

Chapter 1: London, April 10th 2011

A slight movement in the bed. A breath that wasn't his own. A sudden sense of not being alone. He forced his eyes open and immediately remembered. It had been one of those work binges. Everyone in the pub till throwing out time then on to a club till three. He turned his head slowly and saw her. She had reddish hair tangled around her head. Her back was naked and he assumed the rest of her was too. She was a new recruit – he remembered that. Fresh from university. The paper was full of thrusting eager young women like her who easily succumbed under the influence of drink to the persuasion of hacks like him. But he knew the form. When she awoke she would be distraught. She wouldn't remember how she got here and would be terrified that she had somehow jeopardised her job. Or she might be one of the aggressive ones – threats and abuse, possibly the hint of extortion. He groaned inwardly. What was her name? He had made a mental note – an image to help him remember. Something to do with moss. It couldn't be moss – no-one was called that. Heather, that was it. Heather. In a moment, he would wake her gently. Tell her it was alright, that's how it was in the newspaper business. You worked hard and played hard.

His musings were suddenly shattered by a thunderous noise from outside. He leapt naked from the bed, accompanied seconds later by Heather who was holding one hand to her mouth and the other ineffectually over her pubic hair. Voices screamed incoherently accompanied by the sound of heavy beating on the front door. His mind raced with scenarios. Someone had died – his mother, his son. Perhaps it was an old enemy. Someone he'd written about and upset. He scrambled to the floor in search of clothes, coming head to head with Heather who had the same idea. Last night they had abandoned their garments with undue haste and now had to navigate a tangle of socks, tights and underwear. He found his shorts knotted round her bra.

Racing down the stairs, he tripped in the half light and fell down the last few steps.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" He pulled himself upright, claspng his aching right thigh. "Who is it? What do you want?"

"Police. Open the door! We have a warrant to search your property."

His knees almost buckled as he steadied himself against the wall. He had no choice.

He turned the lock and pulled the door open.

"Douglas Penhallam. We are investigating alleged offences of phone hacking. We have reason to believe that you may be hiding information that you did not disclose to us at your recent interview."

"But I've told you all I know. How dare you fucking do this to me! Let me see that warrant."

Three officers pushed past and raced into the flat. They wore black combat suits. He heard a scream from Heather upstairs.

"This is absurd." His words echoed in his head like an old movie soundtrack.

"Shall we go inside, Mr. Penhallam, sir? You must be getting cold standing there just in them shorts." He looked down at his near nakedness. A trickle of blood meandered slowly from his thigh to his knee. He had never before felt so vulnerable.

In the lounge, which still contained the detritus of last night's excessive drinking, they made him sit down whilst they searched the premises. He caught sight of Heather being led down the stairs with a sheet draped around her. She was sobbing loudly. They were having a whispered conversation just out of his earshot. He looked around the dishevelled room. Drawers had been pulled open. His papers were spread over the table, slowly absorbing some of last night's spilt coffee. His laptop had been sealed into a plastic bag.

"Mr. Penhallam," began the senior officer, his hands clasped in front of his paunch. "We have reason to believe that, when you were formally interviewed under caution last week in connection with Operation Weeting about alleged phone hacking offences, you failed to disclose information which could be of significant value to our enquiries. Our investigations this morning have confirmed our suspicions. I therefore have no alternative but to arrest you and to take you to a police station for further questioning."

"But this is crazy. I told you all I know. What didn't I disclose?"

"Douglas Penhallam, I am arresting you on suspicion of unlawfully intercepting voicemail communications. You do not have to say anything, but ..."

He sat in his boxer shorts on the settee, not believing what was happening to him. Did this really happen in Britain in 2011?

"... it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence."

One of the policemen was now pulling his arms behind his back and securing them with a plastic restraint. Outside he could see Heather being helped into a police car.

Suddenly, he felt his bladder give way.

He was in a cell-like room facing two police officers across a grey metal table. A sallow-faced solicitor with thinning hair sat silently by his side. First, there had been the ritual insults and protestations of innocence.

"You idiotic bastards! You've already interviewed me once. I told you all I know – and that's nothing. I've never hacked into anyone's phone and I don't know anyone who has."

Then the game play.

"But, Douglas, we've got new evidence. Evidence that tells us that you did know what was going on. Some of your junior reporters have already admitted hacking."

"You're lying. I don't believe you have new evidence. Who gave it to you?"

"From the top, Douglas, from the very top. Lord Halshaw."

