

Through The Ruins Of
MIDNIGHT

Campbell

INTRODUCTION

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For Mick Habergham, working the nightshift was the best thing about being a policeman. He enjoyed the peace and tranquillity of the midnight hours, when the world was asleep and patrol work simple. Sunday night should have been an easy shift. It was the last night of the week and he was looking forward to two days off. Looking forward to a retirement that was only four years away. As his stab vest irritated his neck, and his mind wrestled with divorcing Angela, tonight would be anything but quiet.

From the mad knifeman of the Hill Top Hostel to the most inept suicide attempt at the House of Pain, Mick would encounter all manner of obstacles to a peaceful night. If it wasn't Marak Vargo, or Booger Smith, it would be the family party gone wrong at Chagrin Avenue, or the tragic pensioners of Maple Court. That was if he survived the battle at the Alex Public House.

Midnight ruined so many lives. Tonight one of them would threaten Mick's own. If he wanted to enjoy a happy retirement he would first have to walk through fields of heartache and survive the ruins of midnight.

First Tour

SUNDAY: 2235hrs.

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Mick Habergham didn't know this would be his last shift when he swung the patrol car into Pelham Terrace. He knew it was the last night of the week and he was due two days off but other than that he still had four years left to retirement. The way his stab vest was irritating his neck, retirement couldn't come too soon. But tonight? No, he wasn't expecting that.

“What's the number again?”

Andy Scott looked across at his partner and sighed.

“How long you been in this job Ham?”

That was Mick's nickname. Ham. He was a big man at six feet three and slightly overweight. Considering how much he ate it was surprising he wasn't as big as a house side, prompting Andy to rename him Hamburger instead of Habergham. Not exactly an anagram but close enough for the police canteen. Most of the shift hadn't realised that renaming Shania Twain, Shiny Twat, wasn't an anagram either but it always got a laugh. So, Hamburger it was, and since policemen like to shorten everything it became Ham.

“Long enough to forget the bloody house number,” Ham said.

“Seventy-nine.”

Ham flicked the headlights to full-beam and the cobbled street came into sharp relief. There were two streetlamps but neither threw out much light. The four remaining houses were back-to-backs, the rest just piles of rubble, so that

narrowed down the search. In this part of town you were lucky if any of the streets survived at all and Pelham Terrace was a weedy, overgrown, wasteland clinging onto life on the outskirts. At just gone half past ten on a Sunday night there were still a few lights on and music hammered out of the end house near the railway lines. It echoed back off the retaining wall that blocked the cul-de-sac and disguised the fact that there was a twenty-foot drop at the other side.

One night a burglar had been chased out of that house by an irate Greek carrying a machete, climbing over the wall to escape. The only piece of luck he had that night was that the Inter-City express had been cancelled otherwise he would have been mashed to pulp instead of just breaking both legs. The Greek was glad too because he nearly climbed after him before remembering where he was. The trains had been keeping him awake for two years.

“Can’t hear the dog barking so that’s a good sign,” Ham said.

“You know it’s just waiting for you.”

“Yeh, well I’m still a probationer don’t forget. You should go in first.”

That wasn’t strictly true because Ham had completed his two years probation twenty-four years ago. With twenty-six done he had more service than the rest of the shift put together but sometimes the police force did funny things to you. Like flopped you lower than whale shit at regular intervals. He had spent the last fifteen years as a Scenes of Crime Officer, coming out twelve months ago when the force civilianisation program caught him. He’d escaped the tenure policy when the Chief Constable decided that SOCO was so specialised that the obligatory five-years-and-you-were-out didn’t apply but they got him with the flying leg sweep. Took the feet right from under him.

After fifteen years away from front line policing he needed extensive retraining and got none if it. Thrown in at the deep end he knew less than the rawest recruit and had to relearn everything he’d ever known, and then some. Computerisation, scrambled radios, Police and Criminal Evidence Act. And stab vests. Not to mention taped interviews and the complete revamping of the prosecution file system. No, it was a jungle out there and he was back at the bottom of the food chain. He had to ask about everything twice and even then he couldn’t remember it all. Including the house number.

