

THE PARTNERSHIP TRACK

by Michael Ridpath

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Author's Note

The Partnership Track is an expanded version of a short story that first appeared in 'The Detection Collection', an anthology of short stories by members of the Detection Club. *The Partnership Track* is a novella of about 20,000 words or 70 print pages.

For Allan and Stephanie

1

‘I’ve had a dozen interviews here and in New York, I’ve met the head honcho twice and he loves me, everyone else thinks I’m perfect for the job. So tell me why I shouldn’t take it?’

We were sitting in the Bunker, the wine bar beneath the twenty-six-storey office block in Bishopsgate that Peter Brearton and I had occupied along with a few hundred other bankers several years before. Between us were two glasses, empty, and a bottle of Sancerre, almost empty. I refilled Peter’s glass. Peter was ambitious, energetic, highly intelligent, unfailingly successful in everything he did. He was thirty-one, a year older than me, although he looked younger, with his square face, short blond hair and round glasses. He was mellowing as he often did after a bottle of wine. I would get to the truth.

‘Don’t you trust me?’ he said.

‘Of course I trust you. I trust you more than anyone else I know. We’re old mates. That’s why I want you to explain to me why you left.’

Peter shook his head. ‘I told you, I can’t tell you.’ He had a soft voice of quiet authority, with a hint of a Geordie accent which became more noticeable when he got drunk, or when – and this was very rare – he lost his temper.

‘They have a great reputation,’ I went on. ‘They’re aggressive but fair; they’re cunning but people trust them. They might not be big, but they’re the best in the world in their market. Bill Labouchere is a genius. Everyone says so.’

‘Don’t do it,’ Peter said.

I took a deep breath. ‘My boss gave me a month to find another job.’

Peter raised his eyebrows. I squirmed; it was something I hadn’t wanted to admit. A last resort.

‘How long ago was that?’

‘Three weeks.’

‘Oh.’ He took a sip of wine. ‘Still don’t do it.’

I couldn’t conceal my frustration. Peter’s employer, Labouchere Associates, was a small, elite outfit that had been responsible for advising their clients on some of the most daring and imaginative takeovers and mergers in the oil business of the last

decade. Where their competitors and clients had lost fortunes in an industry shattered by the oil-price crash, they had made money figuring out how to put the pieces back together. And they paid well. I would be doubling my salary as a vice president. Partners, of whom there were a dozen or so, were reputed to earn many millions of dollars every year. That was certainly something to aim for. The only thing that was standing between all that and me was Peter's opinion.

'I'm going to take it,' I said.

Peter shook his head sadly. 'You're making a big mistake.'

'If you can't give me a good reason not to, I'm taking the job.'

Peter drained his glass, and stared at me thoughtfully. 'You're right,' he said. 'We are old mates. If I can't trust you, I can't trust anyone.' It was true: Peter and I had started our first jobs at the bank on the same day. And the friendships and loyalties you forged at the beginning of your career were stronger than any built up in the ensuing years of job hopping. We had never let each other down; we never would. 'But don't tell anyone else, OK? Not a whisper. You'll see why later.'

'I won't,' I said, leaning forward.

'OK. But first we need another bottle of wine.'

2

It was last March, Peter began. I had been at Labouchere just over two years and I was doing pretty well. The firm usually promotes new partners in April, and that year there was only one opening. They take the process very seriously – too seriously according to some of the partners, but not according to the only one that matters, Bill Labouchere. He insists on a weekend off-site session of role play, where the vice presidents on the partnership track are put through a string of exercises, all watched closely by him and a psychologist. The sessions are notorious within the firm, but unavoidable if you want promotion. And believe me, we all wanted promotion.

There were six candidates. Labouchere prides itself on its international staff: there were two Americans, a Canadian, a Brazilian, a Norwegian and myself. The session was to be held at Lake Lenatonka, some God-forsaken mountain lodge in New Hampshire. I flew over from London to Boston and drove in a hired car from Logan all the way up to the lake. I was knackered; I had only just got back from India, where I had been pulling several all-nighters on a big project financing we were setting up in Rajasthan. The last thing I was in the mood for was corporate games.

There was snow on the ground outside Boston, and it was getting dark as I crossed the New Hampshire border. Lake Lenatonka was fifteen miles off the main road down a dirt track, in what they call the White Mountains. And they were white, or at least a blue shade of white in the moonlight. I didn't pass a single car on that track, just pine trees, thousands and thousands of pine trees. I stopped every few miles to check the map. I dreaded getting lost; I could easily spend the whole night driving around those back roads without seeing anyone.

It takes a long time to drive fifteen miles along a dirt track at night. Soon the moonlight disappeared, and a little later snowflakes started to fall, gently, softly, suffocating the road ahead. I considered turning around, but I had already gone half way, including a long steep climb that would be no fun slithering down, so I pressed on. I was relieved when the wooded valley opened up upon the wide expanse of the lake, a grey board of snow on ice, at the far end of which a series of fuzzy yellow lights trickled through the falling snow. The establishment that emerged as I drew

closer was a series of a dozen log cabins clustered around a larger building, from which a welcoming column of smoke twisted.

The parking lot, or at least the usable portion of it, looked full, so I pulled into the cleared driveway in front of one of the cabins, next to a Porsche Cayenne that I recognized as belonging to one of the partners. There was indeed a roaring log fire in the reception of the main building and I went straight in to dinner, which had started without me.

The dining room was a large wooden hall, warmed by an even larger fire roaring in a fireplace painstakingly constructed out of odd-shaped river stone. The log walls were adorned with mountain bric-a-brac: dead fish and animals, snow shoes and old skis, black-and-white photos and oil landscapes, bookshelves of ancient hard-backed adventure stories, unread and anonymous. Thick log beams supported the vaulted ceiling above, and a balcony ran around one wall, high up, with doors leading off to bedrooms, presumably. The dining table itself was a handsome piece of thick oak, as old and tough as the mountains around it.

One dead animal stood out among the others: the head of a bear, mouth open, teeth bared, blank eyes surveying those gathered below.

There were eight chairs around the table: five occupied by the other candidates, one by Bill Labouchere, one by a woman whom I didn't recognize, and an empty place for me. Everyone, even I, was wearing American corporate casual clothes: chinos and designer button-down shirts.

They all welcomed me and Bill beckoned me over to that empty chair next to him. Was that coincidence, I wondered, just random seating? Had Bill saved me a spot at his side? Or had everyone else figured out that next to Bill was the last place you wanted to be?

It might sound as if I was overthinking things, but I wasn't. Just to operate on a day-to-day level at Labouchere you have to be constantly aware of the people around you, what they are thinking, what they are planning to do, what they are trying to hide. Labouchere operates in an industry thick with numbers and geological data, and all of us have at least some familiarity with geology and engineering – and finance, of course. But what sets Labouchere apart from its competitors, and what keeps us ahead of all of them, is our understanding of psychology. Famously, the only partner without degrees in some kind of physical science is Bill.

Bill can be charming when he wants to be and he knows how to relax people. He's a Cajun from Louisiana, which is where he gets his weird accent. His father had his own oil company and sent him to Yale where he studied psychology and then to Columbia for his MBA. He only went into the oil business himself when his father's company ran into trouble. He couldn't save it, but he did learn how to do deals. He's the expert at doing the deal. The thing to remember about Bill Labouchere is that it's impossible for you to read him, but he can read you like a book. Bill believes that reading the people involved in a deal correctly is more important than the spreadsheets and the accounts, and I'd say he has been proved right.

He's a big believer in the Myers-Briggs tests. They classify people according to various psychological types: extravert-introvert, sensing-intuitive, thinking-feeling and judging-perceiving. I'm Introvert, Intuitive, Thinking, Judging. We all know each others' types, and we have all been on courses to figure out how our clients would score. I've spoken to academic psychologists who say it's all bullshit, but Bill believes that it works and he's the boss. So we all believe it.

Now we come to the good part. Myers-Briggs can be used for putting teams together. The theory is you don't want too many of the same type. And the current partnership of Labouchere is stuffed full of extravert-sensing types. Bill himself is Extravert, Intuitive, Feeling, Perceptive. What they need are more introvert intuitives. Like me.

I had figured that out, but so had everyone else at the table. I was the one to beat.

'Don't look now, but she's watching you.'

I didn't look, but turned to the woman sitting next to me who had spoken, Manuela Oliveira de Sena – like Bill, Extravert, Intuitive, Feeling, Perceptive. She's also stunningly sexy, but in a kind of aloof Latin aristocratic way. She can't be more than five feet, and she has dark hair and skin, a wonderful figure and big soft blue eyes. She speaks perfect American English with only the trace of a Latin accent. I think her father is high up in Petrobras, and she joined Labouchere out of Harvard Business School. She had a very good reputation within the firm, and had made quite an impression. We hadn't worked together much before, so I really didn't know her very well, but of course I had looked up her Myers-Briggs personality type.

'You mean the woman with the glasses? Who is she?'

'Professor Shelley Behbehani.'

‘Professor of Psychology, I take it?’

‘Organizational Psychology. Some university in Texas. Big believer in Myers-Briggs.’

‘Now there’s a surprise,’ I said, impressed that Manuela had done her homework, and kicking myself that I hadn’t done mine.

I find it difficult to talk to very beautiful women at the best of times, and with the professor staring at me, I could feel my poor little introverted tongue tying itself in knots. But I couldn’t help looking into those blue eyes, which were looking back at me with understanding and kindness.

Manuela put her hand on mine. It was as though a jolt of electricity passed from her to me, and I tensed. Manuela squeezed my hand and smiled. ‘Don’t worry about it. Just recite a limerick slowly and seriously to me. A really dirty one. I’ll nod and ask you a clever question. We’ll do OK.’

I relaxed immediately and just managed not to smile. I cleared my throat and repeated the only limerick I could remember.

Manuela listened closely, without showing a hint of humour. ‘Well done, that certainly is dirty,’ she said, nodding her head. ‘Tell me, was the plumber able to extract himself in the end?’

‘I believe so,’ I said, unable to stop my lips from twitching. ‘But what if Professor Behbehani can lip-read?’

‘Good point,’ said Manuela, finally allowing herself to laugh. ‘I hadn’t thought of that. We’ve probably blown the partnership right there. You may as well pour me another glass of red.’

It was warm, the drink was flowing and we all began to relax. The dinner was amazing for a place stuck out so far in the frozen wilds – exquisite food, wonderful Californian wines – and we were all having a good time. Manuela was an entertaining dinner companion, friendly without flirting, not nearly as aloof as she seemed from a distance. I managed not to put my foot in it with Bill, but for some reason he seemed more interested in Manuela than me. Bill is maybe early sixties, but he’s still quite handsome with the tanned face, those black eyebrows and that shock of thick iron-grey hair. He had just ditched wife number three. My bet is there will be a wife number four at some stage, but of course that won’t happen until he has properly researched the current market.

I was enjoying myself, although I was beginning to realize that, despite her having a couple of years' less experience than me, Manuela was a rival to be reckoned with. I was confident Bill would not be so crass as to promote someone to partner just because he wanted to sleep with her. But there was no doubt that she was good with people, and Bill liked that. In theory, the fact that she had exactly the same personality type as him meant she was a poor addition to the partnership. In practice, that might be why he liked her.

Eventually, Manuela turned to talk to Charlie Campbell on her other side, and Bill shifted his attention to me. 'I was very sorry to hear about your mother, by the way. January, was it?'

'Yes,' I said. 'And thank you.' My mother had died earlier that year. For a moment I wondered how Bill knew, but then I realized Bill knew everything.

'How old was she?'

'Only sixty-three. Lung cancer. It was just three weeks from when she was diagnosed to when she died.'

'I'm sorry,' said Bill. 'That's fast.' He was doing that thing he can do, where he looks at you and you are the most important person in the world. And just by looking at you he seems to pass on some of his strength.

And I believed him. He was sorry.

'My own mother died last year. Much older than yours: ninety-one; and it was peacefully, in her sleep.'

'And I'm sorry for you,' I said.

'I miss her. She was my biggest fan. It turns out I needed her more than I realized.'

'Uh . . .' I was momentarily stumped. I found the sudden transition confusing: from employee sucking up to boss to lost motherless child talking to fellow sufferer. 'Mine was my biggest fan, too,' I said. It was true. She it was who had instilled in me the drive and ambition to get me to Cambridge and to business school, and now to this table in the wilds of New Hampshire. There was nothing I couldn't do, as far as she was concerned. I felt my eyes sting. Although her death had saddened me deeply, somehow I hadn't cried for her. Or at least not yet.

