

Sure Fire



Jack Higgins, With Justin
Richards

JACK HIGGINS

WITH JUSTIN RICHARDS

SURE FIRE

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Prologue

Two intruders moved through the oil storage depot, dark shapes against the black night.

One of them moved like a panther, silent and dangerous, leading the way through the jungle of pipes and cables, walkways and stairways. The other man had a limp and walked with the aid of a stick. Huge circular metal tanks rose up either side of them as the two figures made their way towards their target.

“Jammer seems to be working,” the man with the limp whispered, consulting a small device strapped to his wrist like a watch. A small red light flashed rhythmically where the dial should be.

His colleague nodded. His smile was barely visible in the black of the camouflage make-up that smeared his face. “No skimping on this job. Come on, they’ll realise there’s a problem if we hang around too long in one place.”

The jammer scrambled the wireless connection between the cameras that were nearest to the intruders and the security control room on the other side of the complex.

The effect would be to make the security monitors in the control room flicker on and off, seemingly at random.

The two men paused. The one with the stick pressed a button that turned off the jammer on his wrist. “No cameras in this area. We’re in a blind spot. Should be safe for a minute.”

The other man nodded his agreement. “Let’s have a look at the map.”

On the ground between them, they unfolded a detailed map of the complex. The man without the stick pulled something from the pocket of his black trousers: a packet of cigarettes and a lighter.

“You’re joking!” the man with the stick said. “You can’t light up here, John.”

John smiled. “Might seriously damage my health, you think, Dex? I didn’t bring a torch – this is to read the map.”

“Yeah, well, I do worry about my health. And yours.” Dex produced a pen torch and switched it on. “Now stop mucking about and put that lighter away.”

The lighter glinted as John put it away. It flashed in the torch beam for a moment, an engraving on its side visible for a second – a simple outline of a heart.

“You always were the cautious one,” John said.

“For all the good it did me,” Dex muttered. “The one time I try it your way, and look what happens.” He tapped his walking stick against his leg.

John didn’t seem to notice. He was tracing a route on the map with his finger. “Looks easy enough. Turn the jammer back on. Let’s do what we came for and get out of here.”

The building they wanted was a boxy, concrete block with no windows and a single metal door. A red security light cast its glow over the doorway, illuminating a uniformed guard standing outside. The shadow of a holster at the guard’s side left the intruders in no doubt that he was armed.

“Might as well put up a notice,” John whispered. “‘Stuff worth stealing is in here.’ Back in a moment.” Like a ghost, he disappeared into the night.

Seconds later, a sound like a stone falling made the guard move from his post. He drew his gun

and walked cautiously along the front of the building. From the opposite side, a dark shape moved quickly, creeping up behind him. ~~The first the guard knew of it was when a handkerchief was clamped over his mouth.~~

John laid the sleeping guard on the ground in the shadows next to the building. He returned the handkerchief soaked in anaesthetic to a small plastic bag and sealed it shut, before stuffing the bag back in his pocket. Dex knelt down awkwardly by the door and set to work picking the lock.

“Hold my stick, will you?” he asked. “And keep the torch steady.”

Red light spilled across the threshold to the inside as the door swung open. John helped his friend to his feet and gave him back his stick, then handed him a headset – infra-red goggles attached to a set of straps that fitted exactly over their heads and held the goggles tightly in position.

The view through the goggles was remarkably clear, and showed a large room criss-crossed with pipes that came in and out through the walls. A long narrow bench stood in the middle of the room, covered in glassware like a school science lab. Along one wall was advanced electronic equipment – computers, centrifuges and spectroscopic analysers. Several drum-shaped canisters stood at the far end of the room – smaller versions of the huge oil tanks outside – that were linked together by narrow pipes, which then joined a larger pipeline that disappeared out through the side wall.

“You set the charge on the pipeline,” John whispered, handing Dex a compact device. It looked like a plain black box with a small screen set in one side. “I’ll get the sample.”

Dex took the device and found the point where a number of the pipes converged and joined. He set to work, attaching the device just below one of the valves where the thin pipe from the canisters joined.

Meanwhile, John was examining the canisters at the other end of the room.

Carefully, he unscrewed the top of one of the canisters and saw that it was filled with a pale, viscous liquid. He glanced over at the laboratory workbench for something to put the sample of the liquid into. There were test tubes and beakers and jars, but all were made of glass. His eyes wandered round the room, looking for anything that might be of use.

Set high in the corner of the walls, a video camera swung slowly towards him. A thin wire emerged from the camera and disappeared into the ceiling above. John stared at the tiny red light on top of the camera and the wire emerging from the back of it. The camera moved round until it was pointing straight at him.

“We’ve got a problem,” John said. He grabbed the only container he could think of and reached into the open canister. “I think you should hurry.”

The sirens started – a sudden, high-pitched wail of sound. Dex gave John a thumbs-up and they ran for the door.

“That camera must be linked direct to the control room,” Dex said. “So the jammer didn’t work on it.”

They could hear the footsteps and shouts of guards behind them.

Dex was limping badly now and John had to help him along. “Leave me,” Dex said. “I’m only slowing you down.”

“I didn’t leave you in Afghanistan and I’m not leaving you now. I’ll throw you over the perimeter fence if I have to.”

Searchlights snapped on.

“They can’t shoot,” Dex gasped. “Not with all that fuel about.”

Before John could answer, there was a loud crack from behind them, and a bullet ricocheted off the concrete pavement close to their feet.

“Maybe someone should tell *them* that,” John said. “Come on!”

The security centre was in chaos. Uniformed guards shouted into phones and radios. People hurried from monitor to monitor, working the cameras. Then the door swung open and a man entered. The room went quiet.

“Tell those idiots to stop shooting,” the man said. He spoke with the trace of an Irish accent.

He did not speak loudly, but his words were clearly audible across the whole room. He was a short man, very thin, dressed in a simple dark sweater and jeans. His features were narrow and angular, and his hair was a grey crew-cut. There was a distinctive round scar under his left eye, faint white lines splaying out from it so the scar looked like a pale spider on the man’s face.

