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The Door That Led to Where

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Chapter One

'You will never amount to anything, AJ Flynn. Not with one GCSE.'

Here she went again, drumming into him the heavy-metal sentence of failure. But today, a month after he'd received his disastrous GCSE results, his mum's rage seemed to have developed a purpose. This time her fury was accompanied by a culinary cacophony, as if the pots and pans were personally responsible.

'Do you know what you are?' she continued, slamming a cupboard door and clanking the frying pan down on the stove. The question was more a flying saucepan lid than anything requiring an answer. 'Shall I tell you?'

AJ knew of no way to stop her.

'A bloody waste of space, that's what you are. Sixteen years and what's to show for it? One bleeding GCSE.'

AJ stood in the small kitchen of their three-bedroom flat while his mother peeled tough, pink strips of bacon into the frying pan and let them fizzle in the fat. In such close proximity, AJ's only protection was to imagine her as the monster from the depths of despair, a red reptile with a poison tongue. Here it went, lashing out again. If you let it strike you it could cause serious damage.

'You've been nothing but trouble since the day you were born. Well, don't think that Frank is going to let you slouch round the flat doing nothing.'

From the lounge came the voice of Frank.

'Jan,' he shouted, 'bring us a beer.'

Frank and a marshmallow three-piece suite from Sofa World were the flat's latest acquisitions. The suite took up all the space the lounge had to offer, while Frank had taken over the flat. He was a huge, blancmange slug-of-a-man who left a slimy trail of beer cans, bacon sarnies and spittled fag ends behind him.

'Tell him,' Frank added helpfully from the depths of the marshmallow reclining armchair. 'Tell him he can bugger off. What about that beer, Jan?'

AJ felt a flicker of hope. This might be the moment he could devaporise and disappear into the world outside. After that it was down five flights of stairs to where freedom awaited him in the comforting wheeze of London, the siren wail of calm. Sorted.

But instead of robotically doing what Frank demanded, his mum handed AJ a letter. It was addressed to Ms J Flynn and from a law firm, Baldwin Groat. AJ's heart sank.

'What's this?' he asked.

'What does it look like?'

'An official letter,' said AJ. 'But what's it got to do with me?'

'You can read, can't you?'

AJ read. Mr Morton Black would like to see him tomorrow for a job interview.

'What kind of job?' asked AJ.

'I don't care,' said Mum. 'If it's cleaning the bogs, you'll bloody well take it.'

'But how does he know about me?'

'I bloody well told him, didn't I.'

AJ knew that more questions would not lead to more answers. The conversation would end with the reptile's famous saying, 'Because I bloody well say so, that's why.'

End of questions.

A woebegone wail came from Frank. 'Jan – my beer – where is it?'

'Can't he get his own beer?' said AJ. 'He needs a bit more exercise than just a workout on the remote control.'

It was an unwise thing to suggest at the best of times. The beer destined for Frank hurtled towards AJ.

From the reptile-handling manual: in the event of attack, the best course of action is to run for it.

AJ made his exit as fast as he could followed by the enraged red reptile who, leaning over the metal-railed bannister, yelled down the stairs after him.

'You good for nothing little . . .'

Elsie, from three flats below, was already out on the landing looking up.

'Keep it down, Jan,' she called.

'Shut up, you nosy old cow, and mind your own business.'

The door to AJ's flat slammed shut. The noise vibrated through the whole building. If a full stop had a sound, AJ reckoned that was it.

'On one of her mad ones, then?' said Elsie. 'Come in, love, I've another book for you to take back to the library, if you

wouldn't mind. And this time, bring me something with a bit of romance in it.'

Elsie Tapper had been AJ's saviour since he was old enough to walk down the stairs on his own. She had taken him in, even kept him for weekends when Jan wanted to have a break. AJ, in return, called her Auntie, as did his mates, Leon and Slim.

He liked her flat. It was like being in a time warp. The wallpaper was from the 1950s and it had the original kitchen and parquet flooring. The hallway was lined with pictures of Elsie's daughter, Debbie, who now lived in Australia, and her son, Norris, who had disappeared years ago when he was twenty-three. What had happened to him was a mystery.

In a way, AJ had always known he filled the hole Norris had left and because of that he never asked about him. It would be, he thought, treading on a thin membrane of painful memories. AJ loved Elsie. He liked the fact that time and fashions had changed but everything around her stayed the same, ageless and safe.