Bill saw all this. 'Did you take time off for the funeral?'

'Just the day,' I said. Not even that. More like the afternoon. My father had been devastated, and so my younger brother Kieran had sorted everything out.

Henrietta and I had just shown up for the funeral and then left. There was a Vietnamese deal that was in danger of going pear-shaped unless I got a report finished and sent off by the following morning.

‘You should take a few days,’ Bill said. ‘You need to give yourself time to process these things. It’s important.’

He was right. I swallowed. Damn it, I *was* going to cry unless I did something soon.

Bill noticed. He glanced at his watch; the waitress was clearing away dessert. ‘About time I said a few words, I think.’

3

Bill cleared his throat. It was a signal we had all been waiting for. The table was silent instantly, and I was snapped out of my misery, back on the partnership track.

‘Well, thanks to everyone for making the trip,’ Bill said. ‘I know some of you have come a long way.’ He nodded to me and a couple of the others around the table. ‘And I know we are all working on deals for the firm.’ It was true; we were all busy. We were always all busy; there was no slack capacity at Labouchere.

‘We’ll begin on the exercise tomorrow morning; you’ll find an envelope with all the details in your rooms when you return to them. You will be divided into three teams of two and will role-play a takeover battle. You will need to prepare tonight.’

This was bad news: I was shattered and now a little drunk, not at all in the mood for reading documents late into the night. I had hoped that we would be doing some exercise that would allow a good night’s sleep. But, despite Bill’s languid Louisianan drawl, sleeping wasn’t the Labouchere way.

‘Before I let you get to work on that there are a couple of things I’d like to do.’

Of course there were. Bill wasn’t going to let the opportunity to mess with our heads slip.

Bill paused, looked benignly at each one of us, and smiled. ‘I think it only fair to let you know who it is you have to beat. You all have a chance to make partnership, that’s why you are here, but one of you is in pole position.’

Suddenly we were all sober. Bill let the moment rest. He had that frustrating, slightly amused look on his face that he wears when he’s playing with you. Glances flickered around the table, most of them ending up resting on me. There had been much office gossip about who would be promoted, and frankly I considered myself the favourite, with a Canadian smooth-talker called Charlie Campbell close behind. Maybe Manuela was in with a chance too.

‘Harald Utnes,’ Bill said.

There was an intake of breath; eyebrows were raised. I noticed Manuela next to me gave a little smile – perhaps she was pleased that my name hadn’t been mentioned. I knew Harald well. We had worked together for a year in London before he moved to New York nine months before. He was a tall Norwegian with curly fair

hair, a very nice guy, a geologist, totally reliable, totally honest, but in my opinion he lacked the killer instinct, the ability to close a deal. In our business, it's closing deals that makes the money. And, whatever Bill might say, honesty was probably more of a liability than an asset at Labouchere.

Bill allowed himself to look pleased with his little bombshell. But he hadn't finished. I could see repressed excitement in his eyes. I shot a quick glance at Professor Behbehani. She was paying close attention. There was something else coming.

'We all trust each other,' said Bill. 'Or we wouldn't be here. But in a partnership, a strong partnership like Labouchere, that trust has to be unquestioned. So, as you no doubt expected, I have gotten Cray to run the rule over all of you.'

He was right: we had expected that, or at least I had. Cray was a corporate investigations firm we often used to check out people who ran the firms our clients were targeting, or even, on occasion, our clients themselves. I was pretty sure I was clean. But you can never be 100 per cent sure.

'I'm not going to tell you what Cray discovered. As I say, we should trust each other to disclose those things anyway. So what I'm going to do is to ask you to tell me, to tell all of us, any little secrets you have that we should be aware of. Things that your partners should know about.'

The table tensed. We had all figured out what Bill was up to. He hadn't said it, but the implication was that if we didn't confess to something that Cray had discovered about us, we would be marked down with a mark so black we would be out of the running. But of course, if we volunteered some genuine secret that looked bad for us, then there was a chance that it would be news to Bill. Tricky. Very tricky.

'Can't we just tell you in person?' Harald asked. 'Do we have to do it in front of each other?'

Of course you do, I thought. That's the whole point. It will be much more fun for Bill to watch us squirm in front of everyone.

'No, Harald,' said Bill. 'Part of what we are doing is learning to trust each other. Charlie? You start.'

Thank God it's not me, we all thought as we turned to Charlie. Charlie Campbell – Extravert, Sensing, Thinking, Perceptive – was an expert bullshitter, which, let's face it, is a good skill in our business. He was a Canadian graduate of Harvard Business School, who had worked short stints for a number of energy

companies around the world before joining Labouchere a year after me. I didn't like him, I didn't trust him, but he had landed the firm two big deals in the previous twelve months. Partners landed deals, vice presidents and associates did the work, so Charlie was already acting like a partner.

Charlie paused, whether for effect or genuinely to give himself time to think. 'I'm gay,' he said.

Silence. I was surprised, and so, I thought, was everyone else. Charlie didn't look gay; he didn't sound gay. I had worked with him on a North Sea deal and had had no inkling. He was short with neat thinning dark hair. In fact, he was neat all around, from his perfectly tied ties to his expensive suits and his well-polished shoes. Even in smart-casual mode his clothes were the best pressed of any of us.

But then I realized I was just wallowing in stereotypes. So Charlie was gay? He shouldn't have to tell us about that; that was his business. What was more relevant was that you couldn't trust his bullshit.

'I know you're gay, Charlie,' said Bill. 'And I expect most of us in the room know that.'

I checked. Everyone was nodding sagely. They *did* all know apart from me. Unless they were pretending. A little late, I nodded too.

'But I haven't come out to any of you,' said Charlie. 'That *is* my big secret. I'm gay.'

'Is that all you have to hide?' Bill asked, his voice soft and dangerous.

'Absolutely!' Charlie protested. But he protested too much. We all knew it. There was something else – there had to be.

Bill inserted the knife. 'Not the plagiarism at Harvard? You were investigated for copying from a former student's paper in your Finance 2 course. You were nearly thrown out.'

For a second, Charlie glared at Bill, fury in his eyes. We all saw it. Through my peripheral vision I spotted the professor making a note. Then he smiled. 'But I wasn't thrown out, was I? In fact I came fourth in my class. Which is one of the reasons you hired me.'

Nice try, but no cigar. 'That may be so. But you should have told us, Charlie. That's the reason I asked you: to give you a chance to tell us.'

The rest of us had been warned. This was going to get uncomfortable.

'Trent?'

Trent shifted his long frame in the chair. Trent Dunston – Extravert, Intuitive, Thinking, Perceptive – was a tall jock with thick fair hair oiled back from a large, handsome face. He had been reserve in one of the United States’ rowing teams in the Olympics seven years before. I didn’t know too much about him apart from the fact he liked to ‘party’, in all that word’s varying meanings. And he had proven quick to spot opportunities for the firm in the collapsing US fracking market. It wasn’t from his own analysis. He had contacts: he knew how to make the people who knew what was really going on in the industry tell him.

‘Drugs,’ he said. ‘I did drugs.’

‘What kind of drugs?’ asked Bill.

‘All kinds.’ Trent’s thick lips curled into a smile of knowing menace. ‘I spent six months in rehab a year before I joined the firm.’

‘I see,’ said Bill without surprise. He knew; Cray had told him. ‘And do you still do drugs, Trent?’

‘I’ve beaten it,’ said Trent. He paused. Looked straight at Bill. ‘I do a little from time to time, but nothing like I used to. It’s under control. And doesn’t everybody?’

That was a bold move. Trent was gambling that Bill took drugs every now and then. A fair bet.

‘Very good, Trent,’ said Bill. ‘Thank you for sharing that.’

A good bet, well made.

Next he moved on to Cynthia Riviani. Cynthia – Extravert, Sensing, Feeling, Perceptive – was the oldest among us, mid-thirties, and had been at Labouchere the longest. She was a tall blonde woman from the Houston office, with a chin and a nose that were just a little bit too big for the rest of her face. She was fiercely loyal to Labouchere and to Bill. She was hard-working and diligent, but not quite as bright as the rest of us.

She squirmed. It turned out that as an intern at an investment bank in Chicago right out of college, she had given her sister some inside information on a new gas find. Her sister had made twelve hundred bucks’ profit and she and Cynthia had almost been prosecuted, but the DA had decided it wasn’t worth it. She claimed that in her innocence she hadn’t realized what she was doing was wrong. I believed her. She looked totally miserable and ashamed as she admitted this to Bill. We all felt for her.

It was cruel. What did Bill learn from that? I wondered. Cynthia was basically honest. She was loyal. And she was dumb; too dumb to become a partner.

Harald Utnes was next – Introvert, Sensing, Thinking, Judging. His offering was a time he had missed the plane for an interview with a German bank, and hadn't got the job. Bill pressed him for more, but Harald had nothing more to give. His large handsome face was set in an expression of earnest puzzlement. He was smart in his way, which was essentially numeric; he was as good with forecasts of hydrocarbon yields as he was with cash-flow models, but he was out of his depth here. Maybe he really was as honest as he seemed. Or maybe he just didn't get what Bill was after. Hard to believe he was really in pole position for the partnership, even if he was an introvert.

'Peter?'

My turn.

'Nothing,' I said. And there wasn't anything, really.

'Nothing?' said Bill. 'How can there be nothing? We all have some skeletons, even Harald here.'

'Nothing that's relevant.'

'Isn't it up to us to decide what's relevant? Your colleagues? Perhaps your future partners?'

'No.' I smiled. I meant it. And, when you came to think of it, I was right.

Bill stared at me. I stared at him, holding his gaze, the small smile fixed on my lips. Time passed, very slowly. The fire was crackling, but otherwise there was silence around the table. *I can do this all night*, I told myself. *I can do this all night*.

'All right,' said Bill eventually. 'Thank you, Peter. Oh, and give my love to Henrietta.'

I knew it was coming, but I felt a tiny eruption of heat in my face. Was I reddening? I turned my face away from Bill and checked the others. I *was* reddening.

'And lastly, Manuela.'

Manuela drew herself up, inhaled and slowly looked around the table.

'I too have done drugs,' she began. 'In fact, I've even sold a few. I've sold other things. I've never killed anyone, but I'm pretty sure my brother has. I have seen someone stabbed to death. Two people – no, three. One of them was my father. I didn't actually see him stabbed, but I saw him die.'

If this was supposed to shock us, it succeeded. Total silence.

‘Go on,’ said Bill.

‘I was brought up in Rocinha, on a hill with one of the best views in the world, overlooking Copacabana Bay with a view of Sugarloaf Mountain. Rocinha is a favela, a shanty town, and it’s a very tough place.’

‘I thought your father worked for Petrobras?’ said Bill.

‘My guardian. I used to go to a school run by a charity, the Children of St Catherine. It was only for a few hours in the day, but I loved every minute I spent there. And they loved me; the teachers gave me extra lessons. I didn’t know it then, but the main backer of the charity was Ana Clara de Sena, the wife of a wealthy businessman from Rio who had moved to São Paulo. She visited us quite often – I thought she was rich, beautiful, everything I wanted to be. And I was right: she is all those things, plus she is a truly good woman.

‘When I was fourteen, a couple of months after my mother had died of TB, the headmistress took me out of class into her little office. Senhora de Sena was waiting for me. She had decided she wanted to “adopt” two children, to take them out of the favela and give them a chance in life. We chatted for an hour. I could tell she liked me, and I was dazzled by her.

‘So she took me, along with a thirteen-year-old boy named Jorge. Jorge and I moved to São Paulo and we lived in her house there. She and her husband didn’t formally adopt us, but they became our guardians. They educated us, fed us, clothed us, and introduced us to their closest friends. With their permission, we took their last names.

‘Jorge, sadly, took drugs, more drugs. He’s still taking drugs. But I did well: high school, university, graduate school in the States. And I was able to help my brothers. One of them, little Oscar, is working as a chemical engineer in Curitiba. The other one, my elder brother, Gilmar, is more difficult. He got involved with the narco-traffickers. A couple of years ago, he said he needed to raise a hundred thousand dollars within a week or he would be killed. I believed him. I gave him the money, most of which I borrowed from Ana Clara, who was very unhappy about it. It was humiliating.