“I want those intruders caught,” the man ordered. “I want to know what they were doing and who sent them. I want to talk to them before they die.”

No one in the room doubted that the intruders would die – once the man got hold of them. His name was Ryan Stabb, but everyone called him Stabb. The name was short and brutal, like its owner.

“Why isn’t that camera working?” Stabb demanded, pointing at a screen of static. As he spoke, the screen cleared.

“Don’t know, sir,” the guard at the main console said. “They keep cutting out, just for a few seconds. It always happens when there’s a storm.”

“There isn’t a storm,” Stabb pointed out. “But there will be if you don’t get them. They must have a jammer. That’s why the screens cut out.” He leaned over the guard and jabbed a finger at one of the many monitors as it crackled to static. “That’s where they are. You can trace them by the cameras that are affected. Work out where they’re heading. And stop them.”

* * *

The intruders heard the barking before they saw the dark shape of the dog emerge from the gloom. It was bounding towards them, teeth glinting in the searchlights as it snapped its jaws in anticipation.

Dex swore, but John faced the dog and raised his arms. He gave a strange, high-pitched whistle. As he lowered his arms, the dog slowed. It stopped in front of John, panting heavily but no longer snapping. John stooped down beside the dog, reaching for its leather collar.

“Good boy!” John said. “I picked that up from an old Irishman who used to go to the same pub.”

“Hurry up,” Dex urged.

“All done,” John assured him. “Aren’t we, boy? Off you go.” He ruffled the dog’s fur and gestured for it to be on its way. The dog bounded off into the darkness.

“Right then, back this way, I think.” John headed back down the alley between several oil storage tanks.

“You’re almost there,” the guard said into the microphone. “Camera 11B just went. Looks like they’re making for the south exit gate. That or the kennels.” He turned to smile at Stabb. Stabb did not smile back. “They’re going at quite a lick. Must be sprinting along,” the guard said, turning back to the monitors.

“But they must know the main gates will be guarded,” Stabb said. “What are they playing at?” He frowned at the control console as another monitor snowed across. “What were they doing in the lab? Has it been searched?”

“They got out of there straight away, sir,” another guard said. “No point searching for them there.”

“Not for *them*,” Stabb said. “I want to know what they were doing.”

“Sabotage?” the guard asked.

“Search it,” Stabb told him. “That’s the only treated sample we have.” He considered a moment before deciding: “Pump it out. Get it to another storage tank outside the lab. Just in case.”

“Which tank, sir?”

“I don’t care,” Stabb said.

“Number three is empty and sterile,” the guard said. “I can work out which valves need opening.”

“Just do it,” Stabb told him. “Do it now.”

Further down the room, the guard at the main monitors said with satisfaction into the microphone: “That’s it. You’ve got them now. They’re coming right to you!”

The security guards had their weapons levelled. They could hear something moving, coming towards them out of the glare of searchlights. Moving fast.

“Ready, lads?” the leader asked.

“Ready for anything,” the man next to him said.

Then they both stared in astonishment as a shape appeared out of the glare and came towards them.

Following Stabb’s orders, a valve inside the laboratory was opened remotely from the security control room. Pale, viscous fluid slowly started to flow from one of the canisters, along the pipe and towards the junction where the black box was attached.

A cold fluorescent light flickered on inside the room as the guards entered.

“What the hell’s this?” a guard asked, bending to examine the black box.

“Don’t touch,” another warned.

“It’s all right. Doesn’t look like it’s been primed.”

“Anything could set it off. Remote trigger, change of temperature... Just be careful.”

The guard leaned forward to remove the black box from the pipe.

“A dog?”

Stabb stared at the image on the monitor. A security guard was holding a large Alsatian dog by its collar. In his other hand, the man was holding what looked like a wrist watch.

“This was strapped to its paw. I’ve turned it off now.”

Stabb said nothing. He was thinking. If the intruders were that clever, then they would have predicted every detail of how the guards would react. “Stop the flow,” he shouted. “Close the valves on the sample canisters – now!”

The pale fluid in the laboratory reached the open valve that led into the main pipeline.

As it flowed through, a tiny circuit in the black box attached to the outside of the same pipe registered the distinctive vibration in the metal of the pipe – a vibration that could only be caused by the movement of fluid under pressure. The circuit sent a signal to another component in the box.

The guard leaped back as the readout blinked into life. It showed a number: 10.

“What the...” The guard’s voice dried in his throat as 10 became 9.

Then he was running – grabbing his colleague by the arm and dragging him along towards the door.

8.

In a small service road outside the complex, a car was parked. It was a very ordinary car – unremarkable make, normal sort of model, nondescript colour. Inside it were two extraordinary men.

John was smoking a cigarette. "We'll wait a moment," he said to Dex, who sat in the passenger seat. "Until they're distracted."

"Should be any second now, if they're on the case."

The whole security control centre shook with the power of the explosion. Monitors flickered and died. Those that stayed on showed the fireball ripping through the heart of the installation, the ball of black smoke billowing into the air.

Stabb struggled to retain his balance as another larger explosion tore through one of the main tanks. Then another went up.

And another.

He gritted his teeth and scratched at the spider-like mark on his face. It itched like hell – as if his anger was about to erupt through the scar. That anger was not diminished in the slightest by the sight of a car on one of the monitors. It was driving slowly along one of the service roads, back towards the main road.

It didn't have its headlights on, but the orange glow of the fire lit up the sky.

Stabb shoved aside the guard in front of the monitor and reached for the camera controls. The picture zoomed in – showing two dark figures silhouetted inside the car. There was another explosion as the whole complex caught fire, illuminating the car's number plate.

Smoke drifted across the picture, and the car was lost to sight.

Sandra Chance never saw the car that killed her. Just back from several years working in New York for a multinational computer company, she looked the wrong way as she stepped off the Manchester pavement. It was an easy mistake – she was so used to the traffic driving on the other side of the road. The driver was not to blame, but he didn't stop to find out.

The funeral was a quiet affair at the local church in the Manchester suburb she had moved into just a few weeks before. Though she was originally from the area, she had no family there – no family anywhere. Except the children.