'Is that right, then, about your exam results?' asked Auntie Elsie, taking him into her lounge.

Elsie's lounge still had its 1930s tiled fireplace, which made it feel cosy, just like AJ imagined home might be.

'Yes, I only passed English. A* though.'

'I would've thought you'd have got a lot more. Such a clever lad.'

'Perhaps not clever in the right way,' said AJ.

'What are you going to do now?'

'I've got a job interview.'

He showed Elsie the letter. She turned on her lamp and put her glasses on the end of her nose.

'Nice writing paper,' she said. She held up the letter to the light. 'It has a watermark – expensive – with an embossed name. Must be a posh place, these chambers. What're you going to wear, love?'

It was something that AJ hadn't thought about.

'What I have on,' he said.

'No, love, you can't go like that for a job interview. Not to a place with an embossed name and watermarked paper. You wouldn't stand a chance.' She disappeared into her bedroom. 'Come here, I need some help.'

AJ stood on a chair and took an old, battered suitcase down from the top of the wardrobe. Elsie opened it with pride.

'A bit of a teddy boy in his youth, was my Jim. He loved his clothes.'

The jacket was checked with a velvet collar and velvet pocket flaps. The waistcoat was bright red, the trousers too long. Elsie said the shirt, which was a kind of silvery grey, had shrunk a bit.

'Go on,' said Elsie. 'Try them on.'

AJ stood looking at himself in the mirror. Only the crêpe-soled shoes and the shrunken shirt fitted; everything else was too big and made him look like a clown.

'I can't go dressed like this,' he said.

'From where I'm standing it doesn't look like you have much option,' said Elsie.

'Can I borrow the shoes and the shirt?'

'They're yours, love, if they'll help,' said Elsie. 'But what about a jacket?'

* * *

The next day, dressed in jeans, the grey shirt and the brothel creepers, minus a jacket, AJ set off for the job interview, his stomach doing the dance of death. Through his teenage years AJ had found a way of giving himself a boost of good luck when he needed it. He would search for signs – words in adverts would do, even a white feather in the road meant his guardian angel had him safe. Never, he thought, had he needed a sign more than he did that morning as he stood at the gates to Gray's Inn, watching all the fancy-pants ants with umbrellas and suits arrive for work. The address on the letter was 4 Raymond Buildings. It was a Georgian terrace built of mellow London brick, definitely not the kind of place that would have a job for him. His mum must be losing her marbles. He wondered if it wouldn't be best if he gave the whole thing a miss, headed back to Stoke Newington and spent the day in the library, lost in a book.

That was when he saw it, moving slowly down the road, stuck in a jam like the rest of the cars. A brand-new red Porsche. It was the number plate that gave AJ the courage he needed. It read 1 GCSE.

Chapter Two

'Mr Morton Black will be with you shortly,' said a young man in a shiny suit showing AJ into a large, book-lined room that smelled of hoovered carpets.

It possessed an imposing desk with no one behind it or in front of it. AJ was left wondering if it was the desk that was interviewing him instead of Mr Black. It looked more than capable of judging him and finding brothel creepers and a teddy-boy shirt wanting. The desk was a dinosaur of a thing bearing not even a computer to make a nod at the modern world, just an inkstand with clawed feet. On the wall behind the desk was an oil painting of a gentleman in a full-bottomed wig that hung in two forlorn curtains, framing a pink, blotchy face. He could almost hear him say in a voice of brass and wind, 'You will never amount to anything, AJ Flynn. Not with one GCSE.'

What in all the dog's-dinner days had given his mum the crazy idea of writing to this law firm? He tried and failed to think what she might have said that would make even the cleaner agree to give him a job interview. He wondered if he was meant to sit on one of the chairs in front of the desk.

He could imagine it tipping him off the minute he tried, saying, 'I only seat clients. Clients with well-padded bottoms and well-lined pockets.'

AJ waited and waited then, fearing his voice might have left him, said out loud, '"It would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosarurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill."'

'*Bleak House*,' boomed a voice. The collywobbles in AJ's stomach did a somersault as, from an unseen door in the bookcase, a gentleman appeared. 'The everlasting quagmire of Jarndyce and Jarndyce,' he said.

AJ stared into the face of a jolly-looking man with eyes that twinkled and a rubicund nose not dissimilar to the nose in the portrait. 'Rate him, do you? Mr Charles Dickens?' asked this apparition.

