spare the horses!'

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Sea spray splattered across his goggles and Bell used his sleeve to wipe them clean. There was some traffic around – the English Channel was the busiest waterway in the world – but not enough to cause them any problems. There were freighters and container ships and a few miles away was a massive cross-Channel ferry heading towards the French coast. Bell was on his feet, leaning against the white plastic bucket seat behind him. He held the wheel with his right hand and gripped the throttle lever with his left. They were doing just under fifteen knots and the throttle wasn't even at the halfway point. The rib's single outboard engine, the biggest on the market, cost upwards of fifteen thousand pounds and was capable of generating three hundred horsepower. At close to its top speed of sixty knots the engine burned through eleven gallons an hour and the fifty-five gallons in the tank were more than enough to get them across the Channel and back.

Rainey was standing to Bell's right. He had a matching set of controls but he kept his hands away from them and held on to a grab rail for balance. Both men scanned the waves ahead of them, not just for other boats but for anything floating in the water that could rupture the hull or smash the propeller.

Coatsworth and Mercier were off on his port side, about a hundred yards away and slightly ahead of them. Mercier waved. Bell didn't want to take his hands off the controls so he shouted over at Rainey to wave back. Coatsworth pushed the throttle forward and the rib began to pull away. Bell took a look over his shoulder to check that his passengers were OK. They were huddled together in the middle of the boat, hanging on to the guide ropes. 'Hold on tight!' he shouted. The Iraqi woman hugged her son and whispered something into his ear.

Bell turned back to look ahead of the rib. The boat was smashing into the crests of the waves as it powered through the water. He had to grip the wheel tightly and his hand was vibrating on the throttle.

Coatsworth had already got close to full speed and his rib was planing over the tops of the waves, cutting across them like a knife. The rib was designed to lift above the waves once it reached fifteen or sixteen knots. There was a tilt lever on the steering wheel that changed the angle of the propeller relative to the hull and Bell adjusted it before pushing on the throttle. The massive engine roared behind him and the boat leapt forward. The moment it passed sixteen knots the juddering stopped and the boat planed across the top of the waves. Bell continued to move the throttle forward – twenty knots, thirty knots, forty knots. The night vision glasses protected his eyes from the slipstream but the wind was bitterly cold against his exposed skin.

Coatsworth's rib was several hundred yards ahead of him already and by the look of it had reached full speed. He wasn't worried about losing sight of the other rib as the GPS display was guaranteed to keep him on course. All he had to do was follow the dotted line on the display and it would take him straight to their destination on the Suffolk coast.

Bell pushed the throttle as far as it would go and the vessel's speed steadily increased. Fifty knots. Fifty-five. Sixty. Rainey shouted something but his words were lost in the slipstream. He shouted again and then pointed ahead. Bell saw what he was pointing at, a clump of something, rubbish or vegetation, about eighty yards ahead of them. The rib would probably cut through whatever it was but Bell didn't want to risk damaging the hull or the propeller so he steered the boat hard to port and missed whatever it was by yards before straightening up again.

The throttle was in the full-on position and Bell placed both hands on the wheel. It kicked and bucked as if it had a life of its own.

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After almost two hours skimming the tops of the waves, Bell finally saw the coastline ahead of them. Rainey was handling the steering. They had taken it in turns; the wheel bucked and kicked constantly and steering was so tiring they rarely managed fifteen minutes before having to hand over control.

‘Can you see the other boat?’ shouted Bell above the roar of the outboard engine.

Rainey shook his head.

Bell wiped his goggles with his sleeve and looked at the GPS screen. They were bang on the dotted line that led to their landing point. He looked up again and scanned the sea ahead of them but there was no sign of Coatsworth’s boat. He took a quick look over his shoulder. The passengers were all shivering. The Iraqi woman was clutching her son to her chest. Tears were streaming down her face but Bell couldn’t tell whether they were the result of the cold wind or whether she was crying.