Richard and Jade were just fifteen when their mother died. Twins, they had always shared everything – toys, games, books, arguments, and now grief. Rich kept it bottled up, but it was there. His eyes were welling with tears as he stood with his sister in the front pew. Jade let the tears run down her cheeks as they listened to the priest's words about their mother – about their loss, their bravery and their devotion – but Rich preferred to keep his emotions to himself. Jade would know how he felt – she always knew how he felt – and that was all that mattered. He didn't care about anyone else. He didn't *have* anyone else.

A few other locals had turned up, out of respect rather than love, but none of them had known Sandra Chance or her children. Mary Gilpin was the only person who knew her at all, as a neighbour and childhood friend. The children were staying with her now, but Mary's husband Phil had never liked children, and had been quick to involve "the authorities". He hadn't even come to the church.

As the priest mentioned Mary Gilpin's name, she looked up. Jade glanced at her, smiled sadly and looked away again. Rich didn't react at all.

Then the door at the back of the church creaked open. The sound seemed even louder in the still moment of silence. Rich looked around. He stared at the man who stepped quietly into the church and closed the door behind him.

Rich watched the man cross himself and go to the nearest pew at the back of the church. He was a big man, but he moved quietly and easily. When he sat, there was a stillness about him, but also a contained strength. He looked about forty, with a rugged, experienced face and short blond hair. He was wearing a black suit and might have passed unnoticed and unremarked in a crowd except, Rich saw, for the man's eyes. They were blue – like Rich's own – and moved in a slow arc, as if he were taking in every detail of the church and people around him.

Jade had also turned. She too saw the man. The man's eyes met hers, just for a second, then moved on to Rich. The two children looked at each other and frowned. Jade squeezed her brother's hand. She flicked her head to get her blonde hair out of her eyes, and they both knelt to pray.

The cold autumn sun was low in the sky, casting long shadows of the tombstones across the churchyard. Jade and Rich stood together a little way from the grave.

"She should have looked the right way," Jade said. "She was always warning us, telling us to be careful. Not to be in too much of a rush."

"Don't blame her," Rich told her.

"I'm not," Jade protested. "It's just..." She sniffed and looked away. "She should have looked."

The man from the back of the church was talking to the priest and Mrs Gilpin. There was

another woman with them, a middle-aged woman with dyed hair. Rich knew she was with the Social Services. She was supposed to be looking after him and Jade until someone decided what to do with them. He couldn't remember her name and he didn't care.

"Who is that man?" Jade said. "I feel like I've seen him somewhere before."

Rich shrugged. "More Social Services."

"Why are they here?" Jade said.

"We can't stay with the Gilpins for ever."

Jade stared at him, her tear-stained face framed by her long blonde hair.

Rich sighed and went on: "Didn't you hear him last night, going on at her again about how she can't be expected to look after us and it isn't fair on him?"

"Maybe we can go back to New York," Jade said. "Stay with Charmaine and her family."

"Yeah, right," Rich muttered. "Like one of your old school friends is going to take us both in."

The woman from the Social Services was shaking the strange man's hand. She glanced over at Rich and Jade, then walked quickly away. The man seemed to gather himself, squaring his shoulders and taking a deep breath that made his chest heave. Then he and Mrs Gilpin came over to where the twins were standing.

"Hello," the man said. His voice was deep and rich, and he tried to smile. He reached his hand out towards Rich, such a natural gesture that Rich found himself taking the man's hand and shaking it. The man's grip was firm and confident.

Rich felt his insides turn to water as the man introduced himself.

"John Chance," he said. "I'm your father."

They sat at the back of the church while the priest tidied things away and worked in the vestry.

"How can you be our dad?" Jade demanded as soon as they sat down.

"Why should we believe you?" Rich asked.

"It's as much of a shock for me too," Chance said.

"Why didn't Mum say anything?" Jade asked. "We didn't even know she'd been married."

"It was a long time ago," Chance said. "Sixteen years. I came home one day and she was gone. She left a note, but it didn't say much. I assumed I'd hear – from her lawyers if not from Sandy herself."

"No one called her Sandy," Jade said. "Mum hated it."

"I'm sorry," Chance said. "Until last week I really didn't know anything. Then I got a call from Mrs Gilpin. Apparently, your mother left a letter with her – in case anything happened to her."

Chance smiled, but it looked strained. "I did love your mother very much," he said. "I believed she loved me."

"Believed?" Jade prompted.

Chance turned away.

"She never asked for a divorce – she even carried on using my name. We're still married." He hesitated, realising his mistake. "Were still married. That's partly why you're in my care."

"I'm sorry if it's spoiled your day," Jade said sharply.

"That isn't what I meant," he said.

"I guess it's a shock for you too," Rich said. He still had his hand on Jade's shoulder. She put her hand over the top of it.

"Just a bit," Chance confessed. "But, look – we'll make it work. I'm in the middle of some business right now, quite intense stuff. But that should be over soon. By the end of term, when you come home, we'll be able to spend some time and sort out where we go from here, OK?"

"Come home?" Rich echoed. "You mean we're staying up here till the end of term?"

"With the Gilpins?" Jade asked. "While you go back to London?"

Chance looked awkward. "Not exactly. That isn't what I meant."

"Then what did you mean, *Dad*?" Jade asked.

"Look, I haven't exactly had time to plan this," Chance told them. "I live in a tiny flat right now. It's hardly big enough for me, let alone the three of us. And I'm working all the hours God sends. I can't get you to and from school and cook your meals and look after you and—"

"And change our nappies?" Rich said. "We're fifteen. We can cope. Mum worked, you know."

"We'll discuss it at the end of term, all right?" Chance said.

"And where will we be in the mean time?" Rich wanted to know. "In some poky flat that's too small for us all?"

But Jade was staring open-mouthed at Chance. "No way. Absolutely no way at all, ever, on this earth." She looked round at Rich.

And he realised what she had already guessed. "Boarding school is right out," he agreed. "Not if it's the last school on the planet."

"Just till the end of this term," Chance told them. "Till I can spend some time with you and work this out."

"No way," Jade said.