"Lord Halshaw? Now I know you're lying. He may be a bastard but he'd never stoop so low as to shop his own people."

"Think about it, Penhallam." It was a different policeman this time. One who'd been standing in the shadows at the back with his arms folded. "Lord Halshaw doesn't want to get smeared with this hacking business. It smells and it's potentially damaging to his relationship with the PM. He needs scapegoats and you're one of them. If I were you, I'd plead guilty and get it over with. That way the courts will be more lenient. You could be out within a couple of years." An assenting chuckle rippled round the sterile interview room.

After his release at midday, he returned to his flat to change out of the clothes he had hurriedly assembled that morning – now damp with perspiration. The place had been ransacked. His office had been almost cleared. The computer had gone and so had many of the files that contained contact details and copies of some of his more notable stories. He stood among the chaos feeling dejected and alone. His descent over five years from a reasonably happy man living with wife and son in a suburb of Wimbledon to a late

'fortysomething' alcoholic living alone in a wrecked flat near Kilburn had been meteoric. Once one of the most feted reporters on his paper, with a string of awards to prove it, he now spent his time looking over his shoulder at aggressive cub reporters eager to bypass his authority on their way to the top. And above him was a tight-knit management team headed by the paper's owner, Lord Halshaw, whose increasing influence on journalistic freedom was stifling the campaigning culture that had led the paper to become the scourge of many in the public sector.

He was jolted out of his introspection by the sound of his mobile ringing. Struggling to remove it from his pocket, he saw the name 'Prick' – a name he reserved privately for the managing editor, James Welland – a childish taunt but he enjoyed it.

"James, thank God you called! Do you know what happened to me this morning?" Welland had been a cub reporter with him in the mid-80s. They had both been eager and idealistic, working together on major scoops such as the East End vice rings that ensnared some senior figures from both ends of the political spectrum. While he had continued to fine-tune his investigative skills and to build his network of informants, James had networked instead with the management team and gradually carved out a niche for himself, ensuring that relationships cemented in some of London's finest restaurants found expression in the headlines of The Nation's Voice.

"Doug, I think you should come in immediately and see me."

"Too bloody right I should! I want you to make a formal complaint. Do you know they were hammering on my door at five this morning? I want them nailed, James, do you hear me?"

"Just get to my office, Doug. Be there in twenty minutes." The line went dead.

The offices of The Nation's Voice were situated in a tower block at Canary Wharf – part of the regeneration of London's docklands which had transformed derelict warehouses and run down terraces into glittering parcels of real estate. New high rise office blocks thrust themselves confidently into the sky proclaiming the economic supremacy of the market. However, many of the pristine suites remained stubbornly empty, victims of the lingering recession that had attached itself like a lead weight to the faltering UK economy.

Doug hurried out of the underground station and jogged towards the building. He sprinted up the steps to reception, waving nonchalantly to the security guard as he normally did.

"Er, Mr. Penhallam, sir, would you just wait a minute? We've been asked to escort you upstairs to the Director's Suite."

The elderly guard, bedecked with gold braid and sergeant's stripes, got up from his desk and moved towards him.

"But I know where James Welland is. I go there every day. I'm meeting him in his office."

"No sir. The meeting's been changed to the Director's Suite. I'm to take you up in the executive lift." The executive lift – shit – that was normally reserved for old man Halshaw himself and any of his cronies he was entertaining in the exec dining room. His senses flashed warning signs.

The lift sped effortlessly to the fourteenth floor where the doors opened onto a world carpeted in thick cream pile with walls covered in golden flock fabric. The effect was to deaden any noise and deprive the senses of their normal means of orientation. He followed the security guard along the corridor to the room known affectionately as the 'sherry-go-round'. It was where Lord Halshaw greeted his most valued guests to sip sherry before embarking on a modest five course meal, washed down with cabernet sauvignon from his own vineyard in Tuscany. The security guard knocked on the door and pushed it open. Sitting at the round oak table, James Welland had his gaze fixed on a file, his thick black glasses intermittently reflecting the sunlight. Beside him sat a woman in a grey suit. He had seen her before – probably from HR. Her hair was pulled back tight by a comb clamped to the back of her head.

"What's all this about then, James? Couldn't we meet in your office? No need to treat me like royalty."

"Please sit down, Douglas."

His unease began to grow. He noticed that the security guard had not left the room but was standing to attention by the door.