‘I see him!’ shouted Rainey, pointing off to the starboard side. Spray splashed across Bell’s goggles and he pushed them up on to the top of his head and squinted into the wind. With no navigation lights, Coatsworth’s rib was just a black smudge in the water and it took Bell several seconds to see it.

‘He’s stopped,’ said Rainey.

‘Cut the engine,’ said Bell. He took out his mobile phone as Rainey brought the throttle back to neutral. The rib slowed and began to toss and turn in the waves. They were close enough to land to get a signal and he called Coatsworth. ‘Where are you, I can’t see you,’ growled Coatsworth as soon as he answered.

‘About four hundred yards on your port side, behind you,’ said Bell.
‘Is everything OK?’

‘I don’t see any lights on shore, I’m going to call my guy. You stay put.’

Coatsworth ended the call. Rainey looked across at Bell. ‘What’s happening?’

‘He’s waiting for the guy on shore.’

‘Can you take over the driving, I’m knackered,’ said Rainey.

‘No problem.’ Bell’s phone vibrated in his hand. He’d received a text message from Coatsworth. ‘TALLY HO!’

‘We’re on,’ said Bell, pushing the throttle forward. He took the rib up to ten knots. Coatsworth was already moving towards the shore.

A light flashed on the beach. Three short flashes. ‘That’s them!’ shouted Rainey.

‘Do you think?’ said Bell.

The shore was close now, a couple of hundred yards at most. The rib was perfect for smuggling operations, it could go into shallow water where most other boats would run aground. But where it really proved its worth was when it came to landing on beaches. The propeller could be lifted out of the water and the boat could run right up on to the beach. It didn’t need a harbour or a dock, any flat stretch of sand or pebbles would do. And once the boat had been unloaded it was a simple matter to push it back into the water and head off again.

Rainey moved to the stern, ready to lift the outboard. On Coatsworth’s rib, Mercier was doing the same. The light flashed again, about halfway up the beach.

The rib was rocking from side to side, making it hard to control, so Bell increased the power. Ahead of him Coatsworth gunned his engine and the rib leapt towards the shore. Mercier pulled the outboard towards

him, lifting the propeller out of the water as the prow of the rib touched the sand. The rib's momentum carried it on to the beach. Mercier leapt out, ran to the prow and tugged at a rope there. Coatsworth started urging his passengers to get on to the beach. A man in a Barbour jacket and green wellington boots hurried over, and once the passengers were all on the sand he helped Mercier drag the rib on to the beach.

Bell twisted around. 'Here we go!' he shouted at Rainey, and Rainey flashed him a thumbs-up. Bell pushed the throttle to the halfway position. The engine roared and the rib surged towards the beach. A wave broke under the hull just as the boat began to move and the prow pointed up at the stars and then just as quickly dipped down. Bell pulled the power for a second until the bow was back in the water and then he blipped it again. The propeller bit and the rib rode another wave. When the prow was ten feet from the water's edge he pulled the power and put both hands on the wheel and concentrated on keeping the rib facing head-on.

The rib hit the sand and almost immediately Rainey was by Bell's side. He jumped on to the beach and grabbed the rope at the prow. 'Right, everybody off!' shouted Bell.

His passengers undid their seat belts, took off their life jackets and clambered over the side. The Iraqi woman was struggling with her son so Bell held the boy while she jumped over the side. He handed the boy to her and then helped the woman's daughter.

The man in the Barbour jacket jogged over to help Rainey pull the rib farther up the beach.

The passengers gathered together on the beach, splitting into nationalities. Bell climbed out and joined Mercier and the man in the Barbour jacket. The three of them gave the rib a final tug up the beach. 'What happens now?' Bell asked the man.

'He's new,' Rainey said to the man in the Barbour jacket. He was in

his sixties with long grey hair tied back in a ponytail. ‘This is Derek, he handles the transport to London,’ said Rainey.

Derek held out a gloved hand and Bell shook it. ‘Andy,’ said Bell. ‘He’s right, it’s my first run.’

