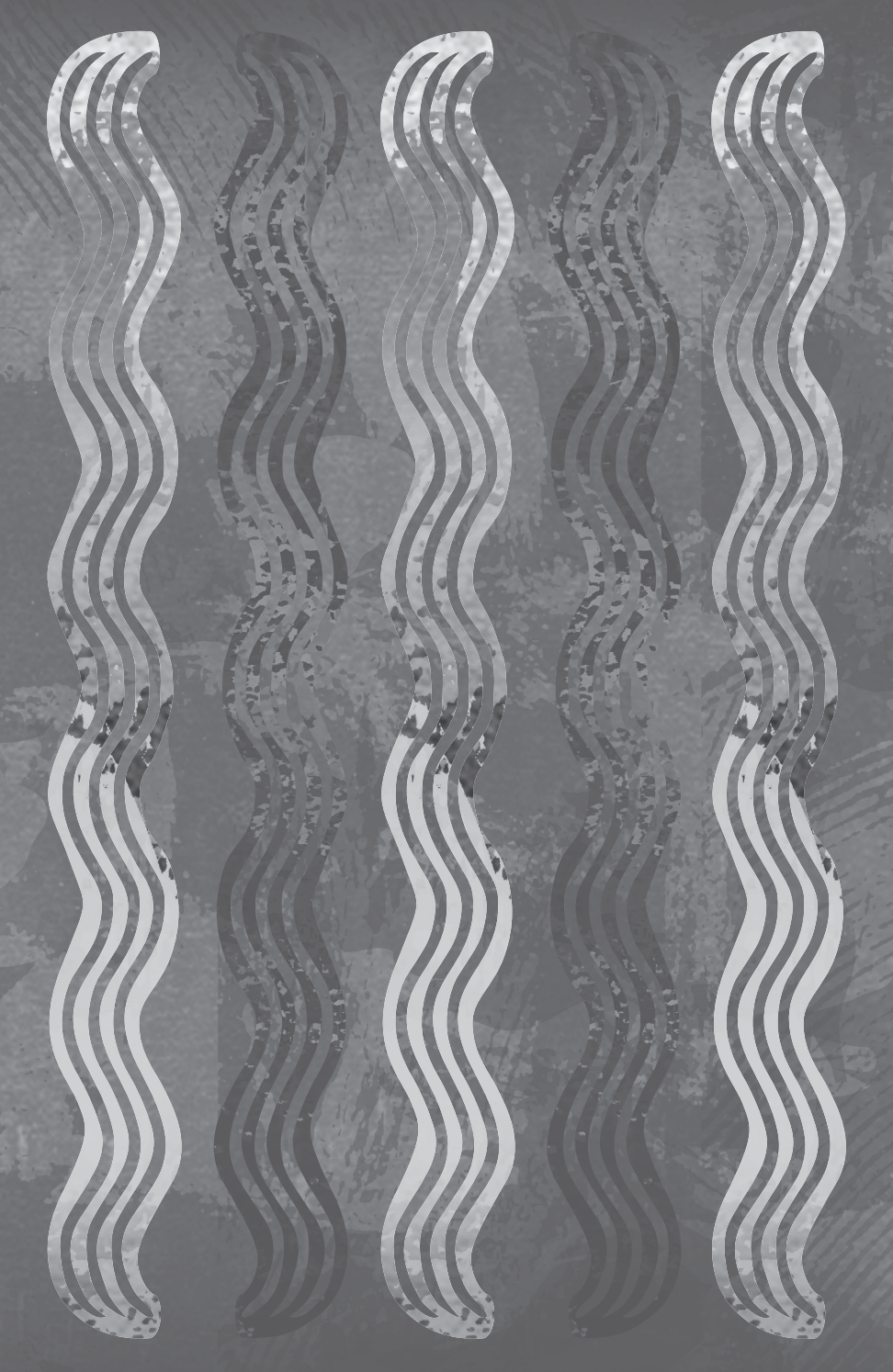