AJ wondered if his tongue had lost the power of speech. The best he could do was mumble, 'He's the beat master.'

'The what?'

'He pumps out the rhythm of rhyme, keeps a story ticking.'

'Well, that's one way to describe it. "My father's family name being Pirrip."'

'*Great Expectations*.'

'"Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail."'

'*A Christmas Carol*.'

'"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times",' continued the man, '"it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness."'

'*A Tale of Two Cities*,' said AJ.

The apparition chuckled.

There was a knock on the door and a man in his late thirties entered the room. He had short-cut hair and a gaze that summed you up and kept the verdict to itself.

'I'm sorry, sir. I've no idea what Stephen was thinking. I'm supposed to be interviewing Ms Flynn's son in my office.'

'I take it then that you are Aiden Jobey,' said the gentleman from the bookcase. AJ felt the carpet to be moving in a not altogether helpful way. 'You are Aiden Jobey?'

AJ felt a momentary panic. There must have been a mix up.

'I'm known as . . .' He stopped himself. Perhaps by claiming this new name that fitted his two initials he would at least sound like someone. 'Yes,' he said.

'Good. And my name is Groat.' He held out a hand. AJ shook it. 'And this is Morton Black, our senior clerk, whom we call Morton. If we take you on you will be working under him. Do you know, Morton,' said Mr Groat, sitting down behind his desk, 'this young man has an exceptional knowledge of Dickens.'

AJ hadn't a clue if that fact interested the senior clerk or not, for his face remained a perfect blank.

'I see from your mother's letter,' Mr Groat continued, 'that you passed English with an A*. She writes of her great disappointment – spelled incorrectly – that you didn't do well in your other exams. Why didn't you do well, Aiden?'

AJ was battling to think straight. There was no mistake. This never-before heard name, Aiden Jobey, belonged to him.

'I spent all my time in the library because school was noisy. I loved English. I loved history, but we only did the twentieth century.'

Mr Groat half closed his eyes so that only a slit of white could be seen. He looked like the prehistoric lizard.

'What do you know about the law?' he asked.

'Very little, but I want to learn,' he said, cursing himself for not being better prepared.

Morton Black studied him. AJ felt as if the senior clerk was looking inside his head and didn't much like the decor.

'Do you cope well under pressure?' Morton Black asked him. 'By that I mean, in difficult circumstances?'

'I've coped with my mother for over sixteen years and that hasn't been easy.'

Mr Groat burst out laughing. 'You're sixteen years old?'

'Seventeen next week. I'll do anything,' said AJ. 'I don't mind what it is, I just want to work.'

Mr Groat tapped his hand on the desk, which responded as if it were a bass drum. He stood up and looked out of the window across Gray's Inn Gardens.

'You are obviously a bright young man,' said Mr Groat. 'Wouldn't you agree, Morton?'

'Yes, sir. But I am somewhat intrigued to know how Aiden managed one A* GCSE and no more.'

AJ, convinced now that the whole thing was hopeless, thought he had nothing to lose in telling the truth.

'I didn't much take to school. Or school didn't much take to me. They always wanted us to learn things that I had no interest in. There are so many books out there . . . about different times, amazing worlds, knowledge without limits. I didn't . . .'

AJ stopped. He was trembling, his knees wobbly. He hadn't

cared about getting a job at this law firm, not until now. Suddenly all he wanted was to work there.

Morton Black asked what else had he read in the library.

'Thomas Carlyle on the French revolution.' He had read that after *A Tale of Two Cities*. 'And I loved *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. It's the best piece of fantasy history I've ever read. Apart from Tolkien.'

'What did you want to do when you left school?'

'Well, up to a few minutes ago I didn't have a clue,' said AJ. 'But now I would like to work here. I'm a quick learner.'

On it went. AJ wondered if some of the questions were tricks to trip him up because they came faster and snappier, almost too fast to think about. AJ was positive he had given the wrong answer to each one. Finally he was told to wait outside. He stood in the corridor and thought it was all over bar the shouting. He shouldn't have mentioned Tolkien in the same breath as *The Decline and Fall*. It sounded stupid.

He waited, watching the busyness of the chambers and a wave of despair come over him. He was certain he'd blown it. The idea that he stood a chance of being employed here was off-the-wall crazy. His mum's words echoed in his head. 'You don't get to wear a suit to work, not with one GCSE.'