"So what's to be done then, James? These cops have got to be put in their place. Unless there's someone else behind it – someone high up who's got it in for the paper – or

for Halshaw. Trouble is, that's half the country. Let me do an investigation, James. I'll ..."

"Stop it, Douglas. That's not what this is about."

"What is it about then?"

"You're out, Douglas – finished."

"What do you mean, finished?" he replied, trying to suppress a feeling of mounting panic.

"Lord Halshaw wants you out. He's been concerned about you for some time. There've been mistakes."

"What sort of mistakes?"

"Things like leaving that list of police informant names in a taxi. That could have been devastating if it hadn't been for the driver handing them in. And your drink problem. The Cabinet Office informed me that you were definitely the worse for wear when you interviewed the Home Secretary last week."

"This is crap, James. I get the stories, that's what matters. It's the oxygen that keeps this paper going."

"We've turned a blind eye for too long, Doug. This phone hacking business is turning messy. Some of your younger reporters have admitted hacking into celebrities' phones. And they say that you knew about it – you condoned it. There's one who says you showed her how to do it."

"That's bollocks, James, and you know it!" exploded Doug as he began for the first time to realise the severity of what was being said. "I've no idea how to hack into a phone. I'm a Luddite, you know that. Give me names. Who's accusing me?"

"One of your junior reporters. Young woman called Heather Jones. Mean anything to you?"

Doug felt a shiver as the implications became apparent.

"I was going to get rid of her, James. She's unreliable. Her way of getting back at me."

"It's no good, Douglas. Lord Halshaw has made up his mind. You've got to go. Miss Elliot here has got the ..."

"Like fuck I'm going to go! I'm not going to be kicked out like some limp junior office clerk at the whim of you and that bastard, Halshaw. My stories helped build this paper. I suppose you know there are procedures, tribunals, the union – all that stuff. I'll drag you

through the courts and sue you for every penny I can get."

"Then you leave me no choice."

"What do you mean?"

"Expenses. We've been tracking your expenses for the past couple of years. They're a joke, Douglas. A work of total fiction."

"Come off it, James. We all know there's a bit of latitude on expenses, there always has been. You know, the extra bottle of Krug passed off as a train journey to Birmingham. We've all done it."

He saw the woman from HR with the scraped-back hair looking at him with her mouth open. James Welland had his eyes lowered and his face looked flushed.

"It's more than that, Douglas – I mean, as if that's not bad enough," he added with haste in an apparent attempt to appease the woman from HR. "We've got a list here. You'd better take a look."

He felt physically sick as he recognised some of the entries on the first page.

'21 February: lunch at the Golden Drake for political analysts – £1,650.00.'

A receipt was attached but it was clear to anyone that it was a fake. The accounts department knew it but that's how it was done. It was how it had always been done. What mattered was getting the story and if you did that they turned a blind eye.

"Look at the fourth one on the list," commanded the managing editor. "How do you explain that?" He scanned the list. The fourth one was for a first class rail trip to Edinburgh to attend an awards ceremony for investigative journalism.

"What's wrong with that? I've always been encouraged to attend those things. Keep the profile up and all that."

"You didn't go. You'd put in leave at the same time. You were getting careless."

He felt his usual persuasive logic draining away. In the face of irrefutable evidence, he was clutching at straws. In desperation, he resorted to the one technique that had got him out of tight spots before – anger.

"Now listen, you prick," he said with venom as he got up from his chair and moved menacingly towards the table. "I've served this bloody paper faithfully for twenty years and if you think ..."

He felt the surprisingly strong grip of the security guard close around his right

forearm. The woman from HR was out of her seat and backing towards the window. The managing editor was in a half sitting, half standing position, thrusting his face towards him with his lip curling like an angry Doberman.

"You're expendable, Penhallam. We've got enough on you to have you sent down for a long time."

After that it was all downhill. Three more security guards were called and he was escorted through the editorial suite to collect his belongings. His iPad, personal photos, his ancient cushion and some books he claimed as his own were packed into plastic bags and then he was led out towards the lifts. The usually noisy room fell quiet and people looked sheepishly away. He wasn't popular, he had trodden on too many toes. Only Raff, his closest ally and fellow troublemaker, got up to acknowledge him.

"I'll see you in the usual place in half an hour. You're going to need someone to talk to."