‘So you see, I have a large debt which I need to pay off. I really need to become a partner here.’

Bloody hell.

Bill was smiling with a mixture of admiration and condescension. ‘I see,’ he said. He clearly knew this; Cray must have dug it up. ‘But why didn’t you tell us this, your colleagues? We wouldn’t have held it against you.’

‘Probably not,’ said Manuela. ‘I know that “poor girl made good” is something to be proud of in this country – and, to be fair, it can be in Brazil too. But I wanted to be successful, to mix with the highest society in Brazil and elsewhere, to be someone Ana Clara would be proud of. To *be* Ana Clara. And to do that, I needed to pretend. I thought if I pretended to be someone I was not for long enough, then eventually I would become that new person. And I have. Haven’t I?’

‘Yes,’ said Bill. The condescension gone, and just the admiration remaining. ‘Yes you have.’

‘I have one request, before you move on.’ Manuela was speaking to all of us. ‘I have shared this with you because, as Bill says, I trust you. But I ask you as my colleagues not to mention this to anyone outside the firm. It is my secret and I have done a good job keeping it until now.’

‘You have my word,’ said Bill. And actually, that was worth something. Bill had a reputation to protect, and when he gave his word, he kept it.

There was a murmur of assent.

‘That was brave,’ I said as Manuela sat down.

Manuela glanced across at Professor Behbehani, who was looking the other way. ‘Not really. Any half-decent detective would have uncovered it, and Cray are better than half decent. So Bill knows. Bill knows, and I am still here, which means I am still in line for a partnership. So admitting it was all upside, provided I could make something positive of it.’

‘You certainly did that,’ I said.

Manuela smiled quickly. ‘Maybe you were the brave one. You refused to tell him. He knows something, doesn’t he?’

‘He does,’ I said. ‘And it really isn’t any of his business.’

‘Or mine,’ said Manuela.

I nodded. ‘Thanks.’

We all got up from the table and, while the others were milling about, I went to the front desk to see about my room. They gave me my key and a little map showing where my cabin was – at the far end of a cluster. My luggage was already there.

It was still snowing outside; after the warmth of the main building, the cold air had an invigorating bite to it. The log cabins that acted as bedrooms were fuzzy dark blurs illuminated by lamps spaced at regular intervals above the path. I sensed, but I could not see in the blurred darkness, the mountains, the lake and the miles and miles of dense pine trees. We were alone, a tiny spark of human light and warmth glimmering beneath the vast soft cloak of a New Hampshire snowfall.

Three figures moved through the gloom a few yards ahead of me: the easily recognizable shapes of Trent, Harald and Manuela – two tall men and one tiny woman. They were discussing Bill and the stunt he had pulled; everyone always talked about Bill. As they passed the first cabin, Trent peeled off.

‘Good night, Manuela,’ he said. ‘Good night, Harald. Sleep well, both of you.’ His words were laced with innuendo.

Manuela stopped in her tracks. ‘Fuck off, Trent,’ she snapped, anger igniting in her voice. ‘If you can’t accept reality, that’s your problem, not ours.’

None of the three of them had realized I was so close behind them. I hesitated in order to let the other two go on ahead. Trent laughed as he entered his cabin and shut the door.

‘Does he know?’ hissed Harald in a too-loud whisper.

‘Shh, Harald,’ said Manuela.

She turned and saw me. As did Harald. They moved apart to place six inches between them. A moment later they were at Harald’s cabin and Harald bid Manuela a cursory good night, ignoring me.

Manuela and I shared a small log building, divided into two semi-detached cabins. She went into her room, and I went into mine.

My bags were on the floor, and a thick envelope lay in the centre of the desk. The case for tomorrow. I decided to get up early and tackle it with a fresher mind and a firm deadline, rather than working on it uselessly into the night.

I undressed, flopped on the bed, and thought about the evening and how everyone had fared. Charlie, Harald and Cynthia had not impressed anyone. Charlie, in particular, had blown it, possibly terminally. Trent had done pretty well, but there was no doubt that Manuela had performed the best by far.

I *thought* I had done OK. Perhaps I should have talked about Henrietta. Bill had been genuinely sympathetic about Mum; there was no reason to think he wouldn’t be sympathetic about Henrietta. He had been divorced three times himself, after all. It

was none of Bill's business, nor anyone else's at Labouchere; but if I wanted to make partner, the right to privacy was one of those niceties I would have to sacrifice. And now with Henrietta gone, I *had* to make partner. Otherwise losing her would have been worth nothing, just a big, giant mistake.

The dark wave with which I had become so familiar over the last couple of months threatened to engulf me again. Mum. Henrietta. Usually I fought it off by working. Well, that's what I would do this time, when I woke up in a very few hours.

But before I could wake up, I had to go to sleep.

I grabbed my phone but there was no signal, so I used the room telephone instead and called Henrietta's mobile number. It was five o'clock in the morning in London and her phone was switched off. I called the landline in our flat. She didn't answer it. Why would she? She wasn't there.

Ten days before, I had arrived home at eleven after a couple of days in Edinburgh seeing a client. The lights were out in the flat, so I had assumed Henrietta hadn't stayed up for me. I had a taxi booked for five forty-five the next morning to take me back to Heathrow for my flight to Delhi, so I needed to turn on the light in our bedroom to get access to the wardrobe to unpack and repack. I apologized as I reached for the switch.

Our bed was empty. On Henrietta's side was an envelope on which was scrawled my name. I ripped it open.

She had gone. She wouldn't say where. She would talk to me, but only on her terms: a three-hour lunch in a quiet restaurant we used to visit when we first met, with no interruptions. If I gave her the day, she would be there. But she wouldn't speak to me on the phone and she wouldn't answer texts or emails.

I was screwed. I tried her mobile, and she didn't answer. I couldn't cancel Rajasthan, or we would lose the deal. I couldn't cancel Lake Lenatonka, because I would lose the chance to be partner. I did send her emails from Rajasthan and I tried to call her at her office; she was a human-rights solicitor with a firm in Ealing. She never answered anything.

She didn't understand! How could I possibly have lunch with her when I was in India? Or New Hampshire?

But of course she did understand. She understood very well.

My alarm went off at four, and I got stuck into the case. Two oil companies, one French and one American, were competing to buy drilling rights in the Peruvian rainforest. Harald and I were to play the role of the French company. It was fiendishly complicated. To the usual problems of reliability of reserves, valuation and negotiation strategy were added an ethical minefield of officials to bribe, public-relations pitfalls and environmental risks.

I was exhausted. My head throbbed and my eyes hurt, but at least I had the five-hour time difference on my side. At six-fifteen I noticed a tinge of grey around the edges of my curtains and decided to go for a half-hour run. I always travel with exercise clothing; I am a big believer in running to clear my head, especially when I'm on the road.

I pulled on my kit and opened the door of the cabin to be greeted by the White Mountains in all their glory rearing up behind the lodge. Despite the snow, this early in the morning they were not yet white, but shades and shadows of grey and blue, with a narrow pink streak of dawn crowning the highest summit. While trees closed in around the lodge; higher up muscles of ancient grey rock flexed and rippled beneath the bare shoulders of the range. Two birds chirped loudly at each other, laying claim to the day.

It was bitterly cold. I jogged to the back entrance of the lodge and stopped at the front desk, which was already manned by a blond kid whose name badge said he was Jason. I interrupted him staring hard at the computer terminal – keeping on top of his social-media presence, no doubt.

‘Is there a running route around here?’ I asked.

‘Sure,’ said the kid. ‘Just right around the lake. About a mile. But it might be tough going after the snow.’ He stared out of the window at the lake covered in ice and snow. ‘If you can wait till nine you can rent some skis? We have snow shoes too, if you want to try those.’

Later was no good to me. If I was going to clear my head, I needed to do it right away. ‘I’ll give it a go now,’ I said.

‘Make sure you stick to the trail,’ the kid said. ‘It’s marked with posts, so you should be OK. But let me know how it is when you get back.’

It was hard work running in the snow. I had intended to do two circuits, but I quickly realized that one would be enough. About five or six inches had fallen overnight, but the trail was sheltered by trees for much of the route, so progress was difficult but not impossible and, as the kid had said, thin black poles with white rings around them pushed out of the snow to mark the way.

It was virgin snow – not a footprint in sight. The silence of the lake, the rhythm of my own panting and footfall, the crisp air biting my lungs and invigorating my bloodstream, and the slow splash of pink and grey light that was washing over the mountains to the west lifted me up and made my heart sing. My mother had gone, possibly my wife had also. The coming day might bring success or failure. But right at that moment, the world was beautiful and so was my place in it.

About a third of the way around the lake, the path narrowed over the extremity of a rocky headland that jutted out into the ice-covered water. It was slippery and I almost fell; and so I slowed down. Then came an open stretch out of the protection of the trees where the snow was deeper, and I was doing little more than trudging. It was hard work, I was warming up and my breath was puffing in clouds around me like a steam train.

Once more I was in a rhythm, and, as I had known it would, my mind turned unbidden to the case, attacking it from a new angle.

The case was a trap.

The smart thing to do was not to bid for the Peruvian oilfield at all: it would cause more public-relations headaches than it was worth. I grinned to myself: it was typical of the kind of test Bill Labouchere would set. Well, I would show him that I could step back and see the bigger picture.

As my strategy was slotting itself into place in my brain, I saw a tall figure coming towards me, running counter-clockwise around the lake. At first I assumed it was Harald. I knew he liked early-morning runs, and indeed we had run together every morning when working on a deal in Aberdeen. I was glad I hadn’t bumped into him this time, though: I preferred to run alone, to think alone. Maybe I could go cross-country skiing with him later on, once the case was finished.

But the figure was broader than Harald, less lopey. As we drew nearer to each other I realized it was Trent. He was powering through the snow. I slowed to greet

him, but he raced on, giving me little more than a nod and a curl of his lip as he sped past.

There was no doubt that he was fitter and stronger than me. And, competitive fool that I am, it pissed me off.

I made it back to the lodge, passing Jason, the guy who had been at the front desk earlier, who was now all wrapped up ready to go outside.

‘How’s the trail?’ he asked me.

‘OK most of the way,’ I said. ‘Pretty deep in some places, where it’s outside the shelter of the trees.’

‘I’ll take a look,’ he said, stepping out into the cold.

As I went out of the back entrance of the lodge to my room, I noticed that Harald’s light was off, but Manuela’s was on in the cabin next to mine. I would have put them the other way around: I knew Harald liked to rise early and Manuela seemed like a late-night worker, but maybe that was just a Nordic versus Latin stereotype.

I remembered Trent’s comment of the night before. Maybe they were both in the same cabin? There was a thought.

I resisted the temptation to peer into Manuela’s room through the window, and jumped into my own shower, before going back to the case.

My brain was buzzing with PR strategies with which to ambush my American competitors when they bid for the Peruvian oilfield. But I knew I would have to demonstrate that I had the numbers at my fingertips, even if they were irrelevant to my plans.

A little after eight, I heard a siren. A police siren, or perhaps an ambulance or fire engine. What had happened? I couldn’t hear a fire alarm. Maybe someone was injured or ill. A heart attack perhaps? Bill? He was the only one of us over sixty, the candidates for partnership were half his age and Professor Behbehani was not much older than forty.

Maybe it was one of the hotel staff?

I forced myself to stop speculating and wrenched my brain back to the case. I can work well under pressure, even when I am tired, and when I eventually left my cabin at ten to nine, I was feeling pretty confident. According to the schedule, we were supposed to have breakfast together at nine and then spend half an hour with our negotiating partners discussing strategy. I was confident I could get Harald to go along with my plan not to bid for the oilfield, although he’d be disappointed because

knowing him he would have done an exhaustive analysis of the reserves. We would just have to figure out a way of demonstrating all that work in the negotiations.

I passed Cynthia coming out of the lodge. She looked upset. My first thought was that Bill had laid into her again. My second thought was that it had something to do with the sirens earlier. Maybe someone *was* seriously ill?

‘What’s up, Cynthia? Has something happened?’

Cynthia’s eyes were wide with shock. Fear. ‘It’s Harald. He’s dead. Oh, Peter, someone has killed him!’

‘What! You mean murdered him?’

‘I think so. They found him by the lake a couple of hours ago. The police are here. It’s horrible, Peter!’