‘First of many, hopefully,’ said Derek. He gestured up the beach. ‘I’ve parked the coach on the other side of the dunes there. Any problems, Frankie?’

‘Sweet as a nut,’ said Rainey. ‘I’ll get my bag.’

‘Good man,’ said Derek. He walked over to the passengers and held out his arms like a shepherd trying to control his flock. ‘Everyone, please move up the beach, the coach is waiting for you.’

Mercier walked across the sand, repeating Derek’s instructions in French and Arabic.

Coatsworth jogged over to Bell and Rainey. ‘Frankie, give them a hand getting them on the coach,’ he said.

‘I was just going to get my bag,’ said Rainey.

‘Get them on the coach first, I don’t want to hang about.’

‘OK, OK.’ Rainey walked over to the Iraqi woman, who was struggling with her son and her suitcase. He grabbed the case from her and headed after Derek, muttering under his breath.

Coatsworth grinned at Bell. ‘How easy was that?’ he said.

Bell nodded. ‘Is it always plain sailing? No pun intended.’

Coatsworth slapped him on the back. ‘Always,’ he said. ‘It’s a milk run, every time. You see how easy it is, now? We can do two runs a night without breaking a sweat.’

A beam of light blinded Coatsworth and he threw up his hands to shield his eyes. ‘What the fuck?’ he shouted.

They heard shouts from the dunes and more beams of white light cut through the night sky. ‘Border Force!’ shouted a man. ‘Stay where you

are!'

Bell heard a woman scream but his eyes were blinded by the lights and he couldn't see who it was. He ducked down, blinking. More than a dozen figures in black overalls and yellow fluorescent jackets were running towards them.

Two of the Somalian lads started to run down the beach, their feet kicking up sprays of sand behind them. Five of the men in fluorescent jackets ran after them. Bell couldn't help but smile as the pursuers were overweight and didn't have a hope in hell of catching the Somalians.

A group of passengers had almost reached the dunes and they were surrounded by Border Force staff. More men in fluorescent jackets were heading their way. Off to Bell's right, a woman screamed.

Coatsworth reached inside his jacket but Bell put a hand on his arm. 'Don't even think about it, Ally,' he said. 'You fire that thing and they'll throw away the key. Same as shooting a cop.'

Coatsworth glared at Bell, but then nodded. 'Aye. You're right. Worst I'll get is a few years for trafficking, maybe not even that.' He tossed the gun into the rib behind him and raised his hands.

The woman screamed again off to their right. Bell used his hands to shield his eyes. Rainey had picked up the Iraqi woman's child and was holding his knife to the boy's throat. Three big men in fluorescent jackets were advancing towards him but they stopped when he pressed the knife harder under the boy's chin. 'One more step and I'll kill him!' Rainey shouted.

'Shit,' hissed Bell. He looked around. While there were more than two dozen Border Force staff on the beach, he couldn't see any police and more importantly he couldn't see any police with guns.

Mercier turned and ran, heading for the dunes, but he was quickly brought down by two big men. One of them straddled him and used

plastic ties to bind his wrists as Mercier cursed them in French.

Bell hurried over the sand towards Rainey. The three Border Force men were standing about ten feet away from him, clearly unsure what to do. Bell looked around but there was no one obviously in charge.

‘Frankie, don’t be stupid, mate!’ Bell shouted.

Rainey kept his eyes on the men in front of him. The boy’s mother charged towards him, her hands splayed like claws, screaming like a banshee. He kicked her in the stomach and she fell back on to the sand. One of the Border Force men knelt down next to her. A blond woman in a fluorescent jacket ran over and put up her hands in an attempt to placate Rainey. ‘Come on, there’s need for this,’ she said. ‘Just put the boy down before you hurt him.’

‘Hurt him? You stupid cow, if you come one step closer to me I’ll slit his throat. Now keep your distance, all of you!’ He backed slowly towards Coatsworth’s rib. ‘Ally, come on, get in the rib, we’re getting the hell out of here.’

‘Don’t do it, Ally,’ said Bell. ‘It’s an immigration bust, it’s no big deal.’