"Never," Rich told him.

Chance stood up. His voice was quiet, but Rich could sense an undercurrent of determination. "I'm not asking you. I'm your father and I have to decide. I'm sorry, but that's how it has to work. End of debate."

"That wasn't a debate," Rich said. "A debate involves two points of view and a decision based on the arguments. That didn't happen."

"You just decided for us," Jade added. "You've only just met us and already you can't wait to get rid of us."

"I'm not talking about it," Chance said. "Because you're right – there is no debate. It's decided."

"Oh – so suddenly you know what's best for us?" Jade said. She stood up and glared at Chance. "You abandon us and Mum sixteen years ago and now you're back and you know best? I don't think so."

"Wait a minute," Rich said. "Sixteen years ago. We weren't even born then."

"You didn't even wait till we were born?"

"Now hold on. Sandy – Sandra," Chance corrected himself quickly, "left *me*. It wasn't my decision. I'd never have left her. Even if..." He stopped abruptly.

"Even if what?" Rich asked.

Chance took a deep breath. "Until yesterday, I didn't know where your mother had gone, what she'd been doing. Until yesterday, I didn't know I was a father."

* * *

No one spoke all the way to the Gilpins' house. Chance parked the car in a space outside the house next door – outside the rented house that Rich and Jade had lived in for the last few weeks with their mother. Jade doubted he even realised.

"Everything's going into storage," Chance explained. "We can sort through all your stuff later, decide what you want."

"At the end of term, right?" Jade said.

Mr Gilpin answered the door. He shook hands with Chance and muttered something about condolences. He glared at Rich and ignored Jade. He stepped inside and gestured for them to come into the hallway.

Several boxes and carrier bags were lined up against the wall. Jade could see her own clothes spilling out of one of the bags. School books shoved in a box. Rich's best trainers in another.

"We could have packed our own stuff," she said.

Mr Gilpin looked away. "Thought you'd be in a hurry to be off."

"Someone's in a hurry all right," Rich said.

"I'd like to say goodbye to Mrs Gilpin," Jade said. "We didn't really get a chance at the church."

Mr Gilpin turned away. "She's not here. Gone out. Shut the door behind you."

Chance lifted one of the boxes. "I think we'd best be going," he said.

As they drove away, Jade watched the net curtains of the front room twitch.

Rich sat in the front and Jade sat in the back of the car.

Jade could see that Chance had angled the mirror so he could watch her. Was he keeping an eye on her? she wondered. Or did he just want to look at the children he hadn't known he had for the past fifteen and a half years? What did he think? What did he see beyond two fair-haired teenagers with similar features, similar slim build? Only their hair distinguished them – Jade's was long over her shoulders while Rich's was short, off his collar and slightly spiky.

"So, tell me about yourselves," Chance said, trying to be cheerful. "What do you like to do with your time?"

"Get driven about in cars that go too fast," Jade said.

Chance's laugh sounded strained, but he eased off the speed slightly. "Right. Anything else?"

Jade slumped back in the seat, looking out of the window as they passed most of the other vehicles on the road.

"I like reading," Rich said. "I read anything, but mostly I like to find out about stuff. How things work. That sort of thing. Telly's good too. Hey," he thought suddenly, "do you have a PlayStation?"

"Sorry. Got a DVD player and a laptop. That's about it. What about you, Jade?"

She continued to stare out of the window. "I like doing things, not reading about them. Is there a gym near you?"

"I've no idea."

"Figures."

Chance laughed again, only this time it sounded more genuine. "I keep pretty fit, you know."

"You think," Jade muttered.

"And my hearing's fine," he said. "You into that fitness stuff then?"

"A bit."

"And then some," Rich said. "She works out. Runs. She eats loads of fruit and vegetables. Drinks loads of bottled water."

"It's good for you," Jade protested. "You have to look after yourself. Healthy body, healthy mind."

"Quite right," Chance agreed.

"Don't patronise me," she told him.

"I was agreeing with you."

"Well, don't."

"You'd rather I disagreed with you?" he asked.

"I'd rather you stopped pretending," Jade replied.

They lapsed into silence.

Jade stared out of the window and Rich turned his head to whisper to her over his shoulder.

"It'll be OK," he told her. "We'll get through this; it won't be so bad. I mean, what's the worst

that can happen? Apart from boarding school?"

"I just want Mum back," Jade said, her eyes filling with tears once again.

Chance was fumbling in his pockets as he drove fast and confident down the outside lane. He pulled something out and Jade's expression changed at once – first to surprise and then anger.

Chance was trying to shake a cigarette out of a packet. He caught a glimpse of Jade's face in the rearview mirror.

"I'm gasping," he told her.

Jade wiped her eyes and glared at him.

Chance put the packet back into his pocket.

It was dark by the time they reached Chance's flat. It was on the second floor of a Victorian terraced house. The outside looked grim and dilapidated. Paint was peeling from the window frames by the door, and the stone steps were chipped and stained.

But once inside it was very different. There was a small lift at the end of a wide hallway and a staircase wound up round the lift shaft. Chance heaved open the heavy metal grille door across the lift.

"Leave that open and the lift won't move," he explained. "Gives us time to put all your luggage inside."

They piled the boxes and bags inside, almost filling the floor space in the small lift. Chance reached in through the door to press the button for the second floor, then he heaved the grill across again – leaving the three of them outside. The lift started to move.

"We could have squeezed inside," Rich protested.

"But Jade wants us to keep fit," Chance said. "Come on – we have to get there before the lift." He took the stairs two at a time with practised ease.

"He'll be wheezing before he gets there," Jade said, running up the stairs. Rich sighed and followed at a more leisurely pace.

They dumped the last load of stuff into the hallway of Chance's flat. Chance himself had disappeared inside already. "Was he wheezing?" Rich asked.

"Expect so," Jade said. "Didn't notice."

"That's a 'no' then," Rich said.