She looked as if she was about to cry. I didn’t know Cynthia that well, but she needed comforting. I opened my arms and she fell into them, burying her head into my shoulder for a few seconds.

Then she broke away. ‘I’m just going back to my room,’ she said. ‘I’ll be back soon.’

I went through to the lobby. I could see a group of people were huddled outside, including Bill, Professor Behbehani and a guy in his forties wearing a suit under his coat, who was presumably the manager.

I was wearing my own winter coat, a red ski jacket, and I went outside to join them. The sky was blue and the lake and forest were sparkling in the low winter sunshine. A large police car, an SUV, was parked haphazardly at the entrance to the parking lot, the red and blue lights on its roof flashing silently. One policeman was standing by some tape blocking the trail around the lake I had followed that morning. I noticed another police vehicle parked, lights flashing, just before the rocky promontory I had nearly slipped on earlier.

Bill was deep in conversation with the man I took to be the manager, so I joined Charlie. ‘Do you know what happened?’

‘One of the lodge staff found Harald’s body just beyond that rock there. He had been shot.’

‘Shot! Do they know who did it? Have they arrested anyone yet?’

‘I think they’re still trying to figure out what’s gone on. These are just the local cops.’ And indeed the nearest car had *Wilburtown Police* emblazoned on it. ‘Here comes someone now.’

An unmarked car was speeding down the track towards the lodge, lights flashing from its radiator grille. It drew to a halt and a man and a woman got out. The man was heavyset, about forty, with tired eyes and a thick moustache. His colleague had short blonde hair and a purposeful manner; anyone who had ever watched any TV could tell they were detectives.

The moustachioed one seemed to be in charge. One of the uniformed policemen, a sergeant, hurried over to him, followed by the hotel manager. I watched with Charlie. I noticed Jason, the guy I had met in the lobby that morning, standing by himself, nervously smoking a cigarette. The sergeant and the two detectives approached him and he began talking to them. The woman was writing things down in her notebook.

‘He must have discovered the body,’ I said. ‘I spoke to him earlier.’

‘So, I guess they are going to cancel the exercise, then?’ Charlie said.

‘Obviously.’

‘Which is a shame, because I was going to whip your ass.’ Charlie was grinning at me. I didn’t bother to reply. What a jerk.

Trent joined us, and Charlie filled him in on the little we knew. I looked about, and saw Cynthia had returned. And Manuela, standing a few yards away from everyone else.

God, if Trent had been right in what I thought he had been suggesting this was going to be particularly tough on her. She looked OK, watching the scene calmly.

I moved over to her. ‘Hi,’ I said.

‘Hi.’

‘This is terrible.’

‘Yes.’

‘Poor Harald.’ I wanted to say what a great guy he was, but that seemed lame.

‘Poor Harald,’ she repeated. She looked serious, but not upset. I was torn about what to do next – whether to show I had overheard Trent the night before. It was her secret, their secret, but I couldn’t just say nothing.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, looking straight down at her with what I hoped was a genuine expression of sympathy.

She didn’t look back at me. She just stared at the police car out by the lake shore, her face set. ‘Peter?’ she said quietly.

‘Yes?’

‘You may have guessed something about me and Harald – I don’t know, you may not have. But if you have, don’t tell anyone, please. I’ll tell the police myself, once I’ve figured out how.’

So there *was* something going on between Harald and her. People abandoned their social life at companies like Labouchere: men and women spent long days, and nights, working together on deals; it was easier to begin a relationship inside the firm than outside it. But that kind of thing was heavily frowned upon at Labouchere Associates. I had no doubt that if Bill had found out about it, both of them would have lost any chance of partnership. But someone had been killed, for God’s sake! Would Manuela still try to salvage her partnership hopes in those circumstances?

She looked up, returning my stare. Despite her steady expression, her blue eyes were moist. ‘Please,’ she mouthed.

‘OK,’ I said.

One of the uniformed policemen approached us both with a notebook. He was young, tall, clean-cut and wrapped up well against the cold. He asked us politely for our names and addresses, confirmed that we were staying at the hotel and that we were part of the Labouchere group, and then politely requested that we wait inside to be interviewed.

I was the first up. The interviews were held in the manager's office by the detective with the moustache and the bags under his eyes, Detective Sergeant O'Leary. He wore a brown suit, and I could see the rim of a black sweater under the collar of his white shirt, which was fair enough: it was cold out there. He asked me in precise detail about my movements that morning, about my run, whom I had seen, whom I hadn't seen and the timings as far as I knew them. Part of me was curious: I had never been interviewed by the police before. Most of me was exhausted and confused. The reality of the murder was only now sinking into my weary, jet-lagged brain.

The detective was making careful notes. 'OK, that pretty much covers what you were doing this morning. Now let's move on to Harald Utnes. How long had you known him?'

'About two years. He joined Labouchere a year after me.'

'What was he like?'

'A nice guy. Hard-working. Keen on his job. Good at it, mostly.'

'Mostly?'

'Yes. He sometimes lost track of the bigger picture. I was working on a deal with him in Vietnam last year, and he almost blew it. Our client wanted to buy an offshore licence, but the oil price was falling. Harald wasn't happy with the client's numbers – he thought they were too optimistic. He was trying to persuade the client to pull the deal. I had to come in and save the situation.'

'Save the situation? How did you do that?'

'I told Harald to shut up and reassured the client that the client's assumptions about the oil price were correct.'

'I don't get it. So Harald had got it wrong about the oil price?'

'Not necessarily,' I said. 'In fact, Harald might well turn out to be right about that. But we were going to lose the deal and the fee. That's what counts.'

The police sergeant frowned. 'I get it now. So what you're saying is Harald was too honest?'

'I suppose so.' My own scruples about being prepared to tell the client what he wanted to hear in order to secure the deal had been set aside long ago.

The detective looked at me closely. I realized that I might have made an error. In portraying Harald's honesty, I had raised questions about my own. Probably not a good idea in a murder inquiry.

'Was Harald popular with his colleagues?'

'Yes, I would say so. Everyone liked him, as far as I can tell. He was a likeable guy.' I decided not to tell the policeman about Harald and Manuela. He could discover that himself from her; I was pretty sure it wasn't common knowledge, so he need never find out that I knew.

'Can you think of a reason anyone would want to kill him?'

It was a good question, and one I hadn't yet asked myself. I thought. 'No.'

'Any unhappy clients?'

'No. Not that I know of.' There had been a deal in West Africa the year before, Project Assegai. Harald had been involved and something had gone wrong, something which had caused a stir throughout the firm. Some mistake with the numbers; I wasn't sure – I had had nothing to do with it. I would leave it to Bill or one of the others who *had* worked on the deal to explain that.

'What about you? His colleagues?'

I replied instantly. 'No reason that any of us would kill him. Look, it must have been someone from outside. A passer-by.'

'A passer-by? This place isn't on the way to anywhere.'

'Then a thief.'

'His expensive watch wasn't taken, neither was his room key. His wallet was still in his room, intact.'

'What happened to him?' I asked.

'Shot in the chest. Probably a handgun, which the murderer will have tossed into the lake if he has any sense. It's deep right around there. He was dragged into the woods, about fifty feet off the trail. The employee who found him saw the marks in the snow and checked them out.'

I hadn't heard a gunshot, but then I wouldn't necessarily have done so if I was back in my cabin on the other side of the lodge when Harald was shot.

'Was the guy who found him called Jason?'

'Yes. How do you know?'

'I spoke to him on my way out this morning. Are there footprints? Tracks?'

‘Three sets, from what we can tell. We think they are yours, Trent Dunston’s, and Jason Turnell’s. We’ll need to examine the shoes you were wearing on your run.’

‘And Harald’s.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Harald’s footprints. Harald’s footprints must have been there too, obviously.’

‘Obviously.’ The detective’s eyes were hard. He clearly didn’t appreciate me trying to do his job for him.

‘So what are you saying? One of us killed him?’

Sergeant O’Leary didn’t answer my question. His blue eyes watched me steadily.

We were both silent. I had the impression that he was waiting for me to fill the gap. With what? Some new piece of information? A confession? This happened in negotiations too – keep quiet and wait for the other guy to concede something.

I kept my mouth shut.

‘You’re all at Lenatonka to figure out which one of you is to become partner?’ he asked eventually.

‘That’s correct.’

I could see where this conversation was going.

‘Last night, did your chairman give any indication of who among you was the most likely to make it?’

‘Yes, he did,’ I said.

‘And that was?’

‘Harald.’ I kept my voice firm. I had nothing to hide. Honest, straight answers would serve me best.

‘Did that surprise you?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘For the reasons I told you earlier. Harald was more concerned with getting the numbers right than doing the deal. When you are a partner you need to be able to do the deal.’

‘Like you?’

‘Like me.’ I couldn’t deny it.

‘Before the chairman said Harald was most likely to make partner, who do you think was favourite?’

I thought about fudging the answer, saying I didn't know. But O'Leary was going to ask everyone the same question. This was not the time to become evasive. 'Me.'

'I see. And how much can a partner be expected to earn?'

'A million dollars a year. Maybe two in a good year.'

'That's a lot of money.'

I had to put a stop to this. 'If you think any of us would kill Harald just so that we could become partner, you're crazy. It's just not that important.'

'A million bucks a year not important? People have killed other people for a whole lot less than that. People I've put in jail.'

I wanted to explain that that wasn't the way any of us thought. That we were earning decent salaries anyway, that the risk of going to jail was not worth the extra cash. That none of us could kill anyone. That I couldn't kill anyone. What I actually said was much more stupid.

'There are taxes. On the million.'

'So half a million after tax isn't worth it, but a million pre-tax would be?'

'That's not what I meant!' I said. I didn't know what I had meant. 'Look. Do I need a lawyer?'

The detective leaned forward and smiled. 'I don't know. Do you?'

'Aren't you supposed to warn me if I do?' I thought of the various cop shows I had seen over the years. 'Read me my rights?'

'We haven't arrested you. Yet. But if you did kill Harald Utnes, I suggest you do get a lawyer. Do you want a lawyer?'

Where would I get a lawyer in America? Ask Labouchere was the obvious answer to that question, but in this case could I trust them to come up with the right one? Perhaps some Googling was required when I got back to my room. Except there was no Internet connection or phone coverage.

'No,' I said.

'Did you kill Harald Utnes?'

'No,' I said, seeking out the detective's blue eyes and holding them as steadily as I could. 'No, I did not.'

'All right.' The detective leaned back. 'That about wraps it up. You can go now, but don't leave the hotel. I'm pretty sure we're gonna want to speak with you again.'

As I was about to leave the manager's office, I paused. 'Haven't I seen you somewhere before?'

O'Leary snorted. 'I doubt it, sir. I took a vacation to London with the kids a couple years back, but it's not very likely we met then.'

'No,' I said. 'Of course not.' But there *was* something. It was as much his mannerisms – that snort for example – as anything else. I never forget a face, or a name. But I couldn't place him.

I was troubled as I returned to the bar, where the others were waiting. I had given the police the trainers I had worn on my run, and permission to search my room. For a firearm, presumably. Cynthia was the next to be interviewed. Manuela was absorbed in a copy of *The Economist*. The others were leafing through newspapers or simply staring into space. One of the hotel staff stood behind the bar watching them.

'Can I have a cup of coffee?' I asked him.

'How did it go?' Charlie said. 'What did they ask?'

'A lot of questions. I went for a run this morning – it had to be just before Harald was murdered. They asked me all about that.' I glanced at Trent, who was leafing through the *Wall Street Journal*, his smartphone, which he would normally have been consulting, sitting uselessly on the table in front of him. 'I saw Trent, but not Harald.'

Trent turned to me. 'I look forward to telling them what I saw. Or rather didn't see.'

I could tell that the police's first take on the matter was that either Trent or I had murdered Harald. And it wasn't me. So . . .

It was ridiculous. Trent was self-absorbed and ruthless in a business context, but he wasn't a killer; it was impossible to believe that any of us was.

At some point, though, it might turn into him or me. In which case I would much rather it was him.

'Did you see Harald?' I asked him.

'No. And I'll tell the police that. The only other person I saw was you.'

I held Trent's gaze. I wasn't convinced Trent had murdered anyone. But I was convinced that he would have no compunction in prodding me further into the frame if it eased him out of it. I would have to keep my wits about me.