‘Ally!’ shouted Rainey. ‘Get a move on.’

Bell reached out for Coatsworth’s arm but Coatsworth shook him off and hurried across the sand towards his rib.

There were more than a dozen Border Force staff gathered on the beach around Rainey but they were unwilling to move in. The boy had gone still, his eyes wide and staring, his face wet with tears. Three searchlight beams illuminated Rainey and the boy and threw elongated shadows across the sand and into the waves.

‘Get me my bag, Andy!’ shouted Rainey.

‘What?’ Bell shouted back.

‘Get my bag, it’s in the hold.’

Coatsworth pushed his rib back into the water.

‘What do you need your bag for?’ asked Bell.

Coatsworth climbed into the rib and made his way to the stern so that he could drop the propeller back into the water.

‘Just get it,’ shouted Rainey. He pressed the knife tighter against the boy’s throat. ‘I’ll cut him!’ he shouted at the Border Force team. ‘Stay back!’

‘This isn’t helping anyone,’ said the Border Force woman. She had the clipped tones of a headmistress addressing an unruly child and Bell could see that she was only inflaming the situation.

‘You, shut the fuck up!’ shouted Rainey.

The Iraqi woman struggled to sit up and began to scream at Rainey. One of the Border Force men knelt down and tried to quieten her but she turned her venom on him, spat in his face and continued to scream.

Bell climbed on to the rib and retrieved Rainey’s backpack from the storage hold in the bow. He straightened up and unzipped it. Inside were six plastic-wrapped packages, each the size of a house brick.

‘What are you doing?’ shouted Rainey. ‘I said bring it here, I didn’t say open it.’

‘What is it, Frankie? Cocaine or heroin?’

‘Get over here, Andy. Don’t fuck about.’

‘You brought drugs with you?’ shouted Coatsworth. ‘What the hell were you thinking?’

‘Fuck off, Ally,’ shouted Rainey. ‘The pittance you’ve been paying me, you can’t blame me. Andy, get over here, now.’

Coatsworth’s gun was by Bell’s foot. Bell bent down and picked it up.

‘Andy, come on! We’ve got to go, now!’

Bell climbed out of the rib and walked along the beach, carrying the bag in his left hand and the semi-automatic in his right.

‘Get a move on!’ shouted Rainey. The child began to scream and Rainey shook him. ‘Shut the fuck up!’ he shouted.

‘He’s scared,’ said Bell.

‘Throw the bag in the boat,’ said Rainey. He shook the boy again, then changed his grip so that his hand was over his mouth, muffling his cries.

Bell did as he was told.

‘Where did you get the gun from?’ Rainey asked.

‘It’s Ally’s.’

‘Well, point it at them,’ said Rainey, gesturing at the Border Force people.

‘I’m not pointing a loaded gun at anybody,’ said Bell.

There was a roaring sound from the dunes and then a blindingly bright light shone in their eyes. Bell heard the whoop-whoop-whoop of a helicopter’s rotor blades. He shielded his eyes with the flat of his hand but the light was still too bright for him to see the helicopter.

‘Andy, give me the bloody gun, come on!’ shouted Rainey, his voice barely audible over the roar of the helicopter’s turbine.

Bell walked over the sand towards Rainey. ‘You’ve got a knife and the kid, how are you gonna hold a gun?’

‘Just give it to me.’

Bell tossed the gun at Rainey and it fell at his feet. ‘What are you playing at?’ shouted Rainey.

‘If you want the bloody gun you can have it, but I’m having nothing to do with it.’

The boy was still struggling in Rainey’s grasp. ‘Be still, will you,’ hissed Rainey, pressing the knife even harder against the boy’s throat. He took a step towards the gun. ‘I’ll cut him if you even think of moving!’ he shouted at the line of fluorescent jackets.

The helicopter banked to the side and the huge beam lost Rainey for a

few seconds and then swung back to capture him once more. Rainey bent down, dropped the knife and picked up the gun. He pointed it at the Border Force woman and grinned. 'This changes things, doesn't it,' he shouted. 'Now back up the beach, all of you!'