“What was the number again?”

“Christ. Sixty-nine.”

“Seventy-nine. Sixty-nine I’d remember.”

He wound the window down to get a better look at the house numbers. There were none. The music battered its way into the car, some unintelligible garage music you could make without any talent or musical instruments. The air outside was as warm as the air in the car, giving no respite at all from the heat of the night. It made the stab vest even more uncomfortable and he vowed to take it off after meal.

The car drifted along the street and Ham checked the windows for signs of life. This was part of night duty he enjoyed, the voyeuristic aspect of life on the beat. Not peeping Tomming but looking through the windows into another world. Another life. It had always fascinated him as a child when he’d watched buses from his bedroom window at night. You could see them running across the valley and once it was dark their interiors stood out against the dappled streets. Inside that glowing tube were a dozen lives intermingled by that single journey, each one touching the other if only briefly. They were projected onto the world like anonymous movie stars on the silver screen.

On night patrol the same thing applied to the windows he passed. He was on the outside looking in, a dark presence pulling back the curtain on someone else’s world. Some of those worlds he became involved with, even changed, like the one he was about to invade now, but how many went by untouched? How many people did he meet without meeting, and how many lives did their lives touch? It was fascinating. In the cold dead hours of night you were God. Tonight however it was the warm dead hours and he still couldn’t find a house number.

The street was long enough to have a number seventy-nine but three-quarters of the houses had been knocked down. God knows why because nothing had been built in their place, leaving an overgrown patch of weeds and rubble where the other fifty-odd homes had been. The surviving block of houses were at the far end near the retaining wall, four at the front and four at the back. The first house looked like a shit tip; its small paved yard strewn with building materials, a wheelbarrow, two shovels, a cement mixer, and an aluminium ladder that was chained to the drainpipe. It was the scruffiest house on the block and therefore most likely the one they were looking for.

Ham shone his Maglite at the door and could just make out a dirty squidge that was the number. Seventy-nine. Of course it was. Of all the houses to choose from why pick a clean one when you could have a roach motel instead. Judging from what the complainant had said this was par for the course.

After turning out from briefing Alpha Two were sent to their first message of the evening before catching their breath. Dog bite. Complainant wants seeing before eleven o'clock. Ham struggled into his stab vest despite the heat of the night, settling for shirtsleeves instead of his Nato jumper. Andy loaded their bags into the boot and off they went. The report was three days old but there had been no free units to attend until now. That meant the poor fella was going to be pissed off as well as bruised.

As it turned out he was more pissed than pissed off. Both he and his wife were nursing glasses of red wine while the husband handed a sheet of homework back to his ten-year-old son. The son's extended forehead and curly blond hair reminded Ham of The Village of the Damned. While they waited for the lad to settle at his makeshift desk in the corner, Ham wondered what time the little devil went to bed? Maybe he had taken control of the adults like the kids in the film, ruling with minds so powerful that they had protruding foreheads and shocking blond hair. An identical boy, only a couple of years older, popped his head round the corner wearing a grandfather dressing gown from the 1950's. He was obviously the ringleader because he simply glared at his parents then left the room.

“Right.”

The man set his stall out for a long tale. He leaned forward, skewering Ham with eyes that had already started to redden and lose focus. He jabbed a finger at Ham's knee. Ham disliked him at once and wasn't at all surprised that a dog had bit him. He felt like biting him himself.

“Happened on Thursday night picking my daughter up from babysitting.”

Ham recoiled at the prospect of a daughter lurking somewhere in the house and prayed that, unlike her brothers, she looked more like the mother. That would be small consolation however, since her mother looked like an inebriated owl, with fish-eyes and glasses you could make a table top out of.

“Now I don't want any trouble down there, cos my daughter needs to go back and, well, the bloke takes a drink. Know what I mean?”

Ham knew what he meant but doubted he would be in the same league as these two. In that he was wrong.

“Came out to see I was alright and grabbed the dog lead. Got a bit mad when it jerked and nearly spilled his beer. I heard someone inside say, eh-up Marco, he’ll be after suing us.”