My coffee arrived. I wished I hadn't come to Lake Lenatonka. It was lunchtime in London; I should have been with Henrietta at that restaurant in Pimlico.

But what about Harald? Why him? There was no justice in the world: he was the nicest guy among us, the most honest, the best. No doubt, somewhere in Norway there was a mother who was as proud of him as Bill's or mine had been of us. Soon the press would come. Bill would have to make a statement. Harald's parents would fly over to collect the body.

And what of Manuela, sitting seemingly absorbed in *The Economist* but never getting beyond the first page? Would she be able to take on the role of mourner who had lost a boyfriend? Or would she try to keep the whole thing secret?

I couldn't bear the thought of Henrietta dying. Especially after what had happened between us. What was happening.

So why had Harald been killed?

'Charlie?'

'Yes?' Charlie Campbell had been staring at the wall, on which was a large photograph of men and horses dragging logs by the side of Lake Lenatonka a hundred years before.

'You worked on Project Assegai with Harald, didn't you?'

'Yeah,' he said.

'What happened with that?'

'We were acting for Tomskoil. They were making a play for some Mauritanian assets owned by Archimedes Natural Resources. I went down there to work on the deal. Turns out the figures were crap and the deal fell through.'

'And Harald was there with you?'

'He came down later. Why do you ask?'

'I just remember there was trouble about it.'

'Tomskoil were pissed, if that's what you mean. And I don't blame them. Archimedes were giving us bum numbers. But we got out of it OK.'

'Did we?' I asked.

'Oh, yeah,' said Charlie. 'Totally.' He picked up a magazine – *New Hampshire Country Living* – and began to study it carefully.

I remembered the deal being more trouble than that, but if Charlie was in bullshit mode, I would never get the truth from him.

Manuela was ignoring us, but I could tell Trent was listening. Maybe I would ask Cynthia later.

Trent was next, and the other detective, the blonde woman, came for Manuela. I was tempted to go back to my room, but decided I would wait for her. When she did emerge, she seemed untroubled. I tried to catch her eye, but she ignored me and returned to her *Economist*. She didn't look as if she wanted to talk, so I stood up to return to my room.

'Peter?'

It was her.

'Would you mind coming for a walk with me? If they let us.'

'Sure.'

They did let us, so we went outside through the front entrance of the lodge. Another van was parked up along the shore of the lake beyond the police tape, and someone in a white forensic suit was retrieving something out of the back. Otherwise there were just the two police cars, and the detective sergeant's unmarked Ford.

'I thought there would be more people,' I said.

Manuela didn't reply.

I set off around the opposite side of the lake from the crime scene, but Manuela stopped me.

'Do you mind if we go up the hill?' she said. 'Where people can't see us?'

'OK.' I could just make out the faint impression in the snow of a pathway branching off to the left and heading for a gap in the trees. Manuela was shod in snow boots but, having lost my trainers, I was wearing my Church's brogues. Oh, well.

Soon after penetrating the woods, the path headed uphill. As the trees closed in around us, so did the silence. Just the crunch of my shoes on the snow and Manuela's behind me. The soles of my shoes had no grip at all, and I made my way gingerly up the path, picking out stones and rocks for purchase. Manuela didn't say anything until we reached a bench about three hundred feet up from the lake. We were both panting.

'Can we stop here?' Manuela asked.

We brushed the snow off the bench and sat on it. Trees had been felled or trimmed to create a view out over the flat white board of the lake. We couldn't see the mountain lodge, which was directly below us, but we could make out the little promontory and the van and the police car. It was hard to tell from this distance, but a couple of the forensic team in their white suits seemed to be sitting down chatting. One of the lodge's snowmobiles was buzzing back along the track from the van to the lodge, the whine of its engine echoing around the valley.

'Can you make out the body?' I said. 'I thought they would put up a tent or something?'

'No,' said Manuela. 'And I don't want to see it.'

'Sorry.'

Beyond the lake, the view stretched over miles and miles of thick undulating forest to a broad river. The White Mountains themselves were behind us and to the left. It was quite beautiful.

Manuela beside me began to sob, silently at first, and then uttering a low whine, a keening sound. It ripped at my heart. I put my arm around her and she buried her head in my chest, her narrow shoulders heaving. I let her cry like that, until eventually she sat up and wiped her eyes.

'I'm sorry to do that to you,' she said.

'That's OK,' I said. 'You should cry.'

'No I shouldn't. I should be able to hold it in.'

'Why? Harald was clearly really important to you. Why shouldn't you be upset? It must be awful. Truly awful.'

'Yes, but I mustn't *show* it,' said Manuela with determination that verged on anger.

'Why not?'

'Because that's not who I am. It might have been who I used to be, but I'm not that girl any more. My success, my life, depends on keeping up the pretence – not the pretence, the reality that I am someone I am not. Or rather I am now someone I used not to be. You can't possibly understand that – you're an Englishman who went to Cambridge.'

'My father was a coal miner,' I said. 'I don't want to exaggerate things – he was paid reasonably well, and retired before the pit closed. We had a nice little house

kept spotless by my mum, good neighbours, but I have had to become someone else too. Chosen to. I don't know.'

The biggest change was when I had married Henrietta, whom I had met at Cambridge and whose father was a barrister. The joint life we had built together had been based much more on her family ways and traditions than mine. I dressed differently, spoke differently. Sometimes I told myself it was inevitable we did things her way because she was the woman in the partnership, but the truth was I liked it. It was the life I had aspired to once I had arrived at university, the life from which the majority of my fellow undergraduates had come, the life I was determined to have for myself.

'So I have rejected who I was too. And sometimes I feel bad about that.' Such as when I only showed up for a couple of hours at my mother's funeral at the village Methodist chapel.

'I thought there might be something like that,' Manuela said. 'That's why I wanted to talk to you. You're not like the others. Except Harald maybe.'

I knew 'not being like the others' was meant as a compliment, although being like the others was what we were both trying to prove to Bill. By lying about who we really were. Did Bill get that? Probably, knowing Bill.

But who cared? Harald was dead.

'Tell me about him. How long had you been going out?'

'About nine months. We were working on a deal together, naturally. It was in the London office – you were away somewhere, I guess. I've had plenty of boyfriends before, but none quite like Harald. I could be who I am with him. He listens – used to listen, without judging. You knew where you were with him – he never played games. He was just a thoroughly decent guy.'

'He was.'

Manuela sniffed and gave a little laugh. 'God knows what he was doing in Labouchere.'

'Can you believe he was really going to be made partner? I saw you smile when Bill announced that, by the way. At the time I couldn't figure out why.'

'I was proud of him,' said Manuela. 'But no, I don't know why Bill picked him. You never know with Bill.'

'No, you don't.'

We sat in silence for a moment. It was cold on the bench, but I was enjoying being there with Manuela. It was like a tiny haven of reality in what was a totally unreal situation.

A woodpecker shattered the calm with a jackhammer burst in one of the trees just behind us.

‘They seem to think I did it,’ I said. ‘Killed Harald.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ said Manuela. ‘Why?’

‘Because I was one of only two people to pass that spot this morning. The other being Trent. And because they think I saw myself as favourite for partner and was upset that Bill tipped Harald.’

‘That’s absurd,’ said Manuela.

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘Tell that to the police.’

‘I will. What about Trent?’

‘What about Trent?’

‘Did you see him do anything suspicious?’

‘No. He was running around the lake just like I was, except in the other direction.’

‘So it must have been him!’ Manuela said. ‘If it wasn’t you, it must have been Trent.’

‘Why would he kill Harald? He had even less reason than I did: Trent only ever had an outside chance of becoming partner, even with Harald gone. I mean, Trent is a bit dodgy, but even so. You’re not suggesting Harald supplied him with drugs or something?’

‘No, of course not!’

‘Then why?’

Manuela didn’t answer.

But in the silence of the forest, away from the pressure cooker of the lodge below, my brain began to work. *Someone* had killed Harald. And although I preferred to believe that it might be a stranger, or one of the hotel staff, it was most likely that it was someone who knew him.

One of us.

‘What about Bill?’ I said.

‘Bill? How could Bill have done it?’

‘He’s clever. And he’s manipulative. If he were to kill someone he would make it look like someone else had the motive and the opportunity.’

‘Like you?’

I didn’t like the thought of Bill picking me out as the fall guy. His opinion of me was important; I thought he liked me, admired me, even. But it was exactly the kind of game Bill might play. And he would figure out a way of making it seem as though only Trent or I could have done it.

‘Why would *he* want to kill Harald?’

‘Did Harald ever talk to you about Project Assegai?’

Manuela watched me, comprehending. ‘Yes, he did. It worried him a lot.’

‘What happened?’

‘I’m not sure exactly. It had something to do with Charlie Campbell, and Steve Rosenheit.’ Steve was a partner at Labouchere. ‘Charlie had screwed up somehow, and Harald was sent down to Mauritania to unscrew things. It was a mess. Harald never told me the details, but he did say he thought he had to speak up about it. Blow the whistle.’

‘Blow the whistle? Tell the press?’

‘Not the press. Bill. I got the impression that Charlie and Steve were keeping something quiet that Harald thought Bill ought to know.’

‘But Harald never told him?’

‘No. He was planning to do it after they announced the new partner.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah. We spoke last night on the hotel phone when we got back to our cabins. Harald was so pleased to be in with a chance. He thought once he was made partner, that would be the time to tell Bill.’

‘So Bill didn’t know about Project Assegai?’

‘Right.’ Manuela sighed. ‘Last night, Harald wanted to come over to my cabin, but I said no. Too risky. And we both needed to work on the case.’ Another tear leaked from her still-reddened eyes. ‘I wish I’d let him, now.’

She took a deep breath. ‘Let’s go.’

We left the bench and plunged back into the woods. Downhill, the trail was even more slippery, and I nearly fell twice.

We came to a more level stretch, where it was easier to talk. ‘You know speaking about the favela yesterday makes this more difficult,’ Manuela said.

‘How? I thought it went down very well.’

‘It’s not that. It’s like Bill has driven a stake into the wall between my two lives, weakened it. It’s a big wall, but it’s got a crack in it now. Why did he have to do that?’

‘That’s what Bill does,’ I said. ‘He finds your weak spot, and he presses. Hard. He thinks he’s being clever, but actually I think he gets a kick out of it. It’s power. The power of the bully in the playground. Not the big one that goes around beating up the little kids. The clever, quick-witted one who gets everyone else scared that they are going to be the kid picked on next. They are much more effective.’

‘You’re right,’ said Manuela. ‘You know, if I was back in the favela, there would be revenge for something like this.’

‘What, an eye for an eye?’

‘And more. If there are no police to enforce the law, you have to rely on your family. People have to know that if they mess with you, your family will protect you. More than that, they will avenge you.’

‘Shame Harald didn’t have anyone like that.’

‘You know, if I called my big brother, he’d be over here like a shot.’

‘And do what?’

‘Sort someone out.’

‘Sort out who?’

‘Whoever I told him to.’

‘And who would that be? Bill?’

‘Not Bill. Whoever killed Harald.’

‘That sounds a little scary,’ I said. ‘Maybe we should just leave it to the police. That guy O’Leary seemed smart to me. He’ll figure out who did it.’

‘I hope so,’ said Manuela.

We were silent as we scrambled down the last steep bit and out on to the snow-covered meadow beside the lake. Without discussing it, we turned left, away from the lodge, along the trail around the lake. It had already been cleared, so walking was easier. I could sense that Manuela felt safe in my company, as I did in hers. We both wanted to put off raising our guards for the police and Bill and his stupid mind games.

‘Tell me about Henrietta,’ Manuela said. ‘I mean, if you want to. She’s your wife, right?’

I hesitated.

‘Sorry,’ Manuela said. ‘That really is your own business.’

‘No, it’s OK,’ I said. ‘It would be good to talk to someone about it. I haven’t had a chance yet. I don’t know about you, but I never get any time to spend with anyone outside work. “Friends” become “old friends”.’ I paused. ‘Wives become ex-wives.’

‘Really?’ Manuela sounded shocked.

‘It looks that way.’

‘She doesn’t like you working so hard? Doesn’t she realize you have to?’

‘She doesn’t like it,’ I said. ‘And I think she is smart enough to realize I don’t have to.’

‘But you’ll never make partner unless you put the hours in.’

‘I told her that.’