Sitting in the bar of The Wherry, one of the few ancient pubs to have survived the regeneration of Docklands, he felt a profound sense of misery. He'd known that he was living on borrowed time. Unlike James Welland, he'd not bothered to cultivate the acolytes who surrounded Lord Halshaw and oozed him with admiration. He still thought of himself as one of the old guard, independent but principled. Even though he gave off an aura of casual indifference, he actually cared very much about his job. In the past, he had exposed some terrible crimes that had been hidden by a cloak of official malaise. There had been the child prostitution scandal in '97, the missing body parts scare in 2002 and, more recently, the ill-treatment of dementia patients in a national chain of old people's homes. He cared about these issues and he cared about the people who were being exploited, so it hurt him to the core to be accused of something as unethical as phone hacking. He didn't need to hack into phones, he had one of the most sophisticated networks of informants of any journalist on a national daily. Hacking was what you did if you couldn't do the job, or if the pressure for screaming headlines made you buckle – which amounted to the same thing.

He downed a scotch, waiting for the sublime relief it would soon deliver to his aching head, then another, and a third before Raff hung a heavy arm over his shoulder and pulled

him across to a quiet table in the corner of the bar.

"Listen, mate, we all knew this was coming," he began as he pulled Doug down into a seat in a darkened alcove. "I mean, when Halshaw bought the paper it sent shivers throughout the whole industry. You know what his reputation is – he wants control. He wants to dominate and he doesn't care who he hurts on the way."

"I won't let him get away with it. I've spent my life fighting bullies and he's just another power crazy thug. I can dig up dirt – there's bound to be plenty of it – a man like him. Prostitutes, I bet. His relationship with the PM. There's bound to be more to it than meets the eye. As soon as they know I'm onto something, they'll pull back – you'll see."

"I love your spirit, Doug. You've always been passionate. But I think they've got you this time. You can fight the phone hacking and you might win. You didn't personally authorise any hacking. I believe you. But if they don't get you on the hacking they'll probably get you on the expenses issue."

"But come on, Raff, you know ..."

Raff held his hands up to silence Doug's protestations.

"I know we've all done it, mate. It's gone on for years. But it's the timing – coming just after the politicians' expenses debacle, the public won't stand it. It's not the nineties any more. They were great times but they're gone – dead and buried. This is the age of purgatory where we atone for our sins, publicly flagellate and then beg for redemption."

His tone lowered. His voice became more earnest.

"Do something else, Doug, mate. You've been hammering yourself ever since you split with Rachel. I've been meaning to say something, but you know how it is. Don't want to interfere."

"I'm fine."

"I mean, all those young women you keep taking up with. You're kidding yourself, mate. They're using you to get a foot on the ladder. Then you wonder why they never last."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You're bloody wrecked."

The ring tone of Doug's phone brought the conversation to a halt as he struggled to extricate the device from the torn lining of his trouser pocket. He felt a twinge of panic as

he saw the caller's picture on his screen. It was Rachel. They hadn't spoken for three weeks. It still hurt to see her face smiling out from his iPhone and to hear her voice.

"Rachel, I've been meaning to phone," he began in the nearest to 'jolly' that he could muster.

"Douglas, I think we need to meet." Her voice was terse and anxious – not the giggly, sexy laugh he had been so fond of when they had first met all those years ago. "It's Nick. I think there's something wrong. I spoke to him at the weekend and he sounded down – something about a relationship problem. I haven't been able to get hold of him since. Have you spoken to him?"

"No."

"I'm not surprised. When was the last time you called him?"

"Oh, about a couple of weeks ago, I think. I've been a bit busy."

"You've always been too busy for your son. Meet me tomorrow at lunchtime."

"OK – where?"

"That small cafe in Russell Square, opposite the entrance to the university. I'll see you at one."

The line went dead. He stuffed the phone back into his torn lining.

"That was Rachel, was it?" enquired Raff. "Good that you two are still talking. Maybe you should think about repairing some of the damage. Use the time you've got now to sort your life out, mate. We all need a bit of time out."

Chapter 2: London, April 11th 2011

Steam rose like an ethereal mist from the drying pavements as Doug made his way along Southampton Row towards the University of London.

Rachel and he had split three years ago after a particularly bad patch. Their marriage had been through plenty of ups and downs but Doug's persistent infidelity had been the last straw for Rachel. As he dodged puddles and weaved his way through dawdling groups of tourists, it surprised him how much pain returned when he allowed his mind to dwell on the break up.