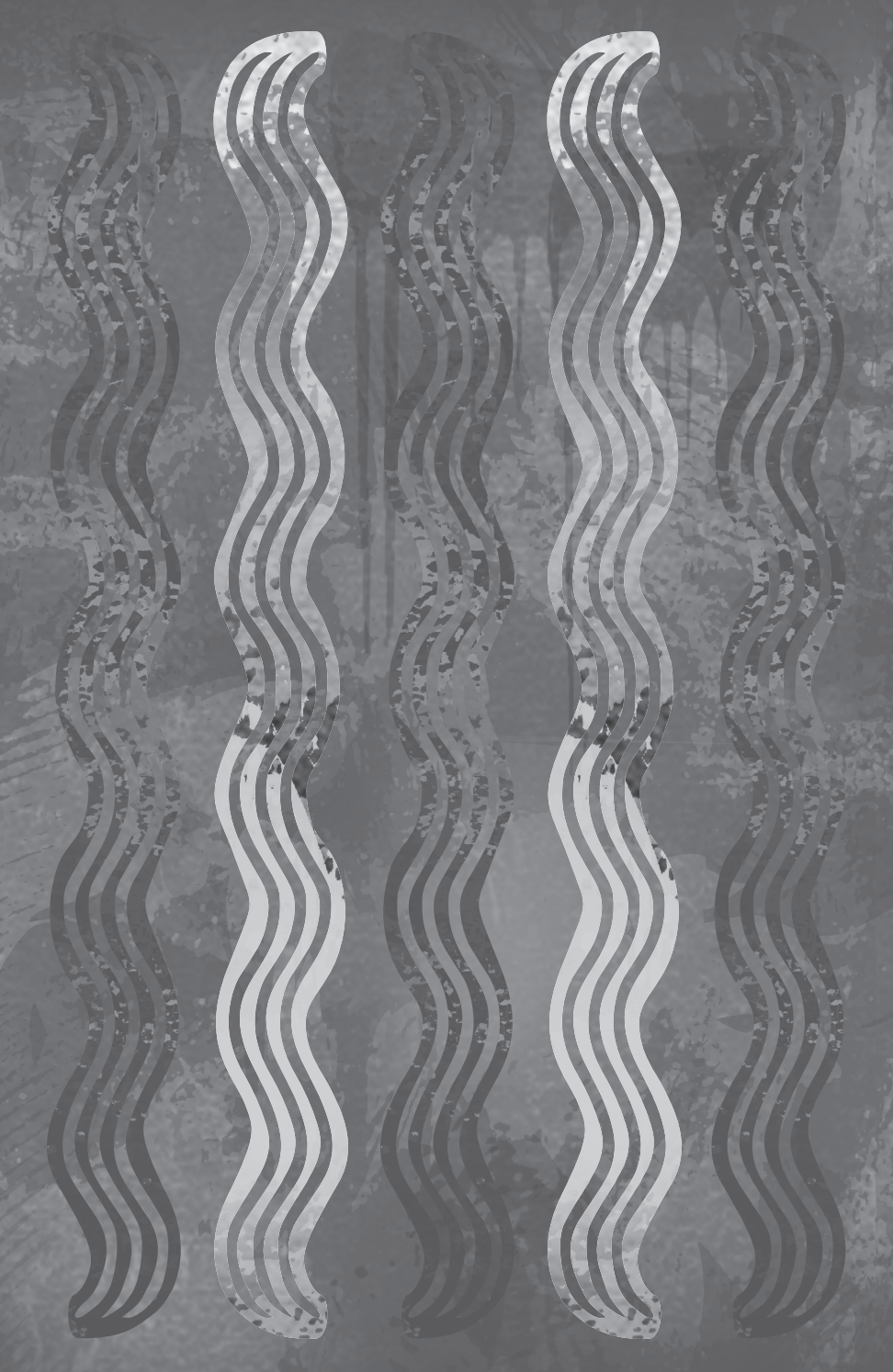