‘And doesn’t she understand it?’

‘Oh, yes, Henrietta understands it. She understands it better than me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She understands that making partner is more important than spending time with her.’

‘We all have to make sacrifices,’ Manuela said.

It was funny hearing Manuela echoing my thoughts, my arguments. And a week ago, even a few days ago, I would have insisted she was right. I had told Henrietta that once I made partner we would have enough money to make our lives easier, her life easier. She had argued, claiming that partners worked harder than vice presidents. I had denied this, but she was right, of course; I just hadn’t been prepared to admit it.

‘Henrietta has actually been very supportive,’ I said. ‘She’s a lawyer, she gets that professionals have to work long hours. And she has always known I’m ambitious. She understands what I do. It’s been good.’

‘Yeah. I liked it that Harald understood me.’

‘Sorry, I—’

‘No. We’ve talked about Harald,’ Manuela said. ‘Go on. How did things change?’

‘It was my mother’s death. She died in January. I was closing the Vietnamese deal, I mean right in the final meetings with lawyers. It was a two-nighter and it was

going pear-shaped. I couldn't leave it. I didn't have time for thinking about my mother. It sounds awful, but do you know what I mean?'

'I know what you mean,' said Manuela.

'Thing is, it *was* awful. It is awful. My poor dad is a mess. I was working on another deal at the same time, and my dad was useless, so I had to leave all the funeral arrangements and the probate stuff to Kieran, my brother. Henrietta seemed supportive; she always seemed supportive. We drove up there and back in the day, just stayed for the funeral. But afterwards she told me that unless I changed my ways, she was leaving. She said I had got my priorities all wrong. She said my father needed me. She said I was the most important person in my mother's life, and she deserved more of my time than that.' I took a deep breath. 'She said *she* deserved more of my time than that.'

'Oh,' said Manuela, neutrally.

That neutrality told me she got it. She understood what Henrietta was saying, and yet she also understood how I felt: how partnership had become the most important thing in my life.

How it was more important than Henrietta.

'I listened. And I tried. I tried damned hard. I tried to spend more time with Henrietta *and* not drop the ball on any deals, *and* keep myself in with a chance of becoming partner. I did blow off a couple of meetings to spend time with Henrietta – we went to Barcelona for a long weekend – but then I told her about the Rajasthan trip and this one. And she left me.'

'Oh.'

'Yeah. And I'm here. And I shouldn't be. I should be with her.'

'Can't you call her and tell her?'

'She insists we talk face-to-face. No phone calls.'

'Oh.'

'See, she does understand me.'

'I see,' said Manuela.

'I don't know why Harald died, who killed him, but he was the best one of us. He's a much better guy than Trent or Charlie, or even Cynthia. Or me.'

'He was certainly better than me,' said Manuela.

I couldn't disagree. I liked Manuela, I liked her a lot, and she certainly had more to her than Trent or Charlie, but she was much more like me than Harald.

‘But the thing is: I’m here now. I’ve made my mistake, and it’s a big mistake, but I can still have a crack at partnership. To lose Henrietta and to lose the chance of partnership would just be stupid.’

‘Let’s go back,’ said Manuela.

We turned around and walked back in a silence of togetherness, scraps of thoughts whirling and spinning in my brain: Harald and the cruelty of his death, Manuela and her loss, Henrietta and my loss, how I wished I could just pick up the phone and talk to her. She would be great in a situation like this.

And my mother.

Suddenly I was struck by an enormous weight of emotion, like a massive avalanche tumbling down the mountain and over the trees, smothering me. Grief. I had lost Mum. I would never see her again. The person who really had loved me most in the world, who had been on my side always, was gone. Gone. Gone forever.

I felt cold. I shook. I think I might even have staggered.

‘What is it, Peter?’ Manuela asked.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I couldn’t do it without my voice cracking and the tears coming. I shut my mouth tightly and just shook my head, lowering my eyes to the snow, determined not to weep.

I felt the gentle pressure of Manuela’s gloved hand touching my arm.

As we reached the lodge, I saw Jason sprinkling some salt on a pathway around the side of the building. I left Manuela and approached him.

‘Hi Jason,’ I said. ‘How are you doing?’

Jason turned and straightened up. He was a couple of inches taller than me, in his early twenties with a wispy fair beard.

‘OK, I guess.’

He didn’t really look it.

‘Was it you who found the body?’

‘Sure was. I was checking the trail soon after you had gotten back from your run. There was this one spot, just past that rock, where the snow was real messed up. Something had gone on, I could tell, so I followed these marks into the woods. And there he was.’

‘Was he dead?’

Jason swallowed and then nodded. ‘He was dead. Eyes staring, you know. I mean, I felt for a pulse and everything, but he was dead.’

I realized that I had never seen a dead body. Not my mother. No car accidents.

‘It must be rough,’ I said. ‘Have they been asking you lots of questions?’

Jason nodded. ‘You?’ He looked at me with something close to suspicion.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘They seem to think I might have killed Harald.’

Jason nodded and looked away, back to the lake. ‘I don’t know how you didn’t see it – you or that other guy.’

‘I didn’t see anything,’ I said. ‘In fact, when I was out there, there were no tracks at all.’

‘Yeah. It’s all messed up now, but at that time of the morning it was pristine.’

‘Any sign of anyone driving into the property?’

‘No,’ said Jason. ‘Nor walking. Nor any footprints around the side of the lodge. Just yours and the other guy’s.’

‘And Harald’s,’ I said.

‘And Harald’s.’

That didn’t look good.

‘Are you from around here?’ I asked.

‘Nope. Minnesota. I’m right out of college trying to get some hotel-management experience. I’m used to the snow, so I figured I’d give New England a try. Not sure that was a good call, now.’

‘Who owns this place?’ I asked. ‘Is it part of a chain?’

‘No. Guy called Matt Parkhouse. Made his money in, like, medical devices or something. I think he’s an old friend of your boss.’

That made sense.

‘See you around,’ I said, and headed back to the dining room.

‘All right, everybody, listen up.’ Bill clapped his hands. We were all sitting around the long table in the dining room. The others had been waiting for Manuela and me to return to the lodge. I had wanted to go back to my cabin and curl up in a ball on my bed, but I couldn’t. I had to sit with the others, who had now all been interviewed, and listen to Bill. I wasn’t in the mood. The big bear on the wall didn’t look too happy about it either.

‘Without a doubt, this is the worst day in our firm’s history,’ he began.

‘Harald was a great guy, he would have made a terrific partner, and we all miss him. We will all need time to mourn him in our own way.’

I glanced at Manuela for a reaction, but she was sitting calmly, arms folded, listening to Bill. How could she do it? I was aware I was fidgeting; I couldn’t help it. Bill’s gaze fell on me for a moment. I glared at him and then bit my thumbnail.

‘For now, we have something very serious to consider,’ he went on. ‘I have been speaking with Sergeant O’Leary, and he is of the strong opinion that whoever murdered Harald was staying here at Lake Lenatonka. As you know, it snowed last night, and there are no fresh tracks anywhere leading into the lake from outside. Now, it may be that the murderer could have been one of the staff at the lodge, and the police are questioning them thoroughly as we speak. But, and I hate to say this . . .’ He paused and looked regretfully at each of our faces. ‘. . . but it is most likely that Harald’s killer is one of us. Or rather, one of you.’

He waited for our reaction. There wasn’t one for several seconds, before Charlie spoke. ‘You can’t be serious,’ he said.

Bill shrugged. ‘I find it very hard to accept myself, but there is no other conclusion.’

‘It doesn’t make sense,’ I said.

‘Sergeant O’Leary thinks it does,’ Bill said. ‘But I have every confidence in the loyalty and integrity of our people. Of you. Before he takes you all off to the police station, I have persuaded him to allow you an hour to discuss it among yourselves. You’ve all worked together in the past; I’m sure you can figure out which one of you is responsible.’

I felt the frustration that had been simmering inside boil up. ‘This isn’t a game, Bill,’ I protested.

Bill turned towards me, his brown eyes hardening. ‘I’m very well aware of that, Peter.’

‘Then what’s *she* doing here?’ I had just spotted the professor, sitting in a chair in the corner, taking notes.

‘I asked Shelley to join us. She is a trained psychologist and she can be there for any of you who need to reach out to someone. This is a tough time for you. For all of us.’

‘This is bullshit!’ I protested. ‘I’m having no part of it.’

‘OK,’ said Bill. ‘I can’t force you to stay. But the police can force you to join them at the police station.’

‘Stay, Peter,’ said Manuela.

Her voice was neutral. It wasn’t a command and it wasn’t a plea. It was what I chose to make of it.

I turned to her. She was looking at me coolly, impassively.

It was advice.

Just as I had been the favourite for partner twenty-four hours before, I was now favourite for Harald’s murderer. She was right: it made sense to stay, if only to listen.

‘All right,’ I said.

‘Good,’ said Bill. ‘You have an hour.’

He was gone, followed by the professor.

We sat in silence, the five of us: Trent, Manuela, Cynthia, Charlie and me. It was an extraordinary situation, totally disorienting. Here we were, miles from anywhere, dealing with the surreal. In daylight, the dining hall’s big picture windows gave a view out on to the lake, sunshine glaring white off its flat snowy surface. There were no signs of human habitation – the police vehicles were just out of view. Framed

by the window, the winter landscape looked like something out of a Christmas card, not the scene of a murder.

I fought successfully to control my anger. I could be in trouble here. I might well need a lawyer: it was frustrating that there wasn't a Wi-Fi connection for me to Google one. It was also strange – Bill insisted his people were in contact with the outside world at all times. The lodge office must have some kind of Internet connection. Otherwise, what could I do? Just accept the local guy the New Hampshire police gave me? Or someone Labouchere got? Neither of those sounded like good options.

But I worked with lawyers all the time. Charlotte would help me – Charlotte Prior who worked for the New York firm we had used for the Vietnamese deal and a couple of others before. She was good in a crisis and I was pretty sure she liked me. It was unlikely that her firm would represent me, but she would at least know how to get me a good criminal lawyer for a case like this.

A murder case.

'OK,' said Cynthia eventually. 'Let's get to it.' She glanced around the room. 'Here, let me get the flip chart.'

'This is all bollocks,' I said. 'None of us killed Harald.'

'We've got an hour,' said Cynthia. 'Let's use it. Bill might have a point; between us we may be able to figure out who killed Harald. We should at least try.' She lifted the flip chart and brought it over towards the table, uncapping one of the thick felt pens. Blue. A constructive colour. She stood there, tall, tidy in her pink shirt and slacks, the corporate uniform of the middle manager at a weekend offsite, her thick blond hair blow-dried to perfection, the pen poised, ready to turn half-ideas into scribbled words.

'What are you going to do with that?' I said.

'Brainstorm,' said Cynthia. 'We brainstorm all the time. So, first question. What's our first question?'

Cynthia looked around at us. Part of me admired her matter-of-fact ability to do something constructive. But I wasn't going to be part of it.

'We know where he was killed,' said Charlie. So how about: "Who could have been at the scene of the crime?"'

'All right,' said Cynthia. And she scrawled the question on the flip chart. 'Thoughts?'

‘Me,’ said Trent with a half-smile. ‘I went for a run around the lake this morning. Put me down.’

Cynthia raised her eyebrows.

‘Go on,’ said Trent.

‘OK.’ She wrote down Trent’s name.

‘Harald,’ added Trent. ‘Obviously.’

Cynthia wrote it down.

‘And Peter. I saw Peter running.’ Trent shot me a smirk.

I wanted to protest my innocence, or suggest that someone else might have been lurking by the side of the lake, but I kept quiet. I didn’t want to encourage them in a game I might lose.

‘Could anyone else have been there?’ Cynthia asked. ‘A hotel employee? A stranger?’

‘No,’ said Trent. ‘I asked the cops and they were certain there were no signs of anyone else apart from me, Peter, Harald and the guy who found him, who worked for the lodge.’

I remembered what Jason had just told me about the lack of unexplained tracks in the snow, but decided not to share it with the others. Trent was right.

There followed a long and unstructured conversation between Trent and Cynthia about footprints, vehicle tracks, why no one had heard a gunshot, the timings, the employee who had discovered the body and what the police had and hadn’t said. Charlie threw in a few comments, but I kept quiet, as did Manuela. Cynthia was doing a pretty good job of asking the right questions, but I had to admit that there was only one answer emerging.