There were three doors from the hallway. The first door led into the kitchen, the next into a living room. At the end of the hall was a toilet. Chance appeared from the kitchen and led the twins through to the living room. It looked like a show home – hardly any furniture, just a sofa and a low coffee table. A television and DVD player stood against one wall, beside an old fireplace, but there were no magazines or books or ornaments. The room was painted a uniform white that made it seem even more impersonal. The only sign of life was the ashtray on the coffee table – full of butt ends of smoked cigarettes. It gave the room a stale, unpleasant smell. A single picture hung on the wall opposite the door. It showed a steam train speeding through the countryside – a sleek, blue engine with a sloping front. In the foreground was a pond with ducks swimming on it.

"That's clever," Rich told Jade, pointing at the picture.

"Why?"

"Because the engine is called Mallard."

She shook her head, none the wiser.

"Mallard is a sort of duck," Chance said, joining them.

"Where's my room?" Jade asked.

He pointed. "Through there, on the right."

"And mine?" Rich asked.

"Same place. Same room."

“You’re kidding,” Jade said.

“We don’t share. We’re fifteen,” Rich added.

“There are only two bedrooms,” Chance told him.

“Why can’t Rich share with you?” Jade asked. “Boys together?”

Chance shook his head. “Because I’m sleeping on the sofa in here and there’s only room on it for one. There are a couple of single beds in there.”

“You said there were two bedrooms,” Rich reminded him.

“I’m using the other one as a study. I have to work. You get a bedroom and beds; I get a study and the sofa. That’s the best deal I can give you.”

“That’s no deal,” Jade said.

“A deal is something that’s agreed between two or more parties,” Rich said.

“And do you know what a pedant is?” Chance asked.

“Yes, I do actually. It’s—”

“I know what it is,” Chance told him.

“Then why did you ask?” Rich asked.

“Dad’s little joke,” Jade told him. She shot a glance at Chance. “Very little joke. Come on.” She led Rich through to the bedroom.

The room was bare apart from two single beds, two bedside cabinets and a mirror on one wall.

“No place like home,” Jade said.

“And this is certainly no place like home,” Rich agreed. “Let’s get our stuff. Must have some posters or something to liven the place up.”

The room that Chance was using as a study was opposite their bedroom door. Jade pushed it open and they looked inside. It was a contrast to the rest of the flat.

There was a single desk with a chair beside it. On the desk was an open laptop computer and a telephone. The rest of the desk was covered in piles of paper that extended to the floor and against the walls – piles of magazines and books. A bookshelf strained under the weight of files and heavy books.

“Oil industry stuff,” Rich said, glancing at some of the titles. “Did he tell us he worked in the oil industry?”

“He’s hardly told us anything,” Jade said. She walked over to the desk.

“We shouldn’t really be here,” Rich said, following hesitantly.

“You’re telling me.” She pointed to a small box attached to the telephone wire. It was about the size of a cigarette packet, plain grey plastic with several buttons on one side. “What’s that? A modem?”

“Don’t think so,” Rich said. “Weird-looking thing.”

“I know what this is though,” Jade announced, grabbing a sheet of paper from beside the phone. “Look – a list of schools. Boarding schools I bet. He’s been crossing them off. God, he’s already trying to get rid of us.”

“What are you doing in here?” Chance asked. He was standing at the door to the study.

“Just having a look around,” Jade said.

“Look – I think we have to have certain rules around here, and one of them is that you never come into my study.”

“But we’re your kids!”

“I’m sorry, but those are the rules,” he said. He put his arm out, gesturing for them to leave the room.

“Come on,” Rich said. He took the sheet of paper from his sister and put it back on the desk. He

glanced down the two columns of names – some of the schools he recognised. “There are two lists here,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Jade asked.

“Come on now,” Chance said.

“Two lists,” Rich repeated. “As in two sets of boarding schools. As in boys’ schools and girls’ schools.”

“No way. Oh, no way on earth,” Jade said.

“You’re not splitting us up,” Rich agreed. He turned angrily to face his father. “Jade and me – we’ve got nothing except each other. You’re not taking that from us too.”

Rich was slumped on the sofa, watching the telly. It was a cartoon and he wasn’t interested, but it was better than listening to Chance, who was sitting on the floor talking to him.

“I tried mixed schools first. Of course I did. But none of them had two spaces in the same year group.”

“So you just thought you’d split us up,” Rich said.

“What was I supposed to do?” Chance asked.

Rich said nothing. He turned up the volume of the television.

But he still heard Jade’s shout from the kitchen, where she’d gone to empty the ashtray into the bin: “What is this? You are one seriously weird guy.”

Rich clicked off the telly and followed Chance to the kitchen. Jade had the fridge door open and was unloading its contents on to the side. Bottles of beer.

“Is that all there is?” Rich asked.

“No. There’s this too.” She pulled out two bigger bottles and put those with the beer. Champagne. “I mean, where’s the butter? Milk? Eggs? Food of any sort? Anything at all really?”

“It’s down the road,” Chance said. He gently eased Jade to one side and started to repack the fridge.

“What do you mean, down the road?”

“I get a takeaway or I eat at the pub. They’re down the road.”

“And that’s how you *live*?” Jade was aghast. “No wonder the kitchen’s so clean. At least you do the washing up.”

“Eat out of the cartons usually,” Chance said casually. He turned and winked at Rich, who stifled a smile.

“You are so gross,” Jade told him. “Just don’t expect us to sink to your level.”

Chance shrugged.

“What about a Chinese?” Rich asked.

They ate Chinese with the telly on. It meant they didn’t have to talk to one another. Jade took herself off to bed almost as soon as she’d finished her egg-fried rice and spring roll. Rich pushed his sweet and sour chicken around the plate, not really hungry.

“I’m tired,” he said awkwardly. “I think I’ll get to bed too.”

“That’s OK,” Chance said. “I’ve got work to do anyway. Some calls to make. Don’t worry – I’ll tidy away. And wash up.”

Rich gave a weak smile and headed for the bedroom.

Jade was already in bed. She hadn’t turned the light out and she was just staring at the ceiling. She frowned at Rich as he came in.

“Hey,” he said.

She turned over, facing away.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “I haven’t done anything.”

She pulled the pillow over her head.

Not listening.

So Rich pulled her duvet away instead.