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BLOOD TIDE

BLOOD SONG

MELVIN BURGESS



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BLOOD TIDE

MELVIN BURGESS

BOOK I

1

The top thirty floors had broken away a long time ago, but the Galaxy Building was still the tallest in London. Engineers had cleared it up so it was safe up there – sort of. A man with close, curly white hair was standing on the viewing platform, pointing out landmarks. His face was a net of fine, soft wrinkles and hard lines cut across by a Y-shaped scar over one eye. He was dressed in a loose suit, rolled up at the sleeves. As he leaned forward to point out Big Ben, St Paul's, Tower Bridge, Docklands and beyond, the man's jacket hung open. Under the suit was a shoulder holster. You could see the neat, deadly shape tucked inside.

This was Val Volson. He owned half of London.

By his side, following his finger, was a tall, wiry girl aged fourteen. She was wearing a short skirt and leggings and a little green jacket which hung open to reveal another shoulder holster containing another, smaller gun. It was handmade for her – girl-sized. But just as deadly.

You could see it all from up here – the buildings of London, its hills and peaks as far as the suburbs and the Wall.

Beyond the Wall, dappled in the distance, lay the halfman lands – acres of rubble and tumbling walls, and the trees turning yellow on this mild autumn day, pushing their way through the Tarmac. After that, the world began.

And far out of sight to the northwest, Ragnor. Its towers and buildings were said to dwarf Old London. Halfman captives said that it seemed to float on the air, made of glittering stripes of light and glass and dark stripes of shadow. At night it shone like a bright little galaxy in the great world Outside. Its very existence was a reminder that London was locked out of the world.

'And when we've got the rest of London just like that,' said Val. He pushed his thumb down hard onto the palm of his other hand to show just where he wanted the rest of London. 'Then, my girl, we'll break out into the halfman lands. And after the halfmen it's the fields and the farms and the villages and the towns. And after that we take Ragnor itself and deal with the security forces . . .'

'But the halfmen!' cried the girl, in an agony of delight and terror.

'That's the easy part. They'll be all dead and gone by then. Then . . . England . . . Europe. Be part of the nation again. We'll *be* the nation. Yeah. Not long now. We're getting so close, Signy!'

The girl stared greedily outwards. She had heard these stories all her life. They had been crooned to her like lullabies in the cradle even before she could understand the words. Now it was all coming true.

'But we all gotta make sacrifices. D'you see . . . ?'

Signy ground her toe onto the platform savagely. 'I don't want to go away,' she said.

'But you will.'

The girl looked briefly up at her father's smiling face, then away.

'You can win as much for us like this as I have in fifty years of fighting.'

'I wanna be in the bodyguard.'

'You can be in Conor's bodyguard.' He thumped his chest. 'I'll insist!'

'I hate Conor.' Val – King Val, he was being called these days – stood upright and shrugged. Love . . . hate. So what? 'This is family,' he said. 'This is *business*.'

Val was disappointed in his daughter. He didn't expect her to want Conor, but he did expect her to want to do as he said.

The girl turned her chin up. 'There are better ways for me to fight for us,' she argued. 'I'm better than any of them. You know that.'

'Ben and Had and Siggy wouldn't whine when I gave them a task.'

'That's not fair! This isn't a task, it's a lifetime. You wouldn't ask them to go away and whore for you.'

Val hissed dangerously between his teeth. 'They'll marry whoever I tell them to.'

'This is different.'

'Because you're a girl?' teased Val.

'That's not fair! I only want to be treated the same. This isn't the same.'

Val glared back at his angry daughter. It was she who was being unfair. 'You'll be like a spy . . .' he said.

'You can't be a spy every second of your life, that's *stupid*.'

She said the word slowly as if she liked the taste of it. Val's hand dashed out to beat her round the head but she was out

of the way before his hand was raised.

'I'm a fighter! Catch me if you can!'

Val stood and watched her dance around. He was getting tired of this.

'But you *are* a girl,' he said sulkily. 'I can't help the way things are.'

'I thought you were the one to change the way things are!'

Val turned away. 'You'll do it anyway,' he said flatly.

Signy put her little handgun back in the soft holster under her arm and growled, 'I'll do it – because I follow orders. But I hate it. Promise me one thing, then.'

'Name it. You know I'd do anything.'

'That you'll give me the chance to kill Conor when the time comes.'

'This is a treaty. There'll be no such time. But if it does . . . I promise.'

Signy nodded. 'Conor never kept a treaty yet.'

The two of them turned to go down. Val put his arm protectively around his daughter. 'I know it's hard.'

Signy smiled sweetly up at him. 'You'd have killed anyone who dared to touch me, and now you hand me over to him to do anything he likes,' she said.

'Don't think I like it either . . .'

'Poor you!'

'. . . but every father has to give his daughter away.'

'Conor has some funny appetites, I bet.'

Val turned a cold eye on her.

'I wonder what'll turn him on? I wonder how he'll enjoy using Val's daughter?'

Val was suddenly furious. He pushed her from him violently so she stumbled on the stairway.

'You don't care for me at all!' she shouted furiously. 'You'd never let the others leave your side . . . never!' She pushed past him and ran down the long winding stairs. How was it possible to hate and love and admire her father so much all at the same time?

'But I love you!' She heard his voice crashing down the stairs after her. It made her cry all the more because she knew it was true.