He reached Russell Square, a pleasant oasis of grass and ornamental flower beds situated in the heart of Bloomsbury. On one side, it was overlooked by the towering edifice of Senate House, the art deco administrative centre of the University of London. A small cafe was situated in one corner of the park. Tables were being set up on the surrounding grass as customers bared their porcelain flesh for the first time this year to the sun's timid rays. Doug settled at one of them. Around him, people chatted beneath a canopy of fresh spring leaves. He began to wonder about his own situation – no job, possible court case pending, broken marriage, failed relationship with his son. His job had given him status, self-respect and some measure of protection. Without it, he felt vulnerable and alone.

Then he saw Rachel walking towards him from the direction of Senate House where she now worked as an administrative assistant. Not the slim young girl he had married, but still good looking. Her dark hair was cut just above the shoulders. She wore a smart beige suit with the jacket open to reveal a low cut top – low enough to warrant a second look. He remembered the early days of their marriage, eagerly awaiting her arrival in some bar or coffee shop. They would have kissed, hugged, asked after each other, then gone home to the house they both shared and made love. But now she was no longer his. She was engaged to Martin, an economics lecturer at the university. He felt anxious. He knew their conversation would be stilted and difficult.

"You're early," she said, with an edge to her voice which he knew meant she was nervous too.

"It's good to see you, Rachel. How are you?"

"We need to talk about Nick," she replied, studiously ignoring any question from him which might invite more intimate conversation. "You said you spoke to him a fortnight ago."

"About a fortnight ago. I can't be certain."

"It was over four weeks ago. On the 27th," she replied tersely.

"Then why ask if you already knew?" he snapped, immediately regretting it. Her face tensed.

He and Rachel had met at Nottingham University in 1981. They had both been university activists and had thrown themselves into lives of campaigning and protest. Doug's high octane presence and charisma got him interviews on regional TV and it wasn't long before he was offered a junior reporter job on the local paper, following his graduation.

"Come on, Rachel. You know what it's like with Nick and me. It just doesn't work. God knows we've both tried."

"You – try!" she exploded. "Let me remind you of the times you've promised me that you would ..." He noticed people at nearby tables turn in their direction, drawn by her raised voice and flailing hands.

"Rachel, Rachel, please. Don't let's do this again," he whispered, trying to calm the outburst. "You told me there was a problem with Nick. Tell me what it is. Let's discuss it."

She paused, unsure whether his plea was genuine. Then shrugged and continued in a measured voice.

"I first noticed it a few weeks back. Nick seemed more distant than usual. He's never exactly been effusive on the phone but something seemed different about him."

"In what way?"

"Evasive. So, eventually, I asked him directly. After some prodding he told me there was a girl involved. He's been seeing her for about six months."

"Well, that's great isn't it? His first girlfriend. You've always worried that he hadn't had a proper relationship."

"She's Indian – Muslim."

"Well, I can see that makes it complicated – but these days ..."

"It's her father. He's very traditional. According to Nick, he would never consent to her marrying outside their faith. It would bring shame on his family."

"Isn't it a bit early to be talking about marriage?"

"You know what Nick's like. Takes ages to make up his mind but when he does – he's committed."

"So, how can we help him?"

"Nick feels out of his depth. They've already arranged a marriage for her. A boy from her father's village, back in India. They're taking her out there after she's graduated."

"They can't force her."

"If they try, she says she'll commit suicide."

Doug sucked in air loudly and rearranged himself on the chair.

"Perhaps if I spoke to the father – maybe if I could establish some relationship with him – explain that Nick's a decent lad."

"Nick thinks he won't listen. He believes the girl's in danger from her family. I suppose you've heard of honour killings."

"Christ, Rachel, this is bloody England in 2011! They can't kill her. I'll talk to people I know."

"Talk to your son. He needs you now. He's always needed you but you've never been there for him."

After university, Rachel had found work in the relative anonymity of charity administration. When Nick was born, she stayed at home to care for him. Mandy, their daughter, followed soon after. It was Mandy's death at eighteen months from meningitis that fundamentally changed their relationship. Douglas couldn't give Rachel the comfort and support she needed and spent longer on work assignments, sometimes being away from home for days. After months of anguish, Rachel emerged from her bereavement a much harder and more remote person. As Doug focused more and more on his work and managed the change from local to national papers, even his relationship with Nick began to wither.

"I've got to go now, Doug. I have to go back to work."

"But you haven't told me how you are," he stammered, suddenly aware that she was

about to walk out of his life again. "And how's Martin? Is he well?"