Andy glanced across at Ham and they both saw the claim form going in to Claims Direct or one of those accident hotlines that were advertised on TV.

“Someone at work said I should report it to the police so you’ve got a record. Bit right threw my trousers and drew blood. Spent two hours at the hospital getting a jab.”

Boy wonder interrupted.

“It was this kind of dog wasn’t it daddy?”

He held a brass ornament of an alsation up for inspection. The look in his eyes made Ham look for voodoo pins and tufts of hair.

“Yes son. Great big alsation. Took a chunk out of my leg.”

He pulled the right leg of his trousers up above the calf. There were three small puncture marks and a slight bruise but nothing you could describe as a chunk missing. It mustn’t have done his trousers any good though. The man read Ham’s mind.

“Didn’t leave a mark on my trousers. But I don’t want any trouble. Got the impression they were Gyppo types. Fly-by-nights. Don’t want them having a go at my daughter when she baby-sits round the back.”

The finger prodded Ham’s knee again. Ham was becoming convinced that the man deserved more than a good bite when Andy stepped in and asked for the address. With calm professionalism he extracted the address, description of the dog, and the fact that a teenage girl had been walking the dog when Mr Prod came out of the alley. The temptation had proved too much and the dog lunged at him, taking its pound of flesh. The girl wasn’t strong enough to hold it back, and there you go. Dog bite. Andy turned the whole thing around and Ham almost fell at his feet in praise.

“I can tell from talking to you that you don’t want to go through with a full report. You know, photographs, doctors’ statements, give evidence in court and all that. But what we can do...”

He leaned forward as if keeping a secret, suckering the man into believing this was for him.

“...is go round and have a word with this fella. We’ll start by telling him that you don’t want to make a complaint, which you could do, but just want him to be more careful with his dog.”

“Yeh, that’s right.”

“It could bite someone younger,” his wife chipped in. “A child.”

“Yeh. We don’t want that,” Marco said. Andy agreed.

“Of course not. If we can stop that from happening then we’ll have achieved something. So, we’ll tell him to keep the dog muzzled when it’s out, and that you don’t want to push the matter because you still need to go down there. That you don’t want to make things awkward for your daughter, but just want them to be aware of the dangers.”

“Yeh.”

Now the man began to think this was his idea and felt proud of himself.

“I just want them to keep the dog under control. That’s all.”

Andy stood up and checked his watch. The man suddenly looked worried.

“You’re not going round now are you? Wouldn’t want him getting narked, because like I said,” he tapped his watch. “At this time of night he’ll have been on the beer. I think he spends most nights drinking.”

Mr Prod didn’t see the irony of saying this while knocking back his vin rouge.

“Don’t worry,” Ham said. “Like my colleague said, we won’t let on that this is something you want to do. You simply had to report it to protect the children in the street.”

A good start to the night. Not exactly inbred but definitely a strange family. Ham was just glad they escaped without having to see the daughter. Some nights when you were on patrol you could come across completely sane and reasonable human beings. Victims of crime, key-holders for burgled premises, or sensible crooks that threw their hands up when caught and yelled, “It’s a fair cop guv.” On the evidence of their first call this wasn’t going to be one of those nights.

Looking at the upended wheelbarrow and the ladders chained to the drainpipe, Ham knew the night was about to take a turn for the worse. The first of many lives he would interact with after seeing them through the window. If a

man's eyes are the windows to his soul, then the windows of the night are the eyes into another world. On the other side of that glass was a complete set of lives, with their own histories and network of connections that Ham didn't even know existed. Before tonight was over one of them would end his career.

79 Pelham Terrace.

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The Delbacaro family weren't so much failures as complete and utter failures. Every single venture Marco had undertaken, from chicken rustling to security guarding, had ended in disaster. The chicken he stole turned out to be a cockerel and the neighbour he stole it from heard it crowing every morning until the police arrived and took it back. The only reason he wasn't arrested was because the constable who attended was too embarrassed to put him on the arrest sheet.