'Aiden.' Morton Black stuck his head out of Mr Groat's office. 'Would you come back in?'

AJ had so successfully persuaded himself that he was unemployable that for a moment he couldn't work out what Mr Groat was saying.

'We would like to offer you a three-month trial period as a baby clerk,' he said.

'It's a glorified way of saying you will be an office boy,' said Morton. 'Your job will be to assist Stephen, the first clerk, and myself, maintaining the stock of stationery and chambers' brochures, updating the chambers' library, collecting and delivering documents.'

'Will I be paid?' asked AJ, hearing the red reptile breathing down his neck.

'Most certainly,' said Mr Groat. 'Not much to begin with but if you prove yourself you will be put on a salary, and if you work hard, one day you might even become like Morton, a senior clerk, thinking he'll retire at fifty-three. You will prove yourself, won't you, Aiden?'

There it was again. That incredible name. Could it really belong to him?

'Yes, sir. I will do my best, my very best.'

Had he heard them right? They were offering him a job, for real.

'Good. Welcome to Baldwin Groat, Aiden.'

The minute Morton and AJ were out of Mr Groat's office, Morton turned to him, not in an unpleasant manner, but firm, as if he meant business.

'You start on Monday and I want to see you suited and booted. No brothel creepers, no cowboy shirt.'

AJ nodded.

'Eight-thirty sharp, and I don't tolerate lateness.'

AJ stood on the pavement staring up at 4 Raymond Buildings, still unable to take in what had just happened. He wondered if by going through the door that led to Baldwin Groat's chambers he had altered everything. He had gone in jobless, hopeless

and nameless, and come out with a job, a glimmer of hope and a name he'd never heard before.

All his life his mum had made no bones about telling him that A and J were just initials, nothing more. Those two meaningless letters had been a problem at school. He had stood out when all he wanted was to fit in.

'It's not a proper name,' his teacher had told him.

She had insisted he spelled it out: A-J-A-Y, until his mum had said with the subtlety of a cement mixer, 'No, he's just an A and a J.'

What she wouldn't tell the teacher was what those two stunted initials stood for, and she definitely wasn't going to tell AJ. By the time he reached secondary school he'd given up asking her. The question of his name belonged with numerous other unanswered questions, like who his father was, or even what had happened to his father. That much she eventually told him.

She had said, without a trace of emotion, 'Dead.'

AJ had assumed that the letter J must be the first letter of his father's surname. He'd imagined it to be something like Jones – certainly nothing as exotic as Jobey. He said it over and over again. Jobey. Aiden Jobey. It felt as if it was a password to a future. In Aiden Jobey there was space to grow. AJ had always felt like a dead end. As he arrived back in Stoke Newington the name was beginning to fit him, although the mystery of why he had never been told it before hung over him in a black cloud.

Chapter Three

It was a mild September day, that time of year when the seasons haven't yet made up their minds whether it's still summer or the beginning of autumn. While Clissold Park smelled of dried leaves and overheated grass that had long forgotten the colour green, the chestnut trees braced themselves for the annual conker bashing. AJ was desperate to share the news of his job with someone other than his mum, whose reaction had been predictable to say the least.

'You can start paying for your board and keep,' she said. 'Don't think I'm a bleeding hotel.'

He had thought about asking her for a loan for a suit, but he knew what she would say: 'Do you think I'm made of money?' So he hadn't asked and he had a job and no suit.

It was a relief to escape the flat, to head off to the skate park. He hoped to find his two best friends, Slim and Leon. He could rely on them being there as long as the weather was fine, but today he found Slim alone, attached as always to his one and only possession, his skateboard.

Slim, with dark hair and brown eyes, was taller than AJ, more grown into himself.

'Where've you been?' he asked.

'I had a job interview.'

'A job interview? That's impressive, bro,' said Slim. 'Where at?'

'A law firm,' said AJ. 'Called Baldwin Groat.'

'You're joking, man. You mean a cube farm? Did you get the job?'

'Yeah, on trial. Office boy. The place doesn't exactly have cubicles, more huge rooms lined with books.'

'Shit. What did you do to make that little miracle happen?'

'Nothing. Mum wrote a letter.'

'That's heavy. What did she write? That she would do them over unless they gave you employment?'