"Martin's fine. You know we're engaged?"

"Yes. I'm pleased for you." He knew he sounded disingenuous. She got up from the table. "I've lost my job, Rachel," he said in desperation. Her jaw dropped.

"What do you mean you've lost your job? Have you been sacked?"

"Something like that."

She clutched the edge of the table with her free hand and slowly sat down again. He explained about the phone hacking allegations but didn't mention the expenses. He wanted her to believe that he had become a victim – sacrificed in the bloody confrontation between journalistic integrity and corporate greed.

"So, what will you do now, Doug?" Her voice had lost its sharp edge and was noticeably softer. "Writing's your life. How about another paper?"

"Wouldn't have me. Once you've been fingered by scandal, you're finished – 'specially at my age."

"Then you must do something else – other writing. You used to be good."

Her right hand stretched out across the table so their finger-tips met. It was the first time they had touched in three years. A sharp pain stabbed at the pit of his stomach as he saw the new engagement ring sparkling on her finger.

"That book you wrote before we had Nick – the historical novel. It got great reviews."

"That was ages ago."

"It was good, Doug. You could do it again. It's what you do. It's who you are – a writer, a story teller." She squeezed his fingers and got up. He didn't try to stop her. She smiled and walked away without looking back.

He remained sitting, feeling suddenly very alone. A passing waiter took his order for a large Pinot Grigio and he downed it greedily. His eyes settled on a young couple seated at a nearby park bench – probably students. They kissed urgently, their tongues on a voyage of carnal discovery. His hand gripped her thigh and her arm clasped his shoulder. He recalled his own early days with Rachel. Their love had been unconditional and all consuming. They hadn't sought anyone's approval and they hadn't cared what anyone thought. How different it was for Nick. He would have to see him – talk to him. He

would call and arrange to meet – drive down there – possibly tomorrow.

"Nick, hello, it's me – your father. I want to come and visit you tomorrow."

"Why?"

"There's something I want to talk to you about."

"You've never bothered before."

"Don't be like that. Your mother told me there's a problem – with a girl."

"She shouldn't have told you. I said it was private. I should never have let her get it out of me."

"She's worried – we both are. You need some help, mate. I gather she's Indian."

"She's British – born in Derby."

"But she's Muslim, right? Nothing wrong in that."

There was a pause at the other end. Doug could sense Nick struggling for words.

"It's not her, it's me. Going out with me brings shame on her family."

Nick's voice trembled. One wrong word and Doug would lose him.

"Are you in love with her?"

"What do you know about love? You only know about screwing the office secretaries."

"That's out of order, Nick. Your mother and I were very much in love – till it went wrong."

"And we know why that was."

"I'm going to come and see you, Nick – tomorrow. Shall I come to your digs? I think I've got the address."

"No, not there. In a pub. There's one in the centre called The Barge."

"Can we make it late afternoon? Going to take me a while to get down there?"

"Four o'clock."

The line clicked dead. He gulped another mouthful of Pinot Grigio and spluttered as he overfilled his mouth with its sharp fruity tang. He knew he was out of his depth. In his world, only scoops and deadlines mattered. Now he was being asked to engage on an emotional level with his son. He had singularly failed in the past and doubted he had the skills to do this now.

As he brooded, he recalled Rachel's words, "You shouldn't stop writing, Doug. It's

what you do. It's who you are."

He remembered the time he'd been writing his first novel. He and Rachel had been living in a small basement flat in Islington while he wrote at night and freelanced by day. It had been an exciting time, writing and making love, with occasional dashes to the pub over the road for more cigarettes. Rachel had driven him on, believing in him and keeping him focused. He felt tears welling in his eyes and a deep emptiness within.

The novel had limited success – a mixture of fiction and fact based on Henry VIII's persecution of the Catholics. It hadn't sold widely but it had been highly acclaimed within a small literary circle and he had enjoyed the attention it brought him. Could he do the same again? Maybe base it on the English Civil War, rich in bloody conflict, with neighbour pitched against neighbour.

There was a place not far from Exeter that he had always wanted to visit – Penhallam Manor. It was an ancient building on the rugged north coast of Cornwall and the ancestral home of the Penhallam family – his own tribe. He knew that they had been caught up in the ravages of the Civil War and their story could make a good starting point for his novel as well as providing a uniquely personal perspective.

Taking another mouthful of wine he made up his mind. He would travel down to Exeter the next day and then travel on to Cornwall.