No, Marco was a complete and utter fuck-up and the family followed suit. His wife, Melinda, was as blind as a bat but too vain to wear glasses; his two teenage daughters were both a few sandwiches short of a picnic, and his guard dog was about as vicious as Dale Winton. To compensate for these inadequacies the entire clan took to the bottle and it was the only thing they were successful at. They were however an extremely close family. The daughters were dating two cousins from the next street and the dog would fuck anything within reach, including Marco's leg. You couldn't get any closer than that. If either of the girls got married they wouldn't be playing the Wedding March but Duelling Banjos.

The window into their world opened onto the living room and it was a microcosm of their entire lives. A natural disaster of biblical proportions. Melinda couldn't see worth a damn so how she managed to hang the wallpaper was a miracle but judging by the gaps in the pattern it was a very small miracle. The gaudy flower design was criss-crossed with missing petals, dissected stalks, and gaping sections of bare plaster. The only consolation was there was so much junk stacked around the room that half the wallpaper was hidden anyway. Then there was the ceiling rose. Marco fingered his head at the thought of that.

Melinda had fitted the heavy plaster rose in a frenzy of home improvement that was about as successful as her wallpapering. The glue was strong enough; she just couldn't see where to apply it. She had pasted a six-foot section of ceiling before clambering onto a buffet balanced on the coffee table. The glue was so thinly spread that when she finally got the rose into position there was

barely enough to hold it in place and with the precarious balance she had no leverage to force it home. The rose looked fine for a couple of days then it fell on Marco's head, knocking him out. Undeterred she refitted it twice and both times it had crowned her husband sending him to the casualty department.

The family sat around the living room on this warm Sunday evening and Marco touched his head without thinking. Trisha was sitting on the settee with cousin number one while her sister, Carla, sat on cousin number two's lap in the easy chair. There was a Freudian message there if you looked for it but Carla was only marginally easier than Trisha. The dog was easiness personified and Marco had to stop it fucking his leg again as he reached for his beer. Melinda sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the fire, as if it wasn't warm enough in here already.

"What you want to watch tonight?" Marco asked no one in particular.

He stood next to the fire and studied the piles of videotapes stacked against the walls. The alcoves on either side of the chimneybreast were piled high with all manner of audio and visual treats. On the right was the Schwarzenegger collection, pre-recorded videos they'd picked up at boot sales and second-hand shops over the years. Next to them were dozens of home taped videos. Every episode of Star Trek, five tapes of Doctor Who, including the William Hartnell original, and a selection of Baywatch videos. There were hundreds of audiocassettes, a mountain of CD's, and three cuddly toys that nobody remembered buying.

Somewhere beneath all this was a cracked Sony Hi-fi that only worked three days a week, and a pair of dusty speakers. At least the speakers were the requisite six feet apart but the left hand one was hidden behind a four-foot plastic alien in a baseball cap and three box sets of The X Files videos. That section was more dangerous than the rest because it was the Mulder and Scully corner. The Delbacaros had not only taped every episode off the TV but also bought separate collections when they came out on sell-through video. In true money grabbing fashion Fox then released some of the episodes as special editions including interviews with cast members, and again as ultimate collectors editions including a couple more interviews and a stills gallery. There were also the box sets and finally the whole thing started again with the DVD editions. They didn't even own a DVD player.

Somewhere among the FBI's finest was the television, a tobacco stained relic of the post war era. The screen was so dirty that everything looked as if it was filmed in sepia and even if it was cleaned the tube was knackered, turning everyone into two-foot midgets with very wide heads. The Delbacaro's weren't bothered. By the time it came to watching TV they were usually too drunk to notice so the question was irrelevant but he asked it again anyway.

"What you want to watch tonight?"

"The dog shagging your leg."

Cousin number two shuck, shucked his hillbilly laugh. Carla snuggled her bundle into his lap and his pecker pinged up. Trisha giggled, as much at the surprised look on her cousin's face as what he'd said. You could have recited the telephone directory and she would giggle. She had a giggling sort of outlook on life, as if the wire on her serious side had come loose, shorting out the circuit. She wasn't sure if she was with the right cousin either and that made her laugh as well.