‘All right,’ said Cynthia. ‘That suggests Trent or Peter.’

Both she and Trent looked at me for a reaction. I didn’t give them one. I was going to watch this game, but not play it.

‘OK,’ Cynthia said. ‘Now, what else?’

‘Motive,’ said Trent.

Cynthia flipped the chart to a new page, and wrote the word down, underlining it. I could see exactly what Trent was doing. ‘All right, so who had the motive?’

‘Peter,’ said Charlie. ‘He was favourite to make partner, until Bill mentioned Harald’s name.’

‘That’s true,’ said Trent, looking at me, one corner of his wide lips raised slightly. I was beginning to see why Trent was so effective at doing deals. He was demonstrating his total confidence that he had got me where he wanted me, and it was hard not to believe him.

I had to fight this. Time to take the field.

‘All of us want to be partners,’ I said. ‘Really badly. You, for example, Trent.’

‘Sure I do,’ said Trent. ‘But I know I don’t have much of a chance. I’m just here to make up the numbers.’

Trent’s chances were better than that, but he had a point, and we all knew it.

‘I don’t believe any of us would actually kill for a partnership,’ I said.

Trent shrugged. ‘Harald is dead.’

‘We don’t know why he was killed.’

‘Put Peter’s name down, Cynthia. He has the strongest motive of all of us. No question.’

Cynthia shrugged. Avoiding my eye she wrote my name on the flip chart.

‘There might be other motives,’ I said.

‘Such as?’

My mind raced, searching for possibilities. I thought of Manuela and her affair with Harald. Wasn’t it about time that she mentioned it? It was definitely relevant. Maybe she had some motive – maybe Harald had rejected her? Or threatened to expose her? Maybe she had killed him?

I glanced at Manuela, sitting, arms folded, watching what was going on, showing no inclination to talk. She had said she would tell the police about Harald when the time was right. Surely the time was right now. Except these people weren’t the police, just her colleagues. Her rivals.

Was she playing some game? Some game that I couldn’t yet fathom?

But I couldn’t bring myself to reveal her affair, at least not yet. I felt as if I had established a tentative bond of trust with her, and I needed all the trust I could get.

So what other motive might there be? Think!

‘Project Assegai,’ I said.

Cynthia stared at me. ‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘Write it down,’ I said.

Cynthia shrugged and wrote it down under *Motive*. She, at least, wanted to play fair.

‘Something went wrong with Project Assegai,’ I said. ‘What was it, Charlie?’

‘Nothing. I told you. I mean, there was some screw-up with the numbers, but we sorted it out and the client was happy in the end. It can have nothing to do with Harald’s death.’

‘But Harald was involved with the deal?’

‘Yeah,’ said Charlie. ‘He reworked the numbers. Modified the assumptions. You know how Harald is. Sorry, was. Always questioning the assumptions.’

‘That’s not how it was,’ said Cynthia, frowning. ‘And you know it, Charlie.’

‘OK, so I screwed up,’ Charlie said. ‘But that has *nothing* to do with Harald’s death.’

‘You know what happened with Project Assegai, Cynthia,’ I said. ‘Tell us.’

‘We don’t have time for this,’ said Charlie.

I checked my watch. ‘We have fifteen minutes.’

Cynthia hesitated, but she overcame her reluctance. ‘OK,’ she said. ‘Peter might have something here.’ She flipped over the sheet and wrote the words *Project Assegai*. ‘Needs its own page. No one in the firm knows what really happened apart from me, Charlie, Harald and the partner, Steve Rosenheit. And it was one humongous screw-up.’

‘What went wrong?’ I asked her.

‘It was a deal in Mauritania, an offshore field operated by Archimedes Resources. They needed another forty-two million to drill two more exploratory wells, and our client Tomskoil was going to put up half the money.’

Tomskoil was a Russian oil company led by an oligarch whom I didn’t trust an inch. But Steve Rosenheit claimed he understood him, and he was one of Labouche’s most profitable clients. I had managed to keep away from him. I knew very little about Archimedes.

‘Steve and Charlie did the deal, but a couple months later, Tomskoil was concerned about the numbers for the Dynamic Simulation Model. A British geologist working for Archimedes had been killed down there – it looked like it was a kidnapping that had gone wrong. Nothing to do with the deal. Harald and I flew down to Nouakchott with Steve and Charlie to check out what was happening. It turned out that the numbers were bad and Charlie hadn’t spotted it.’

‘How *could* I have spotted it?’ protested Charlie. ‘I was using the client’s assumptions. How was I to know they were just making up the figures?’

‘Harald knew,’ said Cynthia. ‘And he told Steve. Steve told us to . . . er . . . to *rework* the figures. Harald refused.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

Cynthia glanced at Charlie. ‘He was *uncomfortable*,’ she said. ‘He thought the Archimedes geologist’s death might be related in some way.’

‘Which was absurd,’ said Charlie. ‘He never understood the real world, that was Harald’s problem.’

‘So Tomskoil never knew you screwed up?’ I asked Charlie.

‘You gotta keep the client happy,’ said Charlie.

I knew I would never get Charlie to admit to what errors had actually been made now they had been covered up, and probably not Cynthia either. But the details didn’t matter. I was beginning to get an idea of what had happened in Mauritania.

‘We screwed up,’ I said. ‘We covered it up. Tomskoil never found out. And Harald was unhappy about it.’

‘That’s about it,’ said Cynthia.

I remembered what Manuela had told me, but she wasn’t saying anything now. ‘And nobody told Bill?’

‘No.’

‘Steve said we shouldn’t,’ said Charlie. ‘It was Steve’s call. We were just doing what we were told.’

Cynthia nodded.

I glanced at Manuela. Nothing. So I asked a question to which I knew the answer. ‘Did Steve think Harald would tell Bill anyway?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Cynthia.

‘Charlie?’

Charlie nodded. ‘Yeah,’ he admitted. ‘Steve got me to talk to Harald, find out what he was thinking. Harald was adamant that Bill should know.’

‘Was what you did illegal?’

Tomskoil was quoted on the London Stock Exchange. Which meant knowingly furnishing false numbers could be a criminal act in the UK. And nobody would want to piss off the Russians.

‘That’s a question of interpretation,’ said Charlie.

‘Probably,’ said Cynthia.

‘Hey! You’re not suggesting *I* killed Harald, are you?’ said Charlie.

‘It’s a motive,’ I said. ‘Put it on the chart.’

Cynthia hesitated.

‘We’re talking about a murder here,’ I said. ‘Maybe two, if you count the geologist in Africa. Write it down.’

Cynthia flipped back to the motive heading, and wrote down *Charlie* next to *Project Assegai*.

‘That’s dumb,’ said Charlie. ‘Anyway, Steve Rosenheit would have a much bigger motive than me to kill Harald. I’m just the grunt who made the error. He’s the guy who authorized the cover-up. And he’s not here.’

That reminded me of the Porsche Cayenne I had spotted as I had arrived late the night before. Steve’s Porsche Cayenne.

‘Yes, he is,’ I said. ‘Or at least his car is. I saw it outside one of the cabins last night.’

‘In that case, where is he?’ Charlie said. ‘I haven’t seen him. Has anyone else seen him?’

Blank faces around the table.

‘Are you sure it’s his?’

‘Yes. He has that stupid licence plate: “OIL 66”. He must have driven up here from New York.’

‘He lives in Connecticut,’ said Cynthia. ‘It would be doable. You drove up here, didn’t you, Trent?’

‘Yeah, I did,’ said Trent. ‘So where is he? Is he hiding?’

‘Or is Bill hiding him?’ I asked.

‘Doesn’t make sense,’ said Charlie.

‘None of this makes sense, Charlie,’ I said. ‘Put his name up, Cynthia.’

‘All right.’ Cynthia scrawled up Steve Rosenheit’s name on her list. I was making some progress.

She checked her watch. ‘OK. Only five minutes left. What are we going to say?’

‘That we have no idea who killed Harald,’ I said. ‘It could have been me, it could have been Trent, it could have been Charlie, it could have been Steve Rosenheit. Hell, it could even have been Bill himself. And somebody shot him. Where would I get a gun? I’ve never fired a gun in my life!’

‘It’s easy to get an illegal firearm in this country if you really want to,’ said Charlie. ‘Even for a dumb Brit.’

‘Or a dumb Canadian. Or Trent, or Cynthia, or Bill or Steve. That’s my point. It could have been anyone.’

‘We’ve got to come up with something,’ Cynthia said.

‘No we don’t!’ I protested, banging my palm on the table. ‘This isn’t an exercise. This is a murder investigation! It’s the cops’ job to gather the evidence and analyse it. We really have no idea who murdered poor Harald, and we shouldn’t pretend we do.’

Cynthia was silent. I was pleased. It looked like I had finally got them to admit the futility of what they were doing. With no help from Manuela. She was still sitting there, arms folded, motionless, her eyes staring somewhere behind Trent’s head. But something seemed to have changed about her. Her folded arms, which previously had acted as a barrier to the rest of us, now seemed to be hugging her small body, hugging it tightly. Her impassivity had become something else. I wasn’t sure what it was.

But it bothered me. It scared me.

‘We do know who killed Harald,’ Trent said.

‘Who?’ said Cynthia, turning to him in something close to relief.

‘Peter. Project Assegai is a distraction. The physical evidence shows it can either have been me or him, or maybe that hotel guy who didn’t know any of us from Adam. I have no motive. I *know* I didn’t kill Harald. And that means it must have been Peter, who wanted to be partner and who saw Harald was in his way. It’s the simplest solution and it’s the one we should go with.’

‘I didn’t kill him,’ I said.

‘I think you did,’ said Trent coolly. A smile slipped across his lips and was gone. ‘That’s what the facts show and that’s what we’ll tell Bill. Hey, we might be wrong, but that’s OK. If you are innocent and you can prove it, the cops will go along with that. But Bill asked us to determine who most likely murdered Harald given what we know, and we’ve done that. It’s you, Peter.’

Trent looked around the table. ‘Are we agreed? We say Peter is the most likely suspect?’

‘Peter,’ Charlie repeated.

‘Cynthia?’

Cynthia hesitated.

‘Cynthia? We need to come up with a name.’

She looked at the thick blue ink on her flip chart. Then nodded. ‘Peter.’

‘Manuela?’ Trent asked.

All eyes were on Manuela, who didn’t respond. But she blinked. Once.

‘Manuela?’ said Cynthia. ‘You haven’t said anything yet.’

Nothing. But Manuela’s small body seemed to be tightening.

‘Manuela? Are you OK?’

‘I know who killed Harald,’ Manuela said in a whisper so low I wasn’t sure I had heard it. The rest of us watched as she began to rock backwards and forwards in her chair, slowly at first and then faster. Her face reddened, and her expression was tight as a drum, as if she were struggling to hold in a mighty force.

‘Harald and I had a relationship. We were engaged, actually.’ She held up her left hand, revealing a cluster of diamonds around her finger. ‘Of course we had to

keep it secret. I put his ring on when I heard this morning.’ I hadn’t noticed it when we went for our walk, because of her gloves.

‘I didn’t know,’ said Charlie. He and Cynthia looked completely surprised. Trent slouched back in his chair. His lips weren’t actually smiling, but he seemed, well, satisfied.

She took a deep breath. ‘They say it’s stupid to enter into a relationship with someone at work. In the case of Harald I don’t regret it for a moment, he was a wonderful man, but sometimes they are right.’ She sniffed. ‘What was stupid was the night I spent with Trent. It was eighteen months ago, before Harald. We were in Williston, North Dakota, and we’d had a few too many drinks in the hotel bar. It was an awful mistake, as I told Trent right afterwards. But he wouldn’t accept it.’

‘Are you saying I killed Harald?’ Trent said with scorn.

‘You were jealous. You were insanely, stupidly jealous, especially when you realized that Harald and I were having a relationship and that that relationship was serious.’

‘I was just kidding,’ said Trent, looking uncomfortable.

‘You stalked me! You followed us when we went out on dates. You called me up in the middle of the night. You sent me flowers, letters. You know you did all that, Trent.’

Now it was Trent’s turn to blush.

‘But there was no need to kill him.’ Manuela’s voice was speeding up. She began to shake. ‘What did you think would happen when he was dead? Did you think I would fall into your arms, my fiancé’s killer? Did you think I would ever speak to you again?’