“Give that back!” she said.

Jade was out of bed and grabbing back the duvet. Rich let it go and went for her pillow instead.

They faced one another, each brandishing bedding.

“Peace?” Rich suggested.

“If you give me my pillow back.”

“Fair enough.” He threw it to her.

Jade dropped the duvet and caught the pillow. Then she started hitting Rich with it, driving him back on to his bed.

“Hey, hey, hey!” He tried to fend her off.

“That’s for ganging up on me.”

“We’re not – I wasn’t. When?”

“In the kitchen. Getting a Chinese.”

“Yeah, as opposed to what?” Rich wanted to know. “There’s no food in this house. Just beer, champagne and cigarettes. Which did *you* want for dinner? At least now we’ve been and got some milk.”

Jade flopped down on her bed, dragging the duvet back up over herself. “I’m sorry. It’s all just so... sudden. So unfair.”

She started crying again. Rich sat beside her on the bed.

“It is a nightmare,” Rich agreed. He looked over at the bedroom door. “*He’s* a nightmare. Maybe boarding school will be better.”

“Oh, look,” Jade said, sniffing between her tears. “Out the window.”

The curtains were drawn and Rich frowned. “What?”

“Thought I saw a flying pig,” Jade said.

“Maybe you did,” Rich told her. He grabbed his pyjamas from under his pillow and headed for the bathroom.

In Krejikistan, the cut glass of a chandelier glittered as the light reflected off its facets. Electric bulbs had replaced the candles that once provided the light, but the ceiling above it still retained an original mural – a pale blue sky with delicate clouds drifting across.

The room below was enormous, with a floor made up of black-and-white marble squares. The space was made to seem even bigger by large mirrors that hung on the walls. The furniture – a highly-polished wooden table that had been made for Louis XIV of France, high-backed chairs patterned in gold leaf that had been a gift to a tsar, and a series of seventeenth-century side tables – were almost lost in the huge space.

Viktor Vishinsky sat in one of the antique chairs. In front of him was a single place setting for dinner – heavy silver cutlery, an ornate bowl filled with stuffed olives and a glass of white wine. He was looking intently at a large screen that his technicians had set up at the other end of the table. The image was grainy and unclear.

“Is that the best you can do?” he asked. He took one of the olives from the bowl in front of him and rolled it between his finger and thumb.

“We have enhanced it as much as possible,” Pavlov, the chief technician, assured him.

Vishinsky settled back in his chair and let them explain. To him, the images still looked crude and fuzzy. He pushed the olive into his mouth.

“You can see where the man at the back of the laboratory is opening the canister,” Pavlov said.

He froze the image. It was projected from a laptop computer on to the large screen. The hi-tech set-up looked out of place in the tsarist splendour of the huge room.

Two other technicians were standing nervously at the side of the room. Whether they were there in case Pavlov needed their own specialist expertise, or simply to give him moral support, Vishinsky did not know or care. His whole attention was focused on the speckled images on the screen.

Pavlov used a laser pointer and ran the red dot of light round the figure just visible by the shadowy shape of the canisters. "If we had images from an infra-red camera—" he began.

But Vishinsky cut him off. "We do not. We must work with what we have. What can you tell me, apart from the obvious?"

Pavlov let the video run on. "As you can see, just, he is reaching inside the canister. As his hand comes out – there." He froze the video again and indicated the man's hand with the pointer. "He is holding something. Something which we must assume he dipped into the fluid and filled. It is not very big. We can tell from his hand that it is about the size of an eggcup." Pavlov paused for a moment, before adding, "It is not an eggcup, I should point out."

"I said omit the obvious. Is it something he found in the lab?" Vishinsky asked, taking another olive. "Or is it something he brought with him?"

"We can find no indication that any container of that size was in the lab. Unfortunately, there is nothing left of the lab, so it is impossible to be sure if anything was taken. But earlier in the sequence we see the man looking round, we think for a container. He finds nothing useful, so uses whatever he brought with him. See, here..." He wound the footage back at high speed before letting it play again. "He seems to take something from his pocket."

"Something that he had in his pocket," Vishinsky said.

"He may have come prepared, and then looked to see if there was a more suitable or larger container to be found in the lab."

"But there was not."

Pavlov nodded. "All sterile glassware. Fragile, if you have to make a hurried escape."

The video was running forward again as they spoke, at normal speed.

"There!" Vishinsky said suddenly. He leaned forward. "Go back – slowly."

Pavlov let the images play backwards at a tenth of their normal speed. He froze the playback as soon as Vishinsky said: "Stop it there."

Vishinsky got up from his chair and walked slowly along the length of the table. His eyes never left the screen. The image showed the dark figure as his hand emerged from his pocket. The fingers were wrapped round whatever he was holding – the receptacle he was about to fill with liquid from the canister. In that single frozen frame, it was angled so that it caught what little light there was – perhaps a faint glow from the display of nearby equipment.

Vishinsky stood close to the screen. "Close in on his hand, on the thing he is holding."

Pavlov moved his fingers carefully across the laptop's track pad and the image zoomed in on the container in the man's hand.

Just barely visible was a shadow or a mark. Something on the container that was catching the light. "What is that?"

"I'm not sure." Pavlov tried to trace the mark with his pointer, but it was not distinct enough. "A maker's mark perhaps? Maybe it's just a shadow, a reflection – an artefact of the enhancement process."

Vishinsky nodded. "Find out," he said.

"But, sir," Pavlov said, "we have already enhanced the image as much as we can. Any more and we risk introducing things that are not actually there." He hesitated and licked his dry lips.

“Don’t trouble me with details,” Vishinsky said. “Just find out what that mark is. You can do that, can’t you? For me?”

He raised a grey-white eyebrow as if asking a simple favour of a friend.

Pavlov swallowed. “Of course, sir. We’ll do what we can. But—”

“Find out!” Vishinsky roared. He waved his hand in sudden, abrupt dismissal and Pavlov quickly disconnected his laptop and hurried after his colleagues from the room. “And tell someone to bring me my food,” Vishinsky said. “Before it gets cold.”