There were two of them, skinny kids dressed in black. The black was like a uniform. One was a boy and one was a girl. Two was a stupid number to go out hunting this sort of prey but these kids had been trained.

'Last time ever,' said the boy.

'Last night of my life,' said the girl.

'Don't be daft. There's always a life. You just gotta make one up.'

'Shut up.'

'Sorry . . .'

'Last night of this life, then.'

'I don't want to do this anymore. If you get hurt tonight, he'll kill me.'

'But you will, won't you, Sigs?' The girl grabbed the boy tightly by the hand.

Siggy squeezed her back. 'I can't believe he's making you do this. He'd never send any of us away.' He meant, the boys. 'We should all get together and tell him – he can't treat you like this!'

Signy dropped his hand and glared. He was just making it harder. 'But he's right, you see,' she said.

'Had don't think so.'

'Had don't know everything.'

'Treaties with the likes of Conor...'

Signy shook her head. 'It's my fate to do it, Siggy. It's just not a happy fate, that's all.'

Siggy frowned. 'But don't you want a happy fate, Signy?'

'Why should it be?'

Siggy stared at her. If it was him... 'I'd run away.'

'You're weak,' she said.

'You're stupid.'

'It's not stupid to make a sacrifice for something great.'

Siggy pulled a face. Of all the family he was the only one who looked down his nose at glory. 'You know what I think of all that stuff.'

Thoughtfully, Signy spat on the ground at his feet and ground it in. There was a long pause.

'So what are we gonna get tonight?' he asked.

'Big fat pig. Full of dripping!'

'Oh yeah!'

Siggy and Signy ran quietly across the polished marble floor. Of course, the stairs were all heavily guarded, but they knew one way out that even King Val would never think to guard – down the glass lift shaft with all its grisly fruit. Then away, past the shattered tower blocks, broken away and worn by the wind like shells in the sea. The few remaining topmost windows glinted in the moonlight. Past the broken church spires and the crumbling storeys of buildings that once housed banks and the offices of international firms, past the roads breaking up with elder trees and buddleia. A group of men working by firelight were loading chunks of broken Tarmac into a vat to melt down. They needed it to extend the

car park for the wedding guests.

Nothing was new, everything was old – ever since the government moved out a hundred years ago and left it to rot under the rule of Gangland.

The kids ran right out of the tall buildings of the City and on towards the West End. It was as dark as velvet. There were no street lights. The poor slept in gangs in the doorways and it was dangerous out, unless you were rich enough to be armed.

During the day Oxford Street and Piccadilly were still thick with people, the shop windows still bright with electricity, even though it was generated privately. The shops were still packed to bursting with new goods. A lot of it was copies – citymades, usually, but some of the richer shops stocked goods smuggled in by the halfmen from Outside. Fashionable clothes, electrical goods, CDs, TVs, fruit from halfway round the world, wine from France. You could get anything if you could pay for it, except two hundred thousand tonnes of asphalt or concrete to keep the roads in order.

All around Westminster and the City it was slums and farmland. You could see cows tethered to parking meters munching slowly on hawthorn, pigs scavenging for rubbish in the streets, open sewage pits, rubbish tips, whole fields where the houses had been knocked down for land to grow crops. Terraces of houses had the walls knocked through to make long barns to house cows or pigs. Sometimes Siggy and Signy went that far, to poke their noses in amongst the moist smell of dirty people and damp walls, the thieves and the beggars, the rubbish and illness. But today was a day for Signy. She wanted fast life, fast people. She wanted a big fat pig and a game of Robin Hood.

*

The fat pig's name was Alexander. He was dripping all right. Rings on his fingers, chains on his neck. It served him right. It was stupid to wear stuff like that, it was asking to be robbed. Mind you, he was at a party inside a heavily guarded house. The other guests were all businessmen, smugglers, gangsters – it was the sort of occasion when you could actually dress up and show off your wealth for once. Alexander had done just that. The dripping was everywhere – stuck on his fingers, dripping out of his wallet. He was expecting a game of cards later in the evening and he could afford to lose heavily.

They got him in the toilet – on it, actually. He was a big man; he could have fought back, but they were quick as ferrets. Two sharp little knives were suddenly pricking his fat neck.