"Not funny Trisha. Dog's supposed to be a guard dog. Should have chopped its nuts. It'd bite then."

"Leave my baby alone"

Melinda turned to stroke the dog. Marco turned on her.

"Aint your baby. Them's your babies, and they're more on heat than he is."

Trisha giggled again and this time Carla smirked as well. She rubbed her bottom into her boyfriend's groin and he went cross-eyed. Marco sipped his beer and looked at the teetering pile of videos. Half a dozen posters of Mulder and Scully were pinned to the wall and they seemed to point him in that direction. The X Files wasn't his favourite show but he could watch that posh tart any time so it was probably the safest bet tonight. Melinda loved David Duchovny and the girls were too preoccupied anyway so he pulled a tape out of the season two box set. He spoke over his shoulder.

"Social books tomorrow. Whose turn is it to go to the post office?"

"Mine," Carla said.

Cousin number one offered to go with her.

"Been a lot of muggings lately."

Trisha bounced on his lap, forcing a grunt of pain.

"You're supposed to protect me, not her."

He looked hurt and turned her face toward his, displaying an intelligence that appeared beyond him.

“Honey, you know I only have eyes for you. But that money’s for all of you. Gets stolen and you’re all in the poor house. I feel I ought to contribute but my money goes to the folks. So, whoever goes to the post office, I should look out for them. It just aint your turn, that’s all.”

Trisha soaked it up like she always did. Gullible as a fish in fish-stew.

“Ah, that’s sweet of you.”

She pecked him on the cheek and didn’t notice Carla stop rubbing cousin number two’s groin. Melinda did though, showing insight that outweighed her lack of vision in the eyeball department. She saw a lot more than that as well.

“Ah fuck.”

Marco struggled to get the cassette into the video. As hard as he pushed the front loader wouldn’t accept it and in that respect it was just like Melinda. No matter how hard he tried she wasn’t interested in being porked any more. His foreplay techniques were no more successful with the video. The tape was rejected again, purring back out the front of the machine.

“It’s already got one in,” Carla said.

Marco bent to look but couldn’t see passed the entry flap.

“Press eject.”

He did. There *was* already one in and in that way it was also similar to his wife who had been getting more than sausage from the local butcher for the past six months. “Deliverance” slid out of the hole and he popped The X Files in for sloppy seconds. More than he was likely to get from Melinda.

She, on the other hand, was concentrating on their daughters, Carla in particular. While she absent-mindedly stroked the dog, which had rolled onto his back with his legs in the air, settling for a hand job instead of mounting Marco’s leg, her eyes scrutinised the girl as she settled back into her boyfriend’s lap.

Melinda gave birth to Carla twelve months after meeting Marco and despite being unemployed he’d immediately proposed. Nineteen years ago he still had something of the knight-in-shining-armor about him, and not a little foreplay, stemming from his elevated position as head of security at the packaging plant. She had loved him then, although even she couldn’t understand how he’d been promoted. The rest of the staff must have been real no-brainer’s.

They married in the summer and had Carla six months later, a happy accident they never regretted. Trisha was planned and came along two years later but it was Carla that Melinda had a deep affection for. They were so in tune that sometimes they had the same thought simultaneously and it was just a case of who got the words out first. If her daughter was worried about something Melinda knew even before she asked for help. And unusually for a mother and daughter she did ask for advice whenever she needed it, Melinda giving it without bias. She might be blind but some things she could see pretty clear. Right now what she saw was trouble.

She took a swig of lager from a long stemmed glass and didn't have to ask what the problem was. She'd been pregnant twice and could see the signs with her eyes closed, more accurate than a home pregnancy test. One thing she was certain of, the father wasn't cousin number two. The dog squirmed under her hand, wagging his tail and almost knocking her glass over. She grabbed it with both hands and didn't spill a drop, a sharp stab of panic cutting through her thoughts.