The woman held up her hands. 'There's no need for any of this,' she said, then flinched as Rainey jerked the gun as if he was about to pull the trigger. 'OK, OK!' she shouted. 'Everybody back!'

The fluorescent jackets started backing away.

'That's more like it!' shouted Rainey.

'Let the boy go, Frankie,' shouted Bell. 'You've got the only gun on the beach.'

'There could be armed cops in the helicopter!'

'It's a Border Force chopper, they're not armed,' said Bell. 'They're too stupid to be trusted with guns.' He nodded at the Border Force woman, who seemed to be running the show. 'No offence.'

'Just push the boat out,' shouted Rainey, his words almost lost in the roar of the helicopter's turbine. He took a quick look over his shoulder. 'Ally, get the propeller in the water as soon as you can.' He looked back at Bell. 'Come on, come on, we've got to get out of here.'

One of the Border Force men took a step forward and Rainey screamed, 'Stay where you are!' and pointed the gun at him.

'Frankie, mate, it's over,' shouted Bell.

'Over? It's not over until we're back in France!'

'The gun's not loaded.'

Rainey looked at the gun in his hand. 'Bollocks.'

'It's loaded,' shouted Coatsworth from the stern of the rib. 'I loaded it myself.'

Bell shook his head. 'Give it up, Frankie. Let the boy go.'

Rainey pointed the gun at Bell, his finger tightening on the trigger.

One of the Border Force men moved forward and Rainey swung the bag towards the rank of fluorescent jackets. ‘Get the hell back or I’ll shoot!’ he yelled.

‘Andy, push the boat out and get in!’ shouted Coatsworth. ‘Let’s get the hell out of here!’

The helicopter was directly overhead now, the rotor wash buffeting them and sending sea spray over the boat.

‘It’s over, Frankie!’ shouted Bell.

‘Like hell it is,’ shouted Rainey. ‘I’m not going to prison again!’ He aimed the gun over the heads of the Border Force team and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Rainey’s jaw dropped. He pulled the trigger and again nothing happened.

Rainey looked over at Bell, his mouth wide open. The young boy slipped from his grip and ran towards his mother.

Bell reached into his pocket with his right hand. He held up the ammunition clip from the gun.

Rainey cursed and almost immediately disappeared under a scrum of fluorescent jackets.

Bell looked over at Coatsworth, who was holding on to the outboard motor to keep his balance as the downdraught from the helicopter rocked the rib from side to side. Coatsworth frowned as he tried to work out what had just happened. He looked up at the helicopter and was immediately blinded by its searchlight. He put his hands up to shield his eyes, lost his balance and fell over the side into the water. It was only waist deep so he was soon on his feet and staggering through the waves to the shore.

Three large figures ran over to Bell. One of them was the woman who had tried to talk to Rainey. She was as tall and heavysset as the men on either side of her. They were both holding big Magnalite torches. The man on her left was ginger-haired and had a crop of freckles across his

nose and cheeks. 'Hands behind your back,' he growled in a West Country accent.

'I'm on your side, pal,' said Bell. 'I'm with MI5.'

'Yeah? And I'm James bloody Bond,' said the man. He brought his flashlight crashing down on Bell's head and he dropped like a stone.

<line #>

'Spider? Can you hear me?' The voice sounded muffled, and far away. Dan 'Spider' Shepherd groaned and opened his eyes. The voice was that of a woman but the face looking down at him had a greying goatee. It was a paramedic in a fluorescent jacket. 'Thank goodness for that, you had me worried for a moment.' The voice was definitely female and the paramedic's lips hadn't moved.

Shepherd realised that Charlotte Button was standing behind the paramedic. She was wearing a wool beanie hat and a North Face fleecelined jacket. 'Charlie?'

The paramedic shone a small torch into Shepherd's eyes and he flinched. 'You're not going to hit me with that as well, are you?' he said.