'How did you get in here?' he gurgled. The two kids laughed. The big one held a knife at his neck and pressed the top of his head down so he couldn't get up. Alexander was fat, getting up wasn't so easy at the best of times. The small one ran round and round in circles like an animal doing a trick, tying the rope round and round the toilet until he was all strapped up. It was over in about twenty seconds. 'Too easy,' sighed the small one. She sniffed the air and glared at her victim.

'Sorry,' he begged.

They relieved the pig of its dripping – the rings from its fingers, the fat bulge of wallet from its inside pocket, the gold cufflinks, the chains, everything. Then they strapped some toilet paper stuck on with packing tape in its mouth so it couldn't squeal, stuck the toilet roll on its lap and made their escape the way they'd come in – through the ventilation shaft. Alexander's eyes bulged with fear and rage as he watched

them remove the grill and creep out. What about the security guards? This building was covered in security guards!

Outside, the children removed their masks. Signy shook her long hair out.

'Good?' grinned Siggy.

'Nah, too easy,' she complained again. They left with the booty, to give it away to poor kids. They didn't need it. What more money did the Volsons need? It was a game, like Robin Hood. But it wasn't really fair, either, not like Robin Hood at all. It was the richest family in London doing the stealing, whoever they gave it to after. But gangmen and kings can get away with what they want. Even if they got caught no one would ever dare to harm them. They could've got past the guards just by showing their faces.

Still . . . it was dangerous enough once the robbing started. And it was fun.

2
Signy

We were discussing how you cope with having sex with someone you loathe. I was trying very hard not to cry.

Ben was having a great time. He was skittering up and down giggling. 'Why don't you just enjoy it?' He grinned at me. 'Why not? I would.'

Had said, 'It's different.'

Ben said, 'No, it's not. She's always going on about being as good as us. Well, we like doing it, don't we, Had.'

'So do I,' said Siggy.

'You haven't done it yet,' said Ben.

'I have,' insisted Siggy. And he looked all guilty at me, because I was the only one who knew for sure that he hadn't.

'No, you haven't,' said Ben.

'Yes, I have!'

'Anyway,' said Had. 'Of course it's different. The man does it; she has it done to her.'

I said, 'Don't talk daft.' Those boys! This was useless!

'The man puts it in and she has it put in,' said Had, just in case we hadn't clicked yet.

'Well, you put food in your mouth, but it's still you doing it, isn't it?' pointed out Siggy.

I could have screamed. 'If he puts it anywhere near me I'll bite it off,' I hissed.

'Dead good way of breaking up the treaty,' said Ben.

Siggy, bless him, said, 'Sod the treaty. Who believes in the treaty? She should just refuse and we should back her up . . .'

And then they stopped talking about how to deal with having sex with someone you've never met before and got on to politics. As for Siggy's idea – it was sweet, but forget it. They talked endlessly about whether or not the treaty could be made to work, but in the end Val wanted it and that was that. It was just . . . yeah, well, it was gonna be pretty lonely there in that bed on my wedding night, that's all.

'You'll just have to hope he's not as bad as he's painted,' said Siggy.

I thought, some hope. I'd just better hope he doesn't hurt me too much, that's all.

3

A cold rain whipped between the buildings and across the streets, where a thin, scratty crowd was waiting quietly. Some hid under blankets and umbrellas mended ten times ten, but most of them just stood there soaking. Val was disappointed. He'd wanted the crowds ten deep, cheering and throwing bunting. But he refused to force them.

The bodyguards waited, Val's on this side, Conor's on the other. They wore black suits and let the rain trickle out of their hair and down under their dark glasses. They might have been men, or machines, or animals, or all three. Under their suits you could see the outlines of powerful weapons which may have been part of their bodies.

There had been war between these two families for generations. This was supposed to be a treaty but no one really dared believe it. It was likely just another trick. But who was playing it?

For a long time there was just a low murmur from the crowd and the steady hissing of the rain on the bricks and pavements, but at last a long convoy of cars and armoured

vehicles turned into Bishopsgate and crept over the cracked Tarmac. As the sound of the engines grew, there was a strange effect. The hissing began to get louder. The faces of the VIPs turned upwards, looking for the heavy rainfall that must be making the sound, but the rain was falling off if anything. The hissing increased, louder and louder, even over the sound of the engines, as if the rain was insisting on its right to be heard.

