

FADE *to* BLACK

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CONTRABAND 

CHAPTER ONE

IN BLOOMSBURY I shook hands with a dead man.

I was waiting for a talk on expressionist imagery in *The Third Man* at London's newest cool gallery when the late Philip Hegley showed up. He announced his arrival by running into a chair he sent toppling onto its back. Then he managed to make an even bigger racket putting it back to sorts, dragging the legs screamingly across the floor. He opened his arms to the small audience in some kind of theatrical apology, looked around the room, then headed straight in my direction. He grabbed my hand and shook.

"I was hoping to catch you here, Root."

Hegley's head was bald and polished, his face hard, like it had lost its flesh, skin taut over bone. He kept a tight grip on my arm like he thought I might bolt.

Before I could respond – what do you say to the deceased? – he talked a staccato burst, offering a reckless spread of notions I couldn't possibly begin to take in.

"I shouldn't have done it, Root. Pure vanity, of course. But they took advantage. Yes, I should have put a stop to it. Foolish, foolish. I need to get on with things now. Difficult, of course. When you're supposed to be dead..."

Barely a minute later, this very tall man – I put the chap at around six-six minimum – arrived at the gallery. He came our way at a fair lick and I was impressed by how light-footed he was for his height. He stopped at our row and made to block an exit, so it seemed. I noticed he was very well-dressed – the stand-outs were his shoes which were absolutely sharp and shone with a patina that was almost antique.

Hegley finally let go of me.

“We need to talk, Root,” he said.

He went over to join the waiting giant, then walked off towards the exit. The man – how was he able to walk so daintily? – kept clean step no more than a yard behind him.

I watched them leave, couldn’t believe what had just happened. Well, it wasn’t every day you met a dead man and got invited to a chat. What was there to say? Pretty much everything I knew about Hegley I’d put into the five-hundred-word obituary I’d written two years ago.

Hegley’s had been the first, and to that date the only, obit I’d ever written, and though I’d certainly known who he was, it wasn’t as if I was any sort of expert on him or his work. What happened was I got an urgent request from a *Guardian* editor. *Our regular on the filmmakers has come down with a bug. Anyone else who could do it is hanging in Cannes and, of course, no one had the thought to prep something on Hegley. He was only sixty, for Christ’s sake. Do it for a pal, won’t you?*

He was a vague kind of friend – I needed a lot of those to do what I did for a living – but I thought, why not, you never knew when you might be after a return favour from a daily. So I dug up what I could on Hegley on the Internet and then called a contact at *Sight & Sound*. He promptly sent over a bike with copies of articles covering the deceased in his cinematic prime, which would have been some thirty years earlier.

I took time to study the obituaries format and it seemed fairly straightforward, not a lot to it unless you personally knew the departed, or had some exciting anecdote up your sleeve. Well, I reckoned the genre needed a pep of sorts so I came up with a fitting style that leant heavily on the screenplay format I knew so well. I definitely managed to put a bit of life into the past of the deceased in the present tense.

The *Guardian* was happy with it. I got the regular fee. That was the obit over and done. And Hegley. Well, until I got to shake his hand in Bloomsbury.

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The morning after the talk, I got up at six-thirty. As I dressed I chatted to Meaghan, tried to explain what had happened, but as usual I wasn't able to interest her in any kind of early-morning talk. As I closed the bedroom door all I could see of her was a blond head sticking out of a snarl of sheets.

I headed straight to the Thames, guessing the tide would be out, though I could never be sure of that. I'd once gone to buy charts so that I'd know everything there was about the high and low waters, but when I actually got my hands on them in the bookshop I realised they'd take the magic right out of the river, that I probably wouldn't have the desire to leave home early hours to go and see the known. So I kept my money, savoured the priceless realisation that sometimes no price could be put on wonderful ignorance.

The Thames Path at Bankside was empty when I arrived, and the water, which was way down, was deserted too. I enjoyed the quiet for a while until a broad-hipped barge came along to spoil it. I leaned into the railings to see it make a graceless way under Blackfriars Bridge and watched as the bubbles of its wake fizzled, then faded. I thought of the previous evening at the gallery, Hegley's appearance, his babble, the intervention of the light-footed tall man. Maybe I should've left the event straight away, tracked Hegley and his follower right out of the place. But the truth was I was absolutely stunned – who wouldn't have been? – so I'd remained fixed in my seat for the next hour. Of course, I was barely able to listen to the speaker bang on about *The Third Man*, Nietzsche, the nature of tragedy.

Now, down by the river, I could barely wait for the world to wake up so I could tell everyone about Hegley's return, as well as try and find out just what might be going on when the dead suddenly show up and are mad keen to talk to you.