'Something like that,' said AJ, and changed the subject. 'Why is Leon not here?'

'Wait a mo,' said Slim. 'How did your mum know about a toff place like that?'

'She had a job cleaning for them before I was born.'

'Hold that picture, bro: so she knows these dudes and after nearly seventeen years she's written to them and they've come over all fairy godmother and given you a job. Now why doesn't that add up in my book?'

AJ didn't want to think about the whys of it or how Mr Groat knew what his initials stood for.

'Leon,' he said. 'Where is he?'

'As my rap of the "Electronic Jungle of Despair" goes, "Life is shitty, times is gritty, Leon's been taken back into care."'

'What happened?'

'His mum, being dosed up higher than the Shard, thought she was a white swan from a kiddies' book and flew off the balcony

of their flat. Smack in her head, smack onto the pavement, smack into intensive care.'

'When?' asked AJ.

'This morning.'

AJ sat down next to Slim. There wasn't much to say. It was an old, scratched record they'd heard many times before. But the news of Leon's return into care took the shine off AJ's day.

Leon's mum was a drug addict. She loved her sons but couldn't look after them. The first time Leon and his little brother were taken into care was when their social worker discovered them eating cat food off the floor while the cat was on the table eating their breakfast. Leon's mum said she couldn't see the difference. The truth was she couldn't see anything. Leon's brother, Joel, was only eighteen months old then.

Their gran, a religious lady high up in the Church of the Celestial Coming, had taken Joel in. She said that Joel was definitely the child of her son, Amos, and still had the chance of being saved. But as far as Leon was concerned, she said he could never be Amos's son, being too pale in the skin. Hell's Highway already had Leon's name printed on the advertising hoardings. He was three when she'd had this helpful revelation and because of it Leon had been in and out of care for the last thirteen years. After a lot of praying for guidance Gran had taken Joel home to Jamaica leaving Leon battling to help his mum with her demons.

'Where have they taken Leon this time?' asked AJ.

'Back to the foster family in Muswell Hill. But they won't want him for long, as he's nearly seventeen.'

As if reading AJ's thoughts, Slim said, 'Nothing changes. We're all up against the white wall of hopelessness. My auntie couldn't care less about my exam results as long as I work on Uncle Jek's stall. The old geezer's only good for shouting out the bargains and being rude to the punters. He can't even count how many pints he's drunk. But wait a bit – if you have this job, don't you need to look the business?'

'Yeah. The trouble is I haven't any money to buy a suit. So as you say, life is shitty.'

'What about your mum?'

'Are you a comedian?' asked AJ. 'Roxy needs new trainers and the wheel fell off her scooter so Mum is buying her a proper one from the bike shop.' Roxy was AJ's half-sister, the apple of Jan's eye. The word 'no' never applied to her. 'I thought about nicking a suit from Oxfam but it wouldn't look good at the law firm if I was done for shoplifting.'

Slim laughed. 'Come on, bro. I've got an idea.'

Unlike AJ, Slim had a family wardrobe stuffed full of relatives, distant, near, and a lot in between. He reckoned that if they stood hand in hand they would stretch the whole distance from Stokey to Dalston, maybe even as far as Shoreditch. AJ had never worked out where Slim fitted in this jammed wardrobe of unnamed relatives. It was one of the things AJ, Slim and Leon had in common: broken families.

They left the park and headed to Mr Toker's laundry and dry-cleaner's on Church Street. Inside, on the wall near the door, was a photo from the 1930s of five men playing golf outside a ramshackled laundrette. They weren't wearing trousers, just

baggy knickers, and socks held up by garters. The sign read 'Free golf while we press your suit'.

'Yes?' said Mr Toker, adding, 'And no, I don't have a penny if that's why you're here.'

'No, bro!'

'Don't you *bro* me.'

'Sorry. No, Uncle Şevket,' said Slim. 'AJ's got a job.'

Mr Toker studied AJ, not sure whether to take him seriously.

'Is this one of your high-flying, fancy stories?'

'No,' said AJ. 'I do have a job, but no suit, and without a suit I have no job.'

'Do I look like a gentleman's outfitters?' said Mr Toker. 'Go away, the two of you, and stop wasting my time.'

The other sign that AJ liked was smaller than the golf photo. It read 'Anything not collected after three months will be sold'.

AJ pointed to the sign.

'Please,' he said. 'I can pay for it on Friday. But if I don't have a suit for Monday, I'm stuffed.'