'You'll be all right,' he said. 'It's superficial.'

'Superficial enough to knock me out cold,' said Shepherd.

'I can take you in for an MRI if you want,' said the paramedic.

'It's OK,' said Shepherd. 'It's not the first time I've been hit and I'm sure it won't be the last.' He put his hand up to his head and felt a dressing just above his right ear.

'There was some bleeding and some swelling,' said the paramedic.

'Are you allergic to aspirin?'

'No, I've got no allergies, but I'm not partial to Magnalites at the moment.'

‘He’ll be fine,’ said Button, patting the paramedic on the shoulder. ‘He’s got a thick skull. Can you do me a favour and give me a minute or two?’

The paramedic nodded and climbed out of the back of the ambulance. Shepherd struggled to sit up. ‘How long was I out?’

‘Fifteen minutes or so,’ she said.

‘He could have killed me.’

‘I think that’s a slight exaggeration,’ she said.

‘Why the hell did he hit me?’ asked Shepherd, touching the dressing again. ‘Didn’t he know who I was?’

‘He was a late addition, a replacement for a guy who called in sick,’ said Button. ‘Seems there was a breakdown in communication and he wasn’t told that you’d be on one of the boats.’

‘And why was no one there armed?’

‘They didn’t tell the police. I gather they were worried that they’d take the credit.’

‘You’re joking.’

‘I wish I was. I understand it was discussed but there’d been no indication from you that anyone in Coatsworth’s gang was armed so they decided to do it without an armed police presence.’

‘They’re blaming me? Are you serious?’

‘Not exactly blaming you, just pointing out that you hadn’t mentioned firearms so they didn’t consider it necessary to ask for armed police support.’ She grimaced. ‘But I think you know as well as I do that it’s probably more that they wanted to keep the arrests in-house. Once they call in the armed police it becomes a police operation.’

‘Yeah, well, there’s a reason they call it Border Farce,’ said Shepherd. ‘You know, these days it’s more likely that it’ll be law enforcement hurting me than villains. It wasn’t that long ago that I was tasered by

cops, remember?’

‘I remember. It was regrettable. As was what happened tonight.’

‘Regrettable? Armed cops tasered me while I was doused in petrol. I could have gone up like a Roman candle. And tonight I got walloped over the head when I was in the process of surrendering.’

‘Luckily you’ve got a thick skull.’ She smiled. ‘I’m sorry, I know it’s not a laughing matter.’

‘Damn right it’s not. Charlie, even if I was a bad guy, he was still out of order belting me the way he did. I had my hands up. I was no threat to him.’

‘You can make an official complaint if you want,’ said Button.

‘What’s the point?’

‘Exactly,’ she said. She looked at her watch. ‘Look, I’m sure you’re tired. I’ve got us rooms booked at a local hotel. Nothing fancy but I’m told they do a good breakfast. You should get some sleep and we’ll do a debrief later.’

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The hotel was surprisingly good considering it was well away from any main road and had only a dozen rooms. Shepherd showered and then slipped naked under a duvet and was asleep within seconds. He woke to the sound of the phone ringing next to the bed. He groped for it. ‘It’s a quarter to ten and they stop serving breakfast at ten,’ said Button. ‘What would you like?’

‘Coffee. Eggs and bacon.’ He ran a hand through his hair and winced as he touched the dressing.

‘They do a wonderful full English, I’m told.’

‘OK, fine. Thanks.’

‘I’ll order it now,’ she said.

Shepherd rolled out of bed and pulled on his clothes from the previous night. There was a small washbag by the sink containing a toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste, a disposable razor and a small can of shaving foam. He shaved, brushed his teeth and hurried downstairs. Button was sitting at a table by the window. Two other tables were occupied – a suited businessman reading the *FT* sat at one and a middle-aged couple sat silently at another. Button had changed into a grey suit and had her chestnut hair clipped up at the back, and she smiled at him over her cup of tea. ‘Sleep well?’