Marco squeezed onto the end of the settee, pushing Trisha into the corner, and the Twentieth Century Fox fanfare blared out of the TV – the speaker was almost as bad as the tube. A moth popped and spun around the light bulb, threatening to bring the ceiling rose down and the soft flutter of wings sent a shiver down Melinda's spine. Maybe she had watched too many episodes of The X Files but sometimes she thought that horrible creatures came with a pair of wings. Not for her the simple beauty of a chaffinch or a sparrow, what she saw was an unpredictable beast with a beak and claws, and the ability to dart around your head when you least expected it. Bats were even worse, and moths were right up there with them. Horrible furry fucks that scared her to death.

The X Files theme came on, its gentle lilting tones soothing her, and thoughts of who'd been sleeping with her daughter drifted away on a cloud of lager fumes and Mulder and Scully.

The dog padded round the living room looking for someone else to pester, considering Trisha for a moment, then settling on Carla, who sometimes took him for his nightly walk. It sat in front of her and lifted a paw in greeting, trying to persuade her with a swish of the tail that caused a stronger draft than the mobile fan burring in the corner. Carla's mind was elsewhere though.

She had caught a glimpse of something in her mother's eye and knew that before the night was through she would have to tell her what she probably already knew. That she was pregnant. The thought of confiding in her mother didn't worry her, being pregnant wasn't the worst thing that could happen to a Delbacaro, but telling her who the father was did. There was enough family tension to retune a grand piano, the sisters providing most of it. No, that was going to be hard. Telling her father would be impossible.

Marco had a strict moral code when he was sober, even if the Delbacaro code bore no relation to the accepted standards of a mongrel country, and a fuse that was shorter than a ten-second timer. When he'd been drinking that fuse became an instant detonator, so it would have to be her mother tonight and hope he didn't find out for a few days. The dog wagged its tail but she ignored it. Stupid mutt had almost blown the story last week and she was in no mood to remember the shock of that moment. Only quick thinking and a devious nature had saved the day. That and the fact that the dog had a bite like a wet kipper.

Mulder and Scully had a secret meeting with the cigarette smoking man on the TV and the plastic alien in front of the speaker stared across the room. Sometimes Carla thought the alien noticed more around the Delbacaro household than the rest of them put together, bearing more than a passing resemblance to the inbred cousins the girls were dating. Both had vacant expressions and looked good in baseball caps.

The dog wagged its tail, and the moth bumped its way around the bulb, and Mulder and Scully continued their investigations into the paranormal. All was right with the world. The knock on the door shattered all that, not only jerking them into action but also provoking a guilty look from Carla. Nobody liked the police coming round and that was definitely a policeman's knock.

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Ham waited for the bark that accompanied most of his door knocking and was surprised when it didn't come. Considering they were here because "The Hound of the Baskervilles" had savaged Mr Prod that was even more surprising. He glanced over his shoulder at Andy who stood two paces back near the gate,

keeping the wheelbarrow between him and any beast that might come out of the front door.

“No reply,” Ham said quickly. “Right let’s go.”

“It’s the last night. You know God isn’t going to be that kind to you on your last night.”

Andy was probably right but still nobody answered the door. Ham knocked again. He knew he couldn’t get away with leaving a Form 150 because they had both seen the family watching TV as they’d got out of the car. The man and the woman were sitting apart but the two girls they spied were as close to their boyfriend’s as you could get. No sign of the dog though. Someone could be out walking it but Ham didn’t think there was anyone missing from The Waltons inside.

The windows don’t lie. Mostly what you see is what you get.

Ham had come to accept that over the years. Of all the windows he’d looked through in his career the majority showed exactly what he was getting himself into, the scene played out on that opaque screen as clear as anything at the Odeon. A little old lady upset at having her handbag snatched; a violent domestic between a drunken husband and his even drunker wife; the deadly stillness of a sudden death. Of course, the films at the local cinema were make believe, concocted at great expense so that everything you saw *was* a lie, but on the budget of your everyday victim there were no special effects or optical illusions. What you saw was truly what you got. On the surface anyway.