The sound of a telephone woke Rich in the middle of the night. Instinctively, he fumbled for his mobile, but it wasn't the same ring. He and Jade both had mobiles, though Mum had made them pay for their own top-ups. Probably he was out of credit anyway.

The phone stopped and, now that he was awake, Rich could hear the low sound of Chance speaking. Rich's mobile showed the time when it wasn't being used – it said 04:32. Who was ringing up at half past four in the morning?

He needed the toilet now he was awake, so he tiptoed to the door and opened it. Rich paused. Chance's voice was muffled and indistinct through his closed study door, but Rich couldn't help catching a few words when he pressed his ear to the door.

"...No, not here... better not meet yet... dangerous... leave it for me... usual place... I'll collect... soon."

The sound of Chance's voice stopped. If he had to be somewhere soon, he'd be in a hurry, Rich realised. He darted back into his bedroom and pushed the door almost closed. The study door opened and through the crack between the door and its frame, Rich saw Chance hurry into the living room. He was still dressed.

Maybe he slept in his clothes, Rich thought. Maybe he didn't sleep at all.

Rich climbed back into bed, his need for the bathroom forgotten. When he woke again it was morning, and the events of the night seemed as vague as a dream.

Jade appeared in the bedroom door. She was still in her pyjamas and carrying two mugs of tea. "He's gone," she said.

Rich didn't need to ask who she meant.

He told her about the night-time phone call while they drank their tea. They went through to the study, where the computer was on. It showed a standard screensaver and there was a password to get out of it and back to the main screen.

"Who needs a password when he lives alone?" Jade wondered.

"Maybe it's for our benefit," Rich said. "Or maybe he takes the laptop to work. Maybe he's gone to work already."

"It's not seven o'clock yet," Jade pointed out.

"Long commute?"

"Or a long meeting. I wonder who called him."

"Let's find out," Rich said, lifting the phone. "1471 – gives the number of the last caller."

"Probably withheld or unavailable," Jade said.

Rich tried it anyway. The dial tone was replaced by the beep of the buttons as he pressed them. But then, instead of a voice, he heard an electronic screech. It was so loud and shrill that Rich dropped the phone.

Jade could hear it too. She picked up the handset to replace it in the cradle. But then she hesitated, pointing at the plastic box attached to the phone. Lights were flashing on the side of it. She hung up and the lights went out.

"I don't like this," Jade said quietly.

Before Rich could reply, they heard the sound of the door to the flat slamming shut. They rushed to the living room.

Chance looked tired. He was holding a few letters which he dropped unopened into the kitchen bin. He closed up the cupboard where the bin was kept and turned the kettle on.

“Lucky we got milk,” Rich said from the doorway.

“I drink my coffee black,” Chance replied, without looking round. “You’re up early.”

“We all are,” Jade said, pushing past Rich into the kitchen. “Where have you been?”

“Couldn’t sleep. Went for a walk.”

The kettle was boiling and Chance made his coffee. “I’ve got some work to catch up on. I’ll see you later. Help yourselves to breakfast.”

“I guess he means the beer,” Rich said, when Chance had gone. “Unless there’s some cereal hidden away.” He opened a few cupboards, but found nothing. Having tried all the others, he opened the cupboard under the sink. This was the cupboard with the bin. As the door opened, it raised the lid of the bin inside.

“Hang on – look at this.” Rich was staring into the bin.

Jade joined him and saw what he was looking at – the letters that Chance had just dropped.

Rich lifted out the letters. “They’re all the same,” he said, showing her. There were five letters – bills and junk mail. The address was the same on them all – *Second Floor Flat* – and the number and street. And they had all been sent to the same person.

But that person wasn’t John Chance. It was Henry Lessiter.

“Remind me,” Jade said quietly. “How do we know that this man who says he’s called John Chance but gets someone else’s post, who gets phone calls in the middle of the night and goes to ‘meetings’ until dawn—”

“How do we know,” Rich finished for her, “that he’s actually our John Chance at all?”

Chance told them he was working from home that day. He was happy for Jade and Rich to explore the area, and they went to the shops. For lunch they got a sandwich in a little internet café, and Rich spent an hour mucking about on the web. Jade emailed her friend Charmaine in America.

They found a small supermarket within easy walking distance and Jade bought bottled water, grapes, oranges and a spray air freshener. Rich bought crisps and coke. They thought about getting some food for the evening, but neither of them fancied cooking and they doubted Chance would offer. So they grabbed a few ready meals that would microwave.

When they got back, Chance was in the living room, talking on his mobile. He hung up as soon as Rich and Jade came in. They exchanged glances, sure it was for their benefit.

“Can I ring my friend Charmaine?” Jade asked.

“Of course you can,” Chance said. “You’ve got a mobile.”

“I’m almost out of credit.”

“Me too,” Rich said.

“Give me your mobile numbers and I’ll get them topped up.”

“I’ll write them down for you later,” Rich said.

“Just tell me. I’ll remember. I’m good with numbers.” He smiled. “Really.”

Rich reeled off his mobile number. Grudgingly, Jade told him hers too. Chance recited them both back perfectly.

“Charmaine’s in New York,” Jade said, as Chance offered his own mobile. “It’ll cost a fortune on that.”

“There’s the phone in the study,” Rich suggested.

“Maybe later,” Chance said.

“I need to call her now, before she leaves for school. You know – the time difference?”

Chance sighed. “All right, all right.”

Jade didn't wait for more, but headed straight for the study. Chance hurried after her and Rich followed.

“Hang on,” Chance said. “I need to set this up.” He fiddled with the plastic box attached to the phone wire.

“What's that for?” Rich asked.

“Oh, it's... It's a security thing. Like a phone lock.”

“There's only you here,” Jade said. “Or was.”

“The company insists. I deal with a lot of sensitive stuff in my job.”

“Like what?” Jade asked.

“Like I can't tell you.” He finished working on the box. “That should work now. I'll leave you to it.”

Rich followed him out. “Why did you throw your letters away?” he asked. “Junk mail?”

“Probably,” Chance said. “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.”

“They were for the previous tenant of the flat. He didn't leave a forwarding address.”