He dropped down on to the seat opposite her and picked up his coffee. ‘I was dog-tired,’ he said.

‘Can’t be easy, driving one of those ribs.’ She raised her cup in salute. ‘Anyway, job well done. You’ve closed down a people-trafficking route and a drug-trafficking route in one fell swoop. Two birds with one stone, to complete the avian theme. Plus you saved that young boy’s life.’

‘Rainey was panicking, I don’t think he would’ve killed the kid.’

‘Spider, he held a knife to the boy’s throat. Anyway, you didn’t give him the chance. How’s the head?’

‘Still hurts,’ said Shepherd.

‘Worse then before? Do you want to swing by the hospital?’

‘It’ll be OK,’ said Shepherd. ‘Like I said, I’ve been hit before.’

A waitress arrived and put a plate of eggs, bacon, sausage, tomato, black pudding and beans in front of Shepherd, along with a full toast rack, before serving Button with a small portion of scrambled eggs and smoked salmon. She caught him looking at her food and smiled. ‘I’m on a bit of a diet,’ she said.

‘You don’t need to be,’ he said. He laughed and picked up his knife and fork. ‘And I’m not just saying that.’

‘I’m on that eat for five days, fast for two days,’ she said. She picked up her fork. ‘Not a real fast, I just have to cut back to five hundred calories on a fast day.’ She nodded at her plate. ‘This is about it, I’m afraid.’

Shepherd tucked into his breakfast while Button took small mouthfuls and chewed slowly.

‘That turned out to be one of your longer cases, didn’t it,’ she asked. It was a statement rather than a question.

‘Four months, on and off,’ he said, as he buttered a slice of toast. ‘It wasn’t easy getting them to approach me. Softy, softly. I had to get close to Rainey and then wait for him to introduce me to Coatsworth. It took time. And a lot of trips on the boat.’ He sipped his coffee. ‘You know, I was on a similar case seven years ago, when I was with the cops. That’s when I learned to drive a rib.’

Button nodded. ‘That’s what made you the perfect choice for this job.’

‘Yeah, but here’s the thing. Seven years ago they were using ribs to dash across the Channel. My case back then was counterfeit currency, but it was clear the same boats were being used for drugs and for people. Seven years later nothing has changed.’

‘Your point being?’

Shepherd smiled thinly. ‘I’m not sure there is a point,’ he said. ‘In fact the whole exercise seems pointless. Anyone can go out and buy a rib and a GPS and set themselves up as a smuggler.’

‘And we stop them. That’s how it works.’

‘But we’re not stopping them, are we? We stopped Coatsworth, sure. But how many others are there?’

‘You’re saying that because so many people are breaking the law we should just stop what we’re doing? That’s like saying we should let everyone drive at ninety miles an hour because so many people break the

speed limit.’

Shepherd shook his head. ‘I just think there has to be a more efficient way of handling it. Make ribs harder to buy, for instance. Or have them all chipped so that they can be tracked by satellite. That way if one keeps running back and forth to the Continent, someone can knock on the captain’s door and ask him what he’s up to. How hard would that be?’

‘Fitting a tracker would be easy enough, but so would disabling it. But it’s a good idea, I’ll raise it with the relevant authorities.’

‘Not Border Farce, please.’

Button chuckled. ‘You really must stop calling them that. I’ll end up picking up the habit and that really won’t do.’

‘Charlie, with the best will in the world, their incompetence nearly got me killed last night.’

‘You got a bump on the head.’

‘No, I had a Magalite torch smashed down on my skull. If he’d hit my temple, I could have died. And that whole business with the kid wouldn’t have happened if there had been armed cops to take care of the situation.’

‘As I said last night, there had been no mentions of a gun so the Border Force commander didn’t think an armed response was necessary.’

‘The commander would be that woman who was on the beach, right? She seemed to be running things. Though by the size of her, I doubt she does much actual running.’

‘Spider! Please. That’s uncalled for.’

‘OK, I take it back. But you can understand why she’s not my flavour of the month just now.’ He gestured with his knife at the dressing on his head.