Mr Toker called to his wife. 'Sarah. Do we have any suits that would fit this scallywag?'

AJ and Slim could see a large lady bending over a basket in the back room.

'No,' she said. 'Why would we?'

'There. You heard the oracle speak. Now bugger off.'

'If you could just lend me one I will pay you back when I have my first pay cheque,' pleaded AJ.

Mr Toker laughed. 'Neither am I a pawnbroker.' He sat down at the sewing machine behind the counter. 'Scarper.'

'He will pay you, Uncle Şevket,' said Slim. 'I promise.

'How? Neither of you has a penny on you.'

The sewing machine's click-clack agreed with its boss.

'Not a penny, not a pound,' it seemed to say.

'I'll leave my skateboard here – it's worth good money,' said Slim.

Mr Toker and the sewing machine stopped. Mr Toker looked up.

'You would do that for your friend? You're sure?'

'Yes,' said Slim, handing over his skateboard. 'It's worth way more than a forgotten suit.'

Mr Toker put the skateboard under the counter, went to the shop door and turned the sign to *Closed*.

'All right. A deal's a deal.'

Slim looked a little shaken.

Mr Toker began to call out AJ's measurements to his wife, who sighed as she looked through the rails of unclaimed suits. Finally she pulled out one in grey.

'Go to the back and try it on,' she said. 'And here – take this shirt.'

Apart from being made for someone altogether taller, the suit fitted AJ perfectly. Without a word, Mr Toker pinned up the trousers and the cuffs then stood back, squinting.

'Where is this job of yours?' he asked.

'Baldwin Groat,' said AJ. 'In Gray's Inn.'

'The suit will be ready tomorrow after three,' said Mr Toker. 'Thirty pounds is the price to have the skateboard back.'

'I owe you,' said AJ to Slim.

'Big time,' said Slim. 'That skateboard is . . . everything.'

'I know,' said AJ. 'I won't let you down – promise, bro.'

Chapter Four

On Monday AJ turned up for work in the suit and a pair of brogues two sizes too big that he'd found on top of a clothes bank. There was no polite introduction to the workings of Baldwin Groat. Morton, the senior clerk, told him that if he was to survive there he would need wit and intelligence. AJ found himself thrown in the deep end of the legal soup.

'We don't need more staff,' Stephen, the first clerk, had complained. 'We manage perfectly well.'

'Aiden was taken on by Mr Groat,' said Morton. 'Any complaints should be addressed to him as head of chambers.'

Stephen was twenty-seven and had been at Baldwin Groat since he was eighteen. The son of one of the junior barristers, he had wanted to become a lawyer like his father but finding the examinations beyond him had gone for the option of being a clerk. Such was his position and so long had he stayed in that position that he saw any new clerk as a threat. AJ was no exception. Stephen instantly took a dislike to him.

'Does Mr Baldwin know about this new baby clerk?' he asked the senior clerk.

'Is that any business of yours, Stephen?' Morton snapped.

'No, but it's –'

'It's none of your business.'

As far as AJ could make out from the junior barristers, the most dynamic of the QCs in the practice was Mr Baldwin. He was abroad on a case and AJ had peeped inside his room. A photo of the eminent Queen's Counsel sat on the desk in a silver frame. AJ couldn't understand why he would want a picture of himself unless it was to remind him who he was. From the photo AJ decided that he was a man who took himself very seriously indeed, a man without a chin, and with a bottom lip much bigger than the top, which combined to squeeze themselves into a pout.

Mr Groat, who had no photos of himself, or anyone else for that matter, was seen as something of an eccentric.

Whenever they were alone Stephen took delight in telling AJ exactly how short his career in the law firm would be.

'When Mr Baldwin's back you'll be out on your arse,' said Stephen. 'One GCSE. You think Mr Baldwin will stand for that? He only takes the brightest and the best. You can't say you quite fit the description.'

AJ was used to bullies. They were to be found in every gang he had ever come across. He ignored Stephen.

'You don't need to charge about the place,' Stephen would say. 'You just get us more work.'

Again AJ ignored him. He would rather be doing anything than standing there looking like a hatstand as Stephen did.

On the Friday of his first week, Morton called him into his office.

'You're for it,' said Stephen helpfully. 'I didn't think you'd last longer than a week. Never mind. You can put it down to work experience.'