The Thames had started coming in – its shifts always took me by surprise – but there was still enough of a strip of beach to make it

worth my while opening the gate to head down a set of concrete steps and onto pebble. I fancied myself a modern-day mudlark, unable to resist a search for jetsam, and a while back I'd got wildly excited on coming across a metal leaping cat that had somehow made its way to the river from the bonnet of a Jaguar car. However, I was always happy with a stroll, with simply tempting the water's edge with my shoe. And I could never resist a patch of bare sand where, like a child, I would plant my foot on uncharted territory, leave the perfect heel, toe.

I left the river and made for Al's, no mere too-little-too-latte coffee shop but an old-fashioned buttery-walled cafe, the only one close to the Thames to be open at this hour. I always collared the table close to the window which let me gaze out onto the street through the brassy lettering on the huge glass panes. From there I could also cover the door, mark comings and goings, and was on nodding terms with a few of the regulars.

I spent twenty or so minutes with the tailend of the wholesale market crowd who'd worked the night through. They were the people – I now recognised the citrus man and the beadle – who devoured Al's full-English fry-ups and drunk what seemed to be full-measure pints of tea. I supped my cup of stewed coffee, took in the pub-like atmosphere.

I was still getting to know, and like, the neighbourhood and I often picked up something in the cafe that I could use in my work. Like the time I put that broadcast segment based on how the Bishop of Winchester used to run the local brothels with the working girls, the so-called Winchester Geese. The area was now my starting point for things London and I liked to think I was at the beginning of a project to get to know the entire city.

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Meaghan had already left when I got home. I phoned Harry to offer a heads-up on Hegley, but I couldn't get through and had to leave a voicemail straight off the cuff. *You just won't believe who's*

washed up, Aitch. Call me as soon as. I knew Harry wasn't the type to wait a long time to find out what was up, would ring back smart enough.

I sat at my desk waiting for the laptop to boot up when I heard a loud snap directly behind me. Another. I went over to the window and saw that one of the panes had a crack running from the centre right into a corner. Down in the road a man – in fact, the very tall one from Bloomsbury – was staring up at me. He crooked his elbow, launched something, and I flinched as it hit the glass right before my face and crazed the pane. He had a bloody good arm, that was for sure. I had no choice but to go downstairs and see what the hell he was playing at.

He was waiting for me, was so cool he even held open the door to let me out of my own building.

“Good of you to come down,” he said. “My name’s Nesh.” He dealt me his half of a handshake.

“Root Wilson.” I kept my mitts in my pocket. There was no way I was exchanging pleasantries with a vandal.

“Root’s an odd sort of name.”

“It was the best my little sister could do with Robert as a kid.” I had no idea why I was sharing such a personal detail.

Nesh nodded like he understood perfectly. Again he was natively dressed. His brogues shone to a gloss and they were decorated with bright red liquorice laces. His light woollen trousers carried a cutting crease. His silk tie was done up in an impeccable Windsor knot. And he was wearing a three-quarter-length black coat that had a nap to die for.

“What’s your game?” I asked.

“We’re not *playing*, Mr Wilson.”

“Who’s we?”

“An interested party.”

“Interested in breaking windows?”

“It’s just a means to an end.”

“An end to what, exactly?”

“I simply wanted to let you know that you went to last night’s talk, listened politely, spoke to no one, then left.”

“And Philip Hegley?”

“Don’t know such an animal.”

“Me neither, I suppose.”

“I knew you’d catch on. You’re not the type to cause any bother, I’d say.”

“What if I remember later that I actually did see and talk to Hegley?”

Nesh made a show of adjusting the knot on his tie. “Memory’s a funny thing, for sure. But one thing you’re not likely to forget is your broken windows.”

I looked up to the first floor, could make out the cracks in the glass even from the pavement. When I turned back to face Nesh, he was already a good twenty yards down the road. He certainly covered ground quickly with that easy gait of his.

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I went back inside. I now had Nesh nailed as someone who really didn’t cut it as a villain – he was clearly all show, was far too refined to be a proper tough nut. And rather than scare me, he’d managed to fire me up about our director friend.

I raked through my files until I found the notes I’d used to put together the obit. I read the *Guardian* piece once more. My article amounted to little more than a grain of history – Hegley had been born, had made his films, passed away. I looked through his career cuttings but there was nothing that might help me work out how he’d managed to turn up still drawing breath. He’d supposedly drowned but I now I realised I needed to find out the exact circumstances. For, in true obituarist style, I’d only dealt that detail a glancing blow when I’d knocked up the original sketch.

I found a dry account of the coronary court proceedings in *The Stage*. Philip Hegley had turned up his toes rather dramatically on a Dover ferry making its way to Dieppe. He had been off to lunch

in France with his agent, Roger Huckerby, who reported that the two of them had spent a quiet hour or so in the passenger lounge before Hegley had left to lift a leg. But he'd never returned to his seat. Huckerby went looking for him and did a few tours of the boat before reporting the disappearance to the crew.