It wasn't water; it was people pulling an old schoolboy trick. The thin rows of white faces lifted up from their huddle of rags and bits of plastic to watch an old enemy arrive among them. They didn't dare to boo or shout abuse for fear of Val's gangmen hidden in among them, but no one could tell where the hisses came from. Faces and mouths stayed still as paintings, but hundreds of throats hissed their hatred. The gang wars had crippled London for generations. Conor and his family had fought savagely and cruelly. There wasn't a soul in this crowd who hadn't lost a loved one to the man now driving in to visit them.

The noise began to gather force, to swell. Val was white with rage and frustration, but there was nothing he could do about it. This was his dream! He was putting together the army that was supposed to conquer paradise. These were the people who would break out of the asylum and take the world into the pockets of the poor. The people of the city had shared so many of his dreams, but not this one – not yet.

Conor's convoy, tiny in the shadow of the Galaxy Building, stopped in the square outside and the soldiers emerged from the armoured cars, bristling with weaponry like little toy men in the wide road.

The crowd began hissing again when Conor's personal bodyguard got out of the car. He . . . it . . . bared its teeth and its fur stood up on end at the sound until it looked pretty near twice as big. Then it opened its mouth – shouting or barking, who knows. It turned to open the door for Conor.

That was a halfman; Londoners had reason to hate them too, but Conor was the real monster. When he stepped out of his armoured car, the hissing swelled up until it sounded like something was going to burst. Conor pulled his coat around him and looked about as if he stood alone on the rainy street.

Out from among the umbrellas came Val, dressed all in grey, as usual, as if he was someone's clerk. But around his neck he wore a bright crimson silk scarf, as he always did on public appearances. A symbol of fire and blood.

The crowd began to cheer for their leader. They loved Val even more than they hated Conor. But the cheering faltered as Conor and Val embraced each other. A few seconds later, as Val took his daughter in his hand and handed her to Conor, it was in a stony silence. Signy was fourteen years old, and scared white even though she knew how to kill a man. Conor leaned across and kissed her. Among the guard of honour that led between the convoy and the Galaxy Building, Siggy stood with the rain streaming down his face, but he kept so completely still that no one could tell his face was wet with tears.

4
Siggy

It was shit. I mean, I never take any notice of the politics but even I could see it was shit. Val was getting old. Doing that to Signy! But he convinced them, same as he always does.

The security arrangements! Conor had to have an army pointing at our throats, we had to have an army pointing at his. What sort of a treaty is that? We should have carried on the war, even if it took another generation. But Val was in a hurry, see. The job he wanted to do was the task of a century, but he wanted it all now, while he was still around to see it. So he ballsed it up.

There were armed thugs wandering around the streets for weeks. People were getting shot up because of fights breaking out between his forces and ours. And for what? For a handful of dreams. Val's dreams. He's a big man, my father, but dreams are just dreams even if you dream them for everyone. Don't get me wrong. I don't mean you just gotta look after Number One. But first of all you got to look after the people you can look after. Like Signy for instance. That's the way I looked at it. If you can't look after your own you can't be

trusted to look after the whole world. But that was Val – his dreams were bigger than he was.

Half the city had to be prettied up for the wedding. We'd had old road surfaces broken up and melted down to re-surface the car park for Conor's cars. We'd refurbished and decorated whole floors of the Galaxy Building for Conor's guests. It cost millions. If Val wanted to make things so great for everyone else, why didn't he just cancel the wedding and give London enough to eat for a couple of weeks? It would've been cheaper. Had did the money side of things; he told me. He's good at that sort of stuff – Val reckons Had could organise the sun at midnight, but I reckon getting Conor and the Volsons to make a treaty is harder. Had's the one who's supposed to take over from Val when the time comes, but I tell you, if anyone's fit to follow Val it's my sister. She has the brains and she has the vision. She's his true successor. But he'll just sell her off to service Conor and probably half his kitchen staff as well, once things break down.

My job was getting Galaxy in order. I had to supervise the building work and the decorators, clean the place up, get it painted. All pretty boring stuff. The only fun bit was clearing out the street kids from the ventilation system.

See, the ventilation system was such a great place for the homeless kids to live. They came from miles around to get in. Whole gangs lived in there, like rats. Well, it's about thirty thousand times better than the street. They were quite happy to climb twenty storeys high or more to get in. Let's face it, Galaxy must've been the richest building in town. Just the crumbs on the floor were better than most people's dinners.