AJ stood in front of the senior clerk's desk. 'You're a quiet one, Aiden,' said Morton. 'Do you like it here?'

The idea that he might like or dislike the job was a luxury of thought AJ hadn't allowed himself.

'Yes,' he said.

'Have a good weekend.'

His seventeenth birthday, hardly remembered, was quickly forgotten. That Saturday AJ was able to get Slim's skateboard back and they went in search of Leon. They reckoned the best place to find him would be the undercroft of the Southbank Centre. The three of them had been going there since they were eleven.

October had come in unseasonally warm, taking everyone by surprise. Half the inhabitants of London were slow cooking in new winter clothes while the other half were out to shimmer in the sunshine in shorts and skimpy dresses, doing their best to chase away the thought of autumn altogether.

It was a relief to find Leon, though he looked tired and thinner. His mum was still in a coma and he visited her whenever he could. His foster family meant well but thought that he shouldn't see her, that it wasn't good for his stability.

'I ain't going back there,' said Leon. 'I'd rather live rough than stay in that up-its-arse-house. They eat brown rice and shit like that, full of what's good for you. They say that if I carry on living with Mum, I'll end up just like her. They understand

nothing except what they read in the *Guardian*. I tell you, life is better in the *Sun*. At least the women have tits. I haven't been going to college either.'

Of the three of them, Leon had done the best in his exams and been accepted at sixth-form college.

'What're you going to do?' asked Slim.

'Move back home. Live there on my own. I'm not a kid.'

'Live on what?' said AJ.

'That's where I thought you might help me out, bro.'

Leon disappeared down the ramp.

'In the nineteenth century,' AJ said to Slim, 'we would've been considered men by now. Do you ever think that you were born in the wrong century? At the wrong time, to the wrong parents?'

'No, never. All I know is we all live in the Electronic Jungle of Despair.'

On Monday, AJ noticed that no one in chambers slouched, nor did the junior barristers linger in the clerks' room. The day was wired tight.

AJ waited anxiously to be called into Mr Baldwin's office. Stephen had a knowing look about him.

'I wouldn't make yourself too comfortable here,' he said. 'If Mr Baldwin doesn't like you – well, that's that.'

Charles Baldwin QC was a well-dressed man, a time fighter, someone who invested a lot of energy in staying young. A smug smile stuck firmly to his tight features.

'So you're Aiden Jobey,' he said, greeting AJ with a pat on the back. 'Morton speaks highly of you. He thinks you could well make a good clerk. I knew your father, you know.'

Had AJ heard correctly? This lawyer had known his father. Why hadn't Mum mentioned it? Surely it was important.

'And Janice, your mother,' Mr Baldwin continued. 'I remember her well. She was a pretty little thing.'

AJ wondered if Mr Baldwin was muddling him up with someone else. It was hard to imagine that the red reptile was ever a pretty little thing. AJ was completely wrong-footed by this plastic cheerfulness. It was not what he had been expecting and he was quite at a loss. How had his mum come to make such a huge impression on Mr Groat and Mr Baldwin that seventeen years down the line they still remembered her? It would have helped if the red reptile had been more talkative on the subject but like so much of her past it belonged in the deep freeze of things unsaid.

'A black coffee, please. Thanks, Aiden,' said Mr Baldwin.

AJ was dismissed.

'Well?' said Stephen who was waiting outside.

'He wants me to make him coffee.'

'As soon as you can Aiden,' shouted Mr Baldwin through the office door.

At the end of a week of making coffee for Mr Baldwin, AJ found to his amazement he still had a job. Stephen was furious, almost green round the edges.

'Don't start thinking you are going to last here,' he hissed, 'because you're not.'

What AJ had seen of Mr Baldwin he hadn't much liked. He thought of him as two-faced. One face was all cultured charm, the other, fast fury, like a sports car in seventh gear.

He didn't trust the eminent lawyer – neither could he work out why he was so interested in his family.

'Where's your father now?' Mr Baldwin asked one morning as AJ brought in his coffee.

'Dead, sir. I never knew him.'

'Oh, sorry to hear that. I recall that he didn't have a will – I tried to convince him to write one. But I suppose he thought he had plenty of time. So do you have anything to remember him by?'

'Like what, sir?' asked AJ, feeling that he was missing something behind the question.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Mr Baldwin. 'A memento perhaps?'