Rich nodded. “And no one writes to you?”

Chance smiled. “That's me – Johnny No-Mates.”

The phone worked fine now, but Jade just got the answer phone at Charmaine's house, so she rang Mrs Gilpin instead.

Mrs Gilpin seemed pleased to hear from her. “How is everything?” she asked.

“Oh, fine,” Jade lied. “There's some shops nearby and a little park. And... Dad is sorting out school for us. We'll be OK.”

“You must come back and visit us.”

“Thank you. We'd like that.” There was something funny with the phone – probably something to do with the plastic box. Jade could hear a clicking every now and again. But she thought nothing of it.

Three streets away from where Jade was making her phone call, an unmarked black van was parked in a side road.

Inside the van, a man wearing dark-framed glasses and a long grey raincoat was sitting in front of a sophisticated audio monitoring system. He wore headphones, listening intently to every word Jade said.

At Heathrow, Stabb was meeting a woman who had just arrived on a scheduled flight. As they walked to the short-term car park, Stabb told the woman how things were going.

“So you’ve achieved nothing,” the woman said with a smile. She was beautiful, with long, straight, jet black hair.

“It is difficult until we can get back the sample,” Stabb said. “We can’t risk losing that, and Chance could have hidden it anywhere. The only way to be sure is to get to Chance as he hands it over. He must still have it or there would have been some fallout by now.”

“I agree. And so does Viktor.”

Stabb scowled. “Glad to hear you both approve.”

“Oh, don’t misunderstand me,” she said, smiling. She brushed her hair away from her face as she got into the car. “You are in charge here.”

Stabb looked at her, then started the engine and pulled out of the parking space.

“So what do you want me to do?” she asked.

“Nothing for now. We’re watching Chance, and so far he’s not made contact with anyone. But the children may provide an opportunity.”

The woman smiled, watching out of the car window as a huge 747 took off into the cloudy sky. “I like children,” she said.

“Jade won’t like that,” Rich warned Chance.

Chance lit the cigarette anyway. He put the packet and his silver lighter down on the coffee table beside his mobile phone. Rich could see there was a heart engraved on the lighter.

Chance blew out a long breath of smoke and Rich winced, trying not to cough. He hated the smell of cigarettes, hated the way the smoke got into your mouth and the stale smell of it lingering on your clothes.

“I’ve had a really long day,” Chance said.

At that moment, Jade appeared in the doorway to the living room. Rich recognised the expression on Jade’s face and from experience he knew it was not good news.

She walked over to Chance and plucked the cigarette from his mouth. Then she ground it out in the ashtray.

“What are you doing?” Chance asked.

“You’re not smoking that,” Jade told him.

“You can’t order me about in my own flat.”

“It might be your flat,” Jade said, “but we all have to live here.”

“Sometimes I just have to have one.” He opened the cigarette packet again.

“You’re killing us as well as yourself,” Jade told him. “Killing your own children.”

Chance was on his feet. He pushed the lighter into the space inside the cigarette packet, then closed the packet and tossed it down on to the table beside his mobile phone. “I’m sorry, but I can’t deal with this right now. I’ll phone schools and you should be somewhere more pleasant by the weekend. Things are not easy for me at the moment – not easy at all.”

He turned and walked quickly from the room.

~~As soon as the study door slammed shut, Jade scooped up the cigarettes from the coffee table. “Confiscated,” she said. “Since we’re all treating each other like school kids. And that,” she added, picking up Chance’s mobile phone. “That’s confiscated too.”~~

“What are you going to do with them?” Rich asked. “Ciggies, fine. But you can’t chuck away his phone. And he put his lighter inside the cigarette packet.”

“Then I’ll put them somewhere he won’t find them,” she said.

“He’ll go ape,” Rich said.

Jade grinned. “I know.” She headed for the bedroom.

Rich stared at the empty space on the table where the cigarettes and phone had been. There was a new packet of cigarettes on a table in the hall, and he fetched it and put it on top of the telly. After a moment’s thought, Rich tore the cellophane wrapper off the packet. Maybe Chance would assume he’d opened a new pack and not get too cross when he couldn’t find his phone or his lighter.

Rich didn’t ask where Jade was actually hiding Chance’s stuff. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know. And when Jade returned and moved on to the kitchen, he decided he *really* didn’t want to know and went to the bedroom. He pushed the door shut and tried to read. He couldn’t concentrate, and when he heard the study door open, he cringed.

A few moments later, he heard the explosion he had anticipated.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Chance asked.

Rich took a deep breath, then went to see what was happening.

Jade had been pouring beer down the kitchen sink. Empty bottles were neatly arranged on the worktop, and now she’d started on the champagne. The room reeked of alcohol.

Jade and Chance were staring at each other, and Rich would not have put money on who would blink or look away first.

“Let’s just all calm down,” Rich said. His voice seemed quiet and strained and rather weedy, even to himself.

“I am calm,” Jade said. She didn’t sound it.

“Maybe we should...” Rich swallowed, “...talk about this.”

“I’ve nothing to say,” Jade replied. She was still locked in a staring match with her father.

“Fine,” Chance said. “Then you can listen. Both of you.” He broke from the confrontation with Jade as he turned to glare at Rich. “In the living room. Now.”

“I don’t—” Jade started to say.

“Now!”

She didn’t finish the thought. She pushed past Chance and Rich and went and sat on the sofa. Rich hesitated a moment, then went and sat beside her.

Chance stood in front of the fireplace, facing them. He looked down at the coffee table between them.

“Where are my cigarettes?”

“I don’t know,” Rich said. “Haven’t seen them. On top of the telly, maybe?”

“So you’re going to smoke at us again, are you?” Jade asked.

“I’m going to tell you some things that you may not want to hear,” Chance said. “And some things that you may not believe, but need to know.”

“So no slouching at the back,” Jade muttered.

Despite himself, Rich giggled.

“Absolutely,” Chance told them, deadly serious. “It’s bad for your posture.” His mouth twitched, just slightly. But it was enough to defuse the tension a little. He took a deep breath, as if gathering himself for what he was going to say.

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