Ham knocked louder, giving the door his number-one policeman’s knock. Not his polite *I’m-sorry-to-disturb-you* knock, but the *come-on-I-haven’t-got-all-day* knock. The knock that was reserved for warrant enquiries when you knew the suspect was inside, or the harassment warning knock where you wanted to establish authority straight away. Or the *your-dog-just-bit-an-innocent-man* knock where the dog owner was sitting watching TV. Whatever you called it there was no mistaking it for your maiden aunt. When that knock went down there was definitely a policeman at the door.

“Coming.” An agitated voice called from inside.

Ham thought he heard the suggestion of a muffled bark. Two bolts were drawn back then a key turned and the door swung inwards throwing yellow light into the street. The heat hit him like a tidal wave, robbing him of his voice for a

second. An angry man glared at him and Ham knew that Mr Prod had been right, drink was definitely an issue here.

“Sorry to bother you at this time,” Ham said, contradicting the knock he’d used. “It’s about your dog. Can we come in for a minute?”

The man stood in the doorway and for a moment Ham didn’t think he was going to let them in, then he stood to one side and grunted an “All right,” as he waved them into the lounge. Ham went in first but Andy let Mr Angry follow before bringing up the rear. Even with a job as simple as this you shouldn’t let an angry man stand behind both of you.

Heat from the fire drained Ham as soon as he passed through the door and he cursed the stab vest under his breath. It was definitely coming off after meal. He wiped a hand across his forehead and smiled at the woman sitting cross-legged in front of the fire.

“Phew. Lost six pounds already. You do know it’s an Indian summer don’t you?”

The girls sniggered and one of the boys yuck-yucked. The woman looked up.

“Want me to turn it down?”

“Please. Otherwise I’ll need smelling salts in a minute.”

“Sorry.”

The woman leaned over and turned the gas down. Ham took a minute to cool, scanning the scene before he spoke. The man who let them in was nursing a glass of beer and the woman near the fire had a long stemmed glass. Two attractive girls sat with their boyfriend’s, each with a bottle of Budweiser beside the armrest. The picture of domestic bliss was only missing one thing and that thing lunged round the coffee table before Ham could get out of the way, all snarling teeth and wagging tail. The wagging tail didn’t fool him; this was the Hound of the Baskervilles.

“Come here you little softy.”

At first Ham thought the woman was talking to him. She put her glass on the table and wrestled the beast’s head between her ample breasts. The tail wagged faster and the dog pointed half an inch of rhubarb from between its legs.

“Softy, softy.”

Her words belied the fact that part of it was anything but soft. Ham pointed at the dog.

“Exhibit A. It’s the dog we’ve come about.”

One of the girls tensed and the woman took the dog’s head into protective custody between her breasts. The man just glared.

“It’s nothing to worry about. Just about last Thursday when your dog bit the fella outside. Now he isn’t making a complaint, let’s get that straight up front. But he thought he needed to report it. Doesn’t want to fall out with anyone since his daughter baby-sits round the back.”

The girl on the chair shifted uneasily but her boyfriend didn’t seem to mind. Mr Angry drank his beer and continued to glare while the dog-protection woman almost suffocated the pooch between her breasts. Its tail wagged so violently it nearly knocked her glass over. Ham nodded at the table.

“That dog gets any more excited you’re going to have an empty glass.”

“Thanks.”

She moved the glass out of tails reach. Ham looked warily at the dog, waiting for the barking lunge that his uniform usually provoked. Andy kept one step behind him, using Ham as a shield. So far the dog hadn’t barked and it looked like it would rather fuck him than bite him. Mulder and Scully engaged in a shouting match with some minor official on the TV, distracting Ham from the issue at hand.

“Could you just turn that down for a minute?”

The man did, then took another swig of his beer.

“Thanks. Whose dog is it? I just need some details.”

“Mine.”

The woman saw Ham’s reluctance to come near the dog.

“Only bites Asians.”

“Does that mean if I don’t black up I’ll be all right?”

“Doesn’t like em. Asians.”

“Well, the fella it bit was white. No turban or anything.”