It seemed as though the French authorities had been lax. The ship returned to England with Huckerby onboard and it wasn't until hours later that a search turned up Hegley's Harris tweed jacket folded in a bin, along with a farewell note tucked into the inside pocket. The British police contacted everyone on the passenger list. One woman remembered seeing someone of Hegley's description – bald, about five-nine – on the car deck during the voyage, while one man said he was fairly certain it was Hegley who had asked him for a light as they stood by the rail at the ferry's stern and had chatted briefly about what was showing in the West End. Hegley's body never did turn up and, after the requisite time period, a verdict of suicide was returned.

At the time of his disappearance, Hegley's career had been deep in the doldrums and he hadn't made anything new for the screen in an age. With that lengthy blot on the CV, there was little prospect of any finance coming his way to change his non-working habit. In short, the prevailing view was that Hegley was commercially played out as a director.

His films – he made five altogether – were generally recognised to be ahead of their time. They were dramas of a gritty bent, with Hegley prone to using lesser-known repertory actors. He was considered to have brought out the best in his casts thanks to the use of what he told the trade press was *rehearsed improv with a twist*. His players were forced to remain totally in character for an entire shoot and they reported that they usually felt utterly spent for months after. Some of them never worked in cinema again, and only a handful of stalwarts appeared in his films more than once.

There was high critical praise for the look and feel of Hegley's work. Authenticity was his byword and he went to huge lengths

to achieve it. For one thing, he directed his cinematographer to scrape the coatings from the camera lenses so that he might capture *real* light. And he insisted on using a rare and expensive black-and-white film stock imported from Austria that had a broad spectrographic range and delivered startling contrast. In an interview with the *Telegraph*, Hegley said he saw his job as similar to a painter's – light was the raw material he mixed on his palette until he got exactly what was required for a scene. Devotees said they needed to see only a few feet of rolling celluloid before being able to identify it as his work.

The last of Hegley's films was his most critically acclaimed, though it also took a heavy fiscal fall. *Greene Land* was reckoned to be a tough fiction set in the London docks shortly before they went into decline and disappeared from the cityscape. I realised I knew almost nothing about it.

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I'd arranged to meet Harry after work. While I felt it was OK for me to dismiss Nesh, I wasn't about to take a risk by involving someone else, and I'd always been especially protective of Harry.

She was already waiting at the Bunch of Grapes when I arrived, looked stunning as always. She liked to dress her way around the decades and this evening was wearing bright-red hot pants with wide braces that rose dramatically up from her waistline and over her white T-shirted chest. Her auburn head was a tumble of waves and curls.

As soon as she saw me, she took me on. "So, what's up? Surprise me with your surprise."

"Can I at least get you a drink first?"

"You know exactly what I want."

"That's for sure."

I ordered our favourite Belgian beers and we waited out their delivery in silence, though Harry was working on sending over her best glare. I wasn't about to put up with any intimidation – I

knew if you let Harry best you just once in the gesture stakes you were dead meat for the rest of the session.

We raised our glasses.

“So?” she asked.

“Shouldn’t we try and scare up a pool table?”

“Job done. We’ll be on in ten minutes. Tell me what’s up.

“Look, Harry, there’s not that much I can give you.”

“Come on, Bro, talk to me, why don’t you?” Her face was tight with frustration. “It will feel soooo good.”

“I’m going to write a biog of Philip Hegley.”

“Hegley? How come?”

“Roger Huckerby, his old agent, called me out of the blue and asked me if I was up for it.”

“I haven’t heard anything about this on the grapevine,” she said. “Tell me more.”

“But I’ve signed an NDA.”

“Oh, give me something.”

“Huckerby told me he really enjoyed the obituary.”

“How can anyone *enjoy* an obituary?”

“Maybe I have a knack when it comes to writing about the dead.”

“So, you’re saying this book is what all this mystery is about?”

“In a nutshell,” I said.

“What? Don’t go around thinking I believe this for a minute, Bro.”

“I need your help here, Aitch. Tell me what you think of Philip Hegley’s work?”

“Why should I say anything when you’re obviously not being straight with me?”

“Be a pal. I’ll definitely give you more when I can.”

Harry looked into her glass. “Well, I’d say he was a bit of a directors’ director who strutted some good stuff on the lighting side. The look of some of his films is, frankly, totally amazing. Not just for their time, either. They still pop socks today.”

“Something of a technician, was he?”

“Far more than that. He had this thing about multiple plotlines that were too much for audiences back then. Have you seen *Greene Land*?”

I shook my head, drank some, was enjoying listening to Harry begin sounding off on something she was clearly encyclopaedic about. She was currently a film production star, knew what was what, who was who. Not that it was any surprise she was flying so high, because even at uni she'd been mad, mad, mad about film, was top of the class and then some.