Val didn't like it much. He thought it was a security risk, but security's about all he can think of. Show him a cheese

sandwich and he'll be wondering about the security implications. Trouble was, though, you'd get more and more of them creeping inside until the place was infested, and it'd begin to stink. Then we had to clear the lot of them out. Actually, it wasn't that smelly when Conor turned up, but we don't want his lady guests being disturbed in the bathroom by a seven-year-old rat-boy jumping out and pinching her powder puff, do we? Those ducts run all over the place and you could hear the kids in the guts of the building, whispering, laughing, chatting, scratching, fighting, from miles away. You never knew where they were. They couldn't hear us, of course, but it did something to your sense of privacy having to listen to them shouting names at you even when you were in your own room.

What you do is, you get the men to cover off the ventilation grids with nets, then you let the dogs in. Pipe hounds, Ben called them. We kept this pack of wiry little terriers just for it. It was so funny! You could hear it all going on – the dogs scampering, growling and barking like little cannons going off. And the kids screaming, yelling, trying to work out where the dogs were and screeching suddenly like demons when the dogs came on 'em, 'It's there! It's there!' Then they'd start howling and running and the whole place would rattle and ring from the inside.

One after the other they'd come popping out of the walls into the arms of the security men. Then I gave them a packed lunch and a blanket and sent them off into the street. They were grateful for the blanket. Val was OK like that. He thought it was a good political move, keeping in with the common people, that sort of thing.

Of course, they'd gradually creep back in, one by one, and

the whole thing would have to happen all over again. It was neat. It just pissed me off it was all for Conor and his mob.

Listen. Maybe you think I'm being some kind of spoil-sport. Maybe you think I'm soppy about my sister. Well, it ain't like that. I just want a life. Politics stinks. Anyway, I'm the youngest, none of that stuff is anything to do with me. As for Signy – she's my twin. I just don't like my sister being used like a lump of meat, something to barter. I just don't want her to go away.

5
Signy

I'd been having nightmares about it for months. And then there he was! He was awkward and shy – that was the first thing. I wanted to despise him for it but I couldn't.

I thought he was weak, the way he stood there smiling and not meeting my eye, but as soon as he turned away and started dealing with his men he was different. It was they who couldn't meet his eye then. It was . . . what is it certain people have? My father has it too. Certainty. The absolute right to have things his way. But Conor was different from Val. He was the man, the numero uno, but at the same time you got the impression that he was expecting it all to disappear at any moment. As if the bad fairy was going to turn him from a king into an urchin if he just said the wrong thing.

He sent his people away, then he turned back to me and stood there scowling, all cross with himself, like an earthquake waiting to happen. You could almost see the molten red beneath, and his expression floating on the surface. I thought, what's going on? And then I thought, this man is dangerous.

I felt a little thrill go through me, right down my neck to you-know-where and then out again through the balls of my feet.

'I don't know how to speak to you,' he said.

'Then keep your mouth shut,' I told him.

He looked a little confused. I bit my cheeks; I wanted to laugh at him. 'You own a quarter of London and you don't know how to speak to me?' I teased.

'Not a quarter, a half,' he said.

'A half! Nothing like it. A third maybe. At the most.'

It was so childish, we smiled at each other. 'A third then,' he said. 'Depends how you measure it, some would say.' Then he scowled and looked intently at me. 'Don't hate me because of my father – that's all I ask,' he said suddenly. He looked me in the eye for the first time, then. I looked straight back. He blinked first.

We were talking in the fruit garden. The grow-lights spread across the ceiling over groves of oranges and bananas. Very romantic, that was the idea. There was an awkward pause, nothing to say, which he broke by spreading his hands. 'This is wonderful. We don't have anything like this in the north,' he said.

'I don't need to be flattered,' I sneered.

I was still scared of him and I hated him for that. I'd never been scared of anyone for years. No, that's not true. Thing is, I always knew in the past that being scared only made me more dangerous. But now it was different – I was scared because of what he could do to me with the consent of my father and my brothers and all the troops. All the king's horses and all the king's men. I can kill a man. I know how. I've done it enough times. In a fight you can do what you

want but in this game he can stab me through and I just have to lie there and take it.

I smiled sweetly at him. 'Here, have a banana,' I said, and I pulled one off the tree and offered it to him. He scowled as he took it. I don't suppose they've got so many bananas in the north. He stood there trying to peel it but it was green. I laughed at him. I thought, you fool.

Conor threw away the fruit. It was a real flash of violence. Anger. I flinched, but then I stuck my face forward. I thought, if you hit me I'll stick you. I had my hand on my knife.

'We have to decide . . . you have to decide . . . what kind of marriage we're going to have,' he said.