The girls sniggered and Huckleberry Finn yuck-yucked again. All he needed was a piece of straw in his teeth and the picture would be complete. Now that Ham thought about it, the two boys did bear a certain family resemblance and they didn’t look too dissimilar from Mr Angry either. Ham was beginning to

think that this particular window was keeping something back. The dog came up for air and the woman turned her gaze to the tall policeman. It was the first time he noticed that both her eyes didn't work in sync. Banjo music began to play in the back of his mind.

“And what's your name please?”

Melinda gave her details then Marco followed suit. Ham wasn't interested in the love twins or their beaus. The dog was called Sabre and now the strangers had been accepted into the family it slinked towards Ham with its tail, still wagging, between its legs. The head bowed and its eyes were filled with sorrow and Ham had to admit that it didn't look like the kind of dog that would attack an innocent bystander. It sniffed the air in front of his legs then dodged back when Ham moved his pocket book, tail wagging all the time.

Encouraged, Ham offered the back of his hand and Sabre licked it twice then retreated. When Ham didn't bite, it came back and licked some more, its tail back to full wag status. It thumped against the coffee table and before he could warn Melinda again the long stemmed glass was knocked over. Amber liquid spilled across the glass top and Melinda exploded.

“Fuckin stupid dog.”

Sabre jumped and scurried into the kitchen. Melinda mopped the drink with a tissue then drank the last from the glass. Andy stepped forward, emboldened by the dog's yellow streak. He followed on from his speech to Mr Prod.

“Like we said, the man doesn't want to make a complaint but we can't have your dog biting people in the street can we?”

Marco bristled.

“Shouldn't have come running out of the back alley then should he?”

“Is that what happened?”

Andy let Marco think he was in charge.

“Just came running out.”

This was a slightly different story than Mr Prod's but Ham was used to that. He had come to expect opposite versions of events from victims and offenders. He dealt with an assault once that occurred on the complainant's doorstep when, if you believed his version, six Asians got out of a black 4X4 and beat him up for no reason. On interview later the offender said he only had one friend with him and they called on the complainant to settle an accident claim. He said he was not

angry that the man had refused to pay for the last two weeks and merely wished to talk about it.

So, on the one hand you had six Asians committing an unprovoked assault and on the other a man who just wanted to talk about the £800's worth of damage to his car. Neither threw the first punch and yet both did, depending on who you believed. Somewhere in between lay the truth and Ham sensed it even though he couldn't prove it. The Asians had come round to sort out payment but not peacefully and the man had refused to pay because he wasn't insured. Also he was pissed and even less likely to see reason so he'd thrown the first punch after voices were raised. Then he got the crap kicked out of him and reported it to the police. QED.

Now it was time to find out just how different the dog attack was from the other side of the fence. Ham watched Andy do his work.

“What time was this?”

“About ten or half ten.”

With careful questioning Andy got the story out of him. It differed from the original report in several ways but was essentially the same. The dog was being walked. A man got bit. And it happened last Thursday night. That was as much as the two stories agreed. According to Marco Delbacaro the dog was being walked on a lead near the front of their house when a man ran out of the passage. Sabre snapped at him as he passed and bit his leg. Marco enquired about the leg and when it didn't seem too serious went back inside. End of story.

Ham sat on the chair arm and stroked the dog while Andy worked his magic. His eyes roamed the faces of the Delbacaro's and pieced together his own version of the truth. One thing was for certain; Marco wasn't walking the dog that night. The look on Carla's face told him that. She listened to the story unfold with a face that was an open book; suspicion when Andy asked if the dog was on a lead; anxiety when her father wasn't sure; and relief when he said he'd been drinking and lost control when the dog lunged forward. The truth, or part of it, was as easy to detect as the stolen hen that was really a cockerel. It crowed the dawn and gave away its position so clearly that all the police had to do was walk in and uncover it. But Ham didn't think this little secret needed uncovering. Not tonight. There were more important crimes to deal with than a bite from a frightened dog, or the infidelities of a teenage girl.

Anyway, they'd already agreed to let Marco off with a warning and Mr Prod didn't want any action taking beyond that so what did it matter who was walking the dog? Ham stood up as Andy finished talking, satisfied that the contents of this particular window had been exhausted. The night was young and there were plenty more to explore.