“Thing is, Hegley's too much of a social realist for me,” she said, “though it's clear why the film's doing well posthumously. It plugs right into the Zeitgeist. I can't believe you haven't bothered to see it.”

“Well, you know my feelings on British filmmakers...”

“They love it in Europe and on the East Coast,” she said. “It's bringing in pots for the production company, and the fact that Hegley's content is part of my portfolio makes me stand out on the balance sheet.”

“I didn't know that.” Harry was turning out to be a great source.

“That's because you never ask what I'm up to.”

“Come on, Aitch, you know I'm not one to follow the deals.”

“Typical bloody creative.”

“Guilty.” I held up my hands. “But give me more. I can't believe Hegley would have approved of a smash hit.”

“I think def he would've. I did meet him a couple of times and he was crazy for success. Thing was, he thought everyone who came to see him after his career troughed was going to somehow pull him back up. I was just another bloody graduate at the time. I couldn't do anything for him.”

“Tell me more about *Greene Land*.”

“Hegley was nuts about everything to do with the Thames. He came from somewhere in oriental England, even had a sort of writing hideaway by the coast. His big idea was always to do a Docklands drama.”

“And it flopped.”

“To be fair, the film only screened in a handful of London theatres. And in midsummer. It could only die.”

“To rise like a phoenix on the director’s demise.”

“If you say so.” Harry emptied her glass with one thirsty pull.

She pointed to the two guys finishing their game of pool. “We’re on,” she said.

Harry was short of time so we played a best of three. And she handed me a proper drubbing. It was in the third, when she was already two up with nothing to lose, that she really cut loose. I’d just gone for a safety and it looked like she needed to proceed pretty cautiously herself to make something of her next shot. Of course, she wasn’t seeing the position through my meek eyes and went at it full of ginger, pulled off a two-rail kick that dropped her stripe coolly into the middle pocket.

“That was something,” I said.

“Wasn’t it just?” She showily kissed the tip of the cue.

Harry then proceeded to run the table, finishing off with an inside cut that not only put away her last ball but also, rather cheekily, saw the cue ball gently tap a solid of mine into the nearest pocket.

“I’m irresistible, Bro,” she said.

Looking directly as I was at Ms Hot Pants, I had to agree.

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Meaghan was at the keyboard when I got home. She was wearing her earbuds, so didn’t hear me come in. I sat myself out of the way in an armchair, watched her play.

One thing Meaghan Terry had in profusion was poise. I relished the rhythm that ran across her shoulders, and I watched it rise into her graceful neck to end in the serene nods of her head. I couldn’t see her face but I took pleasure in imagining the lines of her mouth tensing as she worked her way through the tougher passages. And I admired the finesse of her fingers as they picked out the keys. I was totally fascinated by the art of her bones and

the gorgeous cloth of her skin. I completely adored the form of Meaghan, wanted to make love to her right then.

I hadn't seen her play for ages. She'd studied piano full on until she hit eighteen, then given up abruptly. She abandoned plans of becoming a professional and went on to study composition at the Royal. On graduation, she went straight into publishing, a move that seriously disappointed her musico parents.

Meaghan stopped, removed the buds. My gentle applause made her start.

"Have you been there long?" She tucked stray hairs straight behind her ears.

"I've been admiring the view a while. I wish I could've heard the music, though. What was it?"

"Who Can I Turn To?"

"I'd be a good audience, you know."

I couldn't take my eyes off Meaghan's glorious bee-sting lips. They'd always fascinated me, were beautifully and sexily at odds with the understated features of the rest of her face.

"You don't really like jazz," she said.

"I do when you play it."

"You're still listening to Pulp."

"You make it sound like I'm unfinished business."

"Hanging onto your youth a little, maybe."

"Is that what you think?"

"Isn't that why you see Harriet?" Meaghan could never allow herself to use the name Harry.

"I wondered when she might come up," I said. "You did say you were working late."

She gave me a spiky look.

"It was about work," I said. The way it came out sounded feeble.

"I bet you got your pool fix."

"A few dull games."

"Oh, let's not go pretending anything to do with Harriet is plain vanilla."

“You know, watching you play had put me in a great mood.”

“Apologies for ruining your day. And I’m dreadfully sorry I became part of it so very late.” Meaghan picked up the keyboard and packed it away in a drawer.

“Unfair. I tried to talk to you this morning before you left.”

“You mean when you rattled on about some bloke or other? Hedley, was it?”

“Philip Hegley.”

“Isn’t he dead?”

“You remember Hegley?” I asked. “I’ve been asked to do his biog.”

“I hope you said no.”

“Why would I?”

The telephone rang and I picked it up.

“Root? Philip Hegley. Need to talk, old chap.”

The line immediately went dead.

I put down the receiver. Meaghan was no longer in the room. I heard water running into the bathtub.