'What?'

'For politics. Or for real.'

I said, 'For politics,' at once, and my heart went bang bang bang suddenly. What was he getting at? Let's face it, he could use me to blow his nose on once he got me home. Was he actually going to be decent about it? Or did he really want this mess to work? He didn't look in the least like he was interested in decency.

Now he looked hurt and that made me feel very strange. 'I ask for six months. I . . .' He was looking all over the place, but he forced his eyes to settle on mine. 'I want to try it.'

'You want to try me,' I said cool as you like.

'No.' He said it very quickly. He sounded very sure. 'I mean . . . yes, I want you.' He blushed. He actually blushed! Then he waved his hand dismissively, as if his own words were worth nothing. 'I don't know you at all, how can I say if it would work? But if it did I'd be very happy about it.' And he blushed again, deeper than ever. I thought, you weed. But already my heart wasn't in it. It really was sort of sweet.

He was the enemy of decades, the murderer, the man my father had chucked me to as some sort of sacrifice, the way you chuck a morsel of meat to a lion when you want to sneak past it. Here, have this.

But . . . he was sort of sweet all the same. I couldn't believe I was thinking that he was sweet.

'All I ask is that you give it six months. Come home with me for six months. If you want to go back then, that's up to you.'

'I don't think my father would be very happy about that.'

'You'll be my wife,' he said. 'I can tell him where you'll live.'

I said, 'You can't tell Val anything,' as scornfully as I could. He didn't reply. He stood there waiting.

'I'll think about it,' I said.

Conor nodded. He looked away to a corner of the glasshouse and said vaguely, 'You're very beautiful. You're very desirable. I want you to be my ally as well as my wife. I want you to help me rule. I think . . . who knows? . . . maybe I can love you.' He reached out and touched my arm gently. It was the only time he touched me. 'See you at the wedding then,' he said. He turned on his heel and he was gone before I could say anything.

6

The wedding took place in Westminster Abbey, where the Kings and Queens of England used to be wed – as if these little gangmen fighting over a single city were kings. Val liked to curl his lip and say it was all done to please Conor's vanity. If it was up to him, the Abbey would have to wait until he had the nation in his pocket. The roof would be put back on and the old Kings and Queens, who had been dug up and removed when the government left, would be back under the stones. Then, perhaps, the place would be ready for Val to use.

But Conor wasn't greedy for the future; he wanted it all now. Decent houses had to be knocked down to get timber for stalls for the guests. There wasn't a sheet of plastic big enough to cover up the roof, but they hung up awnings and canopies and put down red carpet plundered from a hotel in Park Lane. The remaining saints were painted in bright colours so you could see them better and a sound system was rigged up to play organ music for the congregation.

The Abbey was a Christian temple. The Volsons had given up on all that years ago but, like all the ganglords, Val was a

superstitious man. It's true that under his grey silk suit he wore a silver cross, just in case Jesus happened to watching, but by its side was the stubby barrel of a small handgun, sawn off short and hammered into the likeness of a man with one eye. That was in honour of the strange gods who were said to have awakened in the halfman lands, and who had been seen these past few years inside the Wall, in the slums and suburbs of London itself. And for the same reason – unknown to Conor who would certainly have objected – a dead man hung upside down from his heel out of sight behind an awning. The new deities were said to favour sacrifice in this form. All nonsense of course – silly stories grown up from halfmen sightings by men from Ragnor or the other cities checking up on them. But Val considered it wise to take all precautions.

A thousand people sat and watched Val walk up the long aisle with Signy on his arm and give her away to Conor. From above, the crumbling saints watched from their niches and the dead man swayed lightly, his hair hanging straight to the ground as the bride held her head up and said, 'I do.'

Siggy stood with his brothers and hated it all. Ben leaned across and hissed, 'Siggy, you've got a face like a ferret.'

Siggy looked at him and tried to smile.

'It's supposed to be a happy day,' Ben told him, and sniggered. As far as he was concerned, Val was God. He never did a thing wrong.

His other brother, Hadrian, just grunted. 'He won't be gentle with her tonight or any night,' he said.

'She said he was tender,' said Siggy.

'Tender or rough, it'll be worth it if the treaty holds,' said Ben confidently. Hadrian nodded grimly. But Siggy didn't

care about the treaty or the world or any amount of ambition. When he saw Conor lean forward and whisper something into the bride's ear, he let out a sigh like a pot bursting.