'He left me nothing, sir,' said AJ. 'Not even a name.'

Stephen looked as if he could willingly murder AJ for usurping his position but Mr Baldwin and his team soon became consumed by a forgery case and Stephen was once more indispensable.

Two weeks later, on the Monday morning, Morton found a note Mr Baldwin had left for him, saying that he was taking a long weekend and would be back on Wednesday. Morton was not best pleased. Mr Baldwin's mobile went straight to voicemail and he had left no other contact details. Even Stephen, who kept Mr Baldwin's diary, was in the dark as to his whereabouts.

'Mr Baldwin is very discreet about his private life,' he said. 'But he may have been going to a fancy dress ball. I found this on his desk.'

It was a receipt for the hire of a costume from Angel's in Shaftesbury Avenue.

'I'm not asking for gossip, Stephen, I'm asking if you know where he is.'

'No, Morton, I don't.'

'I just hope he has a good reason for dumping a hell of lot of work on Ms Finch's plate,' said Morton.

It was that week that AJ's life went from being ordinary to extraordinary in a way he could never have imagined and, like most unusual events, it started with no warning.

Morton asked AJ to sort out some files in the Museum. AJ hadn't seen any room in chambers that could be described as a museum and by now he knew the place well enough. As you came through Baldwin Groat's door on the second floor, there was the reception desk with its huge, caring vase of flowers, comfy chairs for clients to sit on and a picture on the wall that showed a scene of eighteenth century London. Next to reception was the clerk's room and Morton's office. Morton usually liked to keep his door open so that he could see who was coming and who was going. The first room down the corridor belonged to the junior barristers, Mr Baldwin had the largest of the rooms by far and Mr Groat's room was at the back, overlooking Gray's Inn Gardens. There was a small kitchen, loos and a photocopying room but nothing else, so what was Morton talking about?

The Museum turned out to be through a small door that AJ had thought was a broom cupboard. Here the archives were stored, file upon file of cases dating back decades. It was furnished with a solid table and a chair but it was the collection of bizarre objects on the table that caught AJ's

eye: a human skull, a compass, several bowler hats, pieces of jewellery and a box stuffed full of pocket watches and handkerchiefs. AJ could well imagine Fagin having once been a client of Baldwin Groat.

'What do I do with these things?' asked AJ.

'File them in boxes and mark them to the relative cases. It will take you the best part of a week. It's needed doing for ages.'

One of the reasons that AJ had done so disastrously at school was simply the noise: the clatter in the classroom, the bells ringing, the stampede after lessons, the screaming children in the playground. There was enough noise at home. What he had longed for was silence. He had started skiving off school to go to the local library. There, no one was allowed to speak, noise was banned. It was three months before he realised that with a library ticket he could take books home. Solemnly he read through the alphabet of children's literature. It was Mr Montgomery, the senior librarian, who found AJ reading *Oliver Twist* and with his help AJ discovered the rest of Mr Dickens's work.

The Museum proved to be an education in itself – a library of criminal cases. AJ studied the ancient writing – legal mumbling that he didn't understand – but underneath were stories of real people, people like him and Leon and Slim. By the end of the day he had barely started.

On Wednesday Mr Baldwin returned, looking pale. He came to see for himself how AJ was doing.

'Come across any old skeletons?' he said.

'No, sir,' said AJ.

'If you do, bring them to me.'

On Thursday AJ pulled a dusty file from the shelf. What was written on it made his stomach churn.

Jobey
1813

Jobey. The name that didn't belong to him but somehow did. He still hadn't dared raise the matter with his mother and didn't quite know why. He opened the file, hoping it might answer a few questions but it contained only a map, hand-drawn on yellowed paper. Gray's Inn Road was clearly shown, and Mount Pleasant, just a few streets away – but what did Coldbath mean? And why was there an X just to the left of it? AJ took a photo of the map on his phone.

It was getting dark on Friday afternoon when he lifted the lid of the last battered cardboard box. Inside was a rusty iron key about ten centimetres long, the stem turned and decorated. The end that went into the lock had a zigzag line down its centre. It belonged to a time when a key had more weight to it than it did today. This was a key you didn't lose.

A label was tied to the ring. Written on it in beautiful handwriting were the words:

The property of A. Jobey, Esq.
2nd October, 1996

AJ blinked and looked at it again to make sure he had read the date right. It was the day he was born.