‘Anyway, she wasn’t the commander. The commander wasn’t on the scene, but she was his number two. She’s very experienced, Spider, she

was ten years with Revenue and Customs investigations.’

‘She let the situation get out of control, way out of control.’ He buttered another piece of toast.

‘And you rescued it,’ said Button. ‘She knows that, and I will take it up with her commander. But really, all’s well that ends well.’ She refilled her cup from a white pot. ‘Now, let’s look ahead. I’ve nothing pressing for you and you put in more than enough hours on the Coatsworth case, so why not take a couple of weeks off. Have a holiday.’

‘I’m not a great one for beaches or swimming pools. But yeah, I could do with some downtime.’ He put down his knife and fork. He hadn’t realised how hungry he was but he’d cleaned his plate and eaten half the toast in the rack. He looked over at Button’s plate. She’d barely touched her scrambled eggs and salmon. ‘I’ll head back to Hereford, if that’s OK with you. I’ll need transport.’

‘There’s a car and driver outside ready to take you wherever you want to go,’ she said. ‘Where’s the Andy Bell vehicle?’

‘Up north. In the Seahouses harbour car park. I left it there when I took the rib over to France.’

‘I’ll get it collected,’ said Button. ‘And I’ll arrange for the cottage in Seahouses to be cleared. Is there anything there you need?’

‘It’s all legend stuff,’ said Shepherd. He took off his wristwatch, a battered TAG Heuer, and put it down in front of her. ‘That has to go back, too.’ He reached for another slice of toast, buttered it and covered it with marmalade.

‘Do you always eat like that?’ she asked.

‘Only when I’m ravenous,’ he said.

‘You must have a high metabolic rate.’

‘Piloting the rib takes a lot of energy,’ said Shepherd. ‘You’re on your feet all the time and fighting the wheel. What’s happening with

Coatsworth and the rest?’

‘They’ll all be charged with human trafficking, and the importation of Class A drugs. There were eight kilos of high-grade Afghan heroin in Rainey’s backpack. We’ll try to get him to tell us where the drugs were headed.’

‘And cut him a deal?’

‘That’s how it works.’

‘But no deal for Coatsworth?’

‘Not on the drugs. He’s denying all knowledge of the heroin.’

‘I don’t think he knew, Charlie. He never mentioned drugs to me.’

‘Why would he, you’re the new guy on the team.’ She leaned towards him. ‘Seriously, Spider, you did well. Coatsworth’s operation has brought over hundreds of illegals and heaven knows how much heroin.’

‘Ally always said the great thing about smuggling people was the penalties were so much lower.’

‘Ally?’ She raised her eyebrows.

‘Just because I use his first name ...’

‘The drugs were on his boat, Spider.’

‘No argument there, I’m just saying that he probably didn’t know what Rainey was doing. It was just a backpack. We all had gear with us.’

‘Yes, but you didn’t have eight kilos of almost pure heroin in your backpack, did you?’

‘So Coatsworth is going to be charged with drugs smuggling as well?’

‘That’ll be a CPS decision,’ she said.

‘That’s not fair.’ He held up his hands. ‘I know, life’s not fair.’

‘Spider, he ran a smuggling operation and the day we busted him there were eight kilos of heroin on his boat. If Rainey wants to stand up in court and say that Coatsworth didn’t know about the drugs, then that’s all well and good. But it’s not your problem.’ She picked up the TAG Heuer

and put it in her handbag, then looked at her own watch, a slim gold Cartier. 'Right, I've got a debrief with the Border Force commander at noon. I'll be sure to bring up the matter of you being belted over the head. Let me know what you decide holiday-wise. Oh, and your biannual is due. Caroline Stockmann will be in touch.'

'My favourite psychologist,' he said. Six-monthly psychological evaluations were a nuisance but he liked Stockmann as she had the knack of making them seem like friendly conversations.

'You love your little chats with her, you know you do.' Button laughed. 'And she can check that the torch didn't do any lasting damage.'