‘Hey, I didn’t kill him!’ Trent protested.

Manuela was on her feet. ‘Of course you killed him! Peter didn’t – why would Peter do something like that? But then you saw him out running by the lake, and you killed him. You’re a murderer, Trent!’

She was screaming now, her face red, spittle flying from her lips. She launched into a tirade of Portuguese, and lunged towards him. I stood up and grabbed her by the arm. ‘It’s OK, Manuela,’ I tried to say. ‘It’s OK.’

‘It’s not OK, Peter,’ she said, but she was sobbing. ‘I’ve got to get out of here. I can’t stand being in the room with him.’

‘Here, I’ll take you back to your room.’ I led her out of the dining room. The policeman guarding the back door out to the cabins was about to stop her, but Manuela glared at him and, startled, he stepped out of our way.

We stopped outside her cabin.

‘It’s OK, Peter, I’m OK now. You can leave me. I’d like to be alone.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure.’

And in fact she did seem calmer. The rage had disappeared, leaving her perfectly composed: some redness around her eyes and a glint of tears in the winter sunshine on one of her cheeks being the only sign that anything had been wrong. I marvelled at her self-control.

‘All right, then.’

She went into her cabin, and I looked up at the muscled sinews of the snow-covered mountain behind the lodge, letting the sun bathe my face for a few moments.

Could Manuela be right? Trent didn’t strike me as an obsessive romantic. I could certainly imagine him sleeping with Manuela, and I could see him being angry when he discovered she was having a relationship with Harald. Trent had a lot of vanity, a lot of pride, and he could be dangerous. Manuela was an object that he wanted and couldn’t have because of Harald, a rival whom he would dismiss as unworthy.

That would make Trent angry. Very angry indeed. But angry enough to kill?

I wasn’t sure. But I was sure Manuela believed he was.

It just seemed so absurd, so unreal. The whole thing seemed unreal.

I headed back to the dining room where Bill was waiting for me, sitting at the head of the table, Sergeant O’Leary next to him. I noticed Professor Behbehani lurking in an armchair in the corner, notepad on her lap.

‘Ah, here you are, Peter! And Manuela?’

‘She’s gone back to her room.’

‘That’s a shame. I did ask you all to remain here; I’d value the input of the whole team.’

I just shrugged.

‘Take a seat. So, have you come to a decision?’

There was silence for several seconds. Bill wasn’t going to break it.

But Trent was, eventually. ‘It was Peter.’

‘Peter?’ Bill raised his eyebrows and turned to me. ‘Do you think it was Peter, Cynthia?’

‘I don’t know.’ She glanced at Trent. Then she nodded.

‘And Charlie?’

‘It was Peter,’ said Charlie.

‘And you, Peter? Is this a confession? What do you have to say for yourself?’

Bill looked pleased. It was almost as if he was enjoying this. I was disgusted and I was angry.

Think!

Bill looked to be in control. Total control. That wasn’t right. Bill had lost one of his most valued members of staff; the murder would splash Labouchere’s name all over the press; things were completely out of control, surely?

Something was up. And I could guess what it was.

‘I have two statements and a question,’ I said.

‘Fire away.’

‘One.’ I looked straight at Bill. ‘I didn’t kill Harald.’ It was worth a try. Bill prided himself on being able to read people. I was innocent, I wasn’t lying; if he was that good, he should be able to see that I was telling the truth. Bill’s deep dark eyes held mine. I thought I caught a hint of amusement in them, but then it was gone.

‘Two. Before I answer any more questions from you or the police I want a lawyer present, and a lawyer of my own choosing.’ I prayed that I could get hold of Charlotte Prior in New York. I had her cell number and, good corporate bunny that she was, she would answer a phone call from a client at the weekend. And I thought I could trust her to help me. We would see.

‘And the question?’ Bill asked.

I took a breath. ‘Did you kill Harald, Bill?’

This time Bill did smile. ‘Why would I do that?’

I thought of mentioning Project Assegai, but although my colleagues had just accused me of murder, I didn’t want to betray their secrets. Or not yet. There would be time for that once I had my lawyer and I could do it properly.

‘I don’t know. But did you kill him?’

Bill hesitated. ‘That thought had occurred to Sergeant O’Leary. But I was able to tell him I was on a conference call to our London office from six to eight a.m. this morning. They can confirm that, of course.’

Bill glanced at the detective, who nodded.

‘Did you pay someone to kill him?’ I asked.

‘What, a hit man, you mean?’

I shrugged. ‘Yes, that’s what I meant.’

‘No, I didn’t. Are there any signs of a hit man, Sergeant O’Leary?’

O’Leary shook his head. ‘No one came into the area from outside in the night. And Trent is correct. We only found signs of four individuals in the section of the lake shore where Harald was killed: Trent, Harald himself, Jason Turnell the hotel employee, and you.’

Bill was watching me closely. It was almost as if he was impressed with me rather than disgusted. Professor Behbehani was scribbling in the corner.

I thought of asking Bill whether he had paid or coerced Trent or Jason Turnell to kill Harald, but that wasn’t it. Bill was still in control. My question hadn’t discomfited him one bit. Bill hadn’t killed Harald.

So I shut up.

Bill turned to the flip chart. ‘Who wrote all this?’

‘I did,’ said Cynthia.

‘Do you want to take me through it?’

Cynthia began to explain their reasoning, omitting any reference to Project Assegai. It was just like a presentation to a client about a potential acquisition target, except I was the target.

I tuned out.

This question of control concerned me. It was one of Bill’s key mantras: always stay in control of the client, stay in control of the meeting. He didn’t always manage it. I had once witnessed him in a meeting where his client’s chief financial officer had let slip that he had been negotiating with the other side behind Bill’s back. I had seen the anger in Bill’s face, but he hadn’t let it get the better of him. He had set about the task of regaining control over the client with grim, ruthless determination. Within a week, the CFO was transferred to the client’s Taiwan office.

So I didn’t necessarily expect Bill to panic on hearing about Harald’s murder. But I didn’t expect this.

Cynthia had finished.

‘Very interesting,’ said Bill. ‘Thanks, you three, for doing that for us. I’m sure Sergeant O’Leary found it useful.’

‘I did,’ said the detective. ‘Now I’d like you all to remain here for half an hour or so until the DA gets here.’

Bill, O’Leary and the professor left the room.

There was silence around the table.

‘I’m sorry, Peter,’ Cynthia said. ‘But we had to come up with something.’

No she didn’t, but I didn’t reply. My mind was elsewhere.

I had remembered where I had seen Sergeant O’Leary before.

And I knew why neither I nor anyone else had heard a gunshot.

I got up to leave the room. Outside, in the lobby, my way was blocked by the young police officer. He was tall and nervous; he seemed to still be recovering from Manuela’s hysterics. He didn’t look like a country policeman at all. A policeman, even in rural New Hampshire, should be able to handle angry women better than he had. In fact this guy didn’t even look as if he lived in New Hampshire – he seemed more of a soft city boy.

‘Where’s your squad car?’ I asked him.

‘Out front,’ he said.

‘I’m going to see it,’ I said. ‘And I’m going to take a look at where Harald was killed.’ I moved to one side to pass him.

‘I can’t let you do that, sir,’ the cop said, stepping in front of me.

‘How are you going to stop me?’

‘I can restrain you, sir. I’m a police officer.’

‘Are you sure quite about that?’

I asked at the front desk for Bill's room number. Jason was at reception and he wasn't in a helpful mood.

'I'm sorry, I can't disclose that, sir.'

'What do you mean?' I protested. 'We all work for the same company.'

'It's policy. We can't disclose our guests' room numbers without their permission. And I don't have Mr Labouchere's permission.'

A door swung open from a corridor leading away from the front lobby of the lodge, and I turned to see the podgy balding figure of Steve Rosenheit. He was moving fast and he looked angry.

'Steve!' I called out.

Steve paused. When he saw who was addressing him, his face became even angrier. For a moment, I thought he was going to hit me.

'Fuck you!' he said and headed out of the main entrance.

'Steve! What's Bill's room number?' I called after him, but he ignored me.

I pushed through the fire door into the corridor from which Steve had come. There were three doors, each of which bore a name: *Mount Washington*, *Mount Adams* and *Carter Dome*. I tried *Mount Washington* and *Mount Adams*. Conference rooms. Empty. Then I opened the door to *Carter Dome*.

Three people were sitting in the small room behind a table, watching a large screen in front of them.

The three were Bill Labouchere, Professor Behbehani and Sergeant O'Leary. On the screen was a CCTV feed of the dining room. Cynthia, Trent and Charlie were talking.

Bill frowned when he saw me, but only for a second. Then his face broke into a grin and he stood up. 'Peter! You figured it out! I told you he'd figure it out, Shelley.'

'You did,' said Professor Behbehani, who looked less pleased.

Anger flashed through my brain, but I fought to control it. I had intended to force Bill to tell me what was going on, but an urgent voice somewhere in my head told me to shut up and think. And listen.

Losing your temper with Bill Labouchere was never a good idea.

‘Take a seat, Peter. Congratulations. How did you do it?’

‘That young police officer didn’t seem right to me,’ I said. ‘And then I remembered where I had seen this guy before.’

Detective Sergeant O’Leary raised his eyebrows.

‘You’re an actor, aren’t you? You had a bit part in *House of Cards*?’

‘You remembered that?’ said O’Leary. ‘I’m impressed. No one ever recognizes me from that. I was only in one episode.’

‘Don used to be a cop before he became an actor, so he was perfect for the role,’ said Bill. ‘He could do the live interviews with you guys.’

‘You forgot that Harald must have made some footprints,’ I said to O’Leary. ‘As did Jason. Is he an actor too?’

‘Yes. We realized he might have a speaking role.’

I looked at the three people on the screen. Cynthia seemed to be having second thoughts that I was a murderer. The audio quality was excellent; the view was from high up.

‘Is the camera in the bear?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ said Bill. ‘In his throat. Gives us a great view through his jaws. You did a good job there, by the way. I thought Trent had you, but you fought back well.’

‘So where’s Harald?’ I asked.

‘He’s fine,’ Bill said. ‘He’s at the motel in town. We whisked him away in the middle of the night. He has no idea what’s going on here. Poor fellow never was on the partnership track, but I needed a fall guy to play the favourite.’

‘You had us fooled,’ I said, trying and mostly succeeding to keep the anger out of my voice. Bill looked very pleased with himself; O’Leary had a relaxed smile now the charade was over. Only the professor was looking at me closely. She knew I was angry.

Bill flashed a warm grin of triumph. ‘This was the ultimate partnership test. It was Shelley’s idea, but we tailored it for the firm. We wanted you to be the chief suspect, and I must say you handled it pretty well. But that affair between Manuela and Harald was quite unexpected. I wouldn’t have thought he was her type. I’ve learned a lot about Trent as well. And then there’s Project Assegai. I knew there was something going on with that, I just didn’t know what it was.’

‘That’s why Steve was here?’

‘Yes. I told him I wanted his help evaluating you guys, but I hoped that the pressure of the situation would encourage Charlie to talk. Which he did. Thanks to you.’

‘Steve didn’t look very happy when I passed him in the lobby just now.’

‘No,’ said Bill. ‘I don’t think we can really trust Steve as a partner going forward. Some serious issues have been raised. It doesn’t look too good for Charlie either. But you, Peter? I’d say that you are the clear winner from the weekend’s exercise, don’t you agree, Shelley? Shelley has been assessing you all throughout the exercise.’

‘Peter performed very well,’ said the professor. But she was watching me carefully.

‘And what about Manuela?’

‘That was unfortunate,’ said the professor. ‘We weren’t expecting that.’

‘But we learned a lot about Manuela too,’ said Bill. ‘She slept with Trent and with Harald, and she knows that’s not the way we do things at Labouchere. Don’t worry – she’ll be fine this afternoon once she knows Harald is OK. And she’ll be laughing about it next week.’

I wasn’t so sure.

‘How did you know I would go for a run?’ I asked.

‘We know how you behave,’ Bill said. ‘You often go for runs in the morning, especially if there is a deadline approaching. As does Harald, which is why we chose an early-morning run as the best way for his body to be found a distance from the hotel. We didn’t expect Trent to do the same; that was a stroke of luck. As was the fresh snow. But the plan was always flexible. In a sense, it didn’t matter, as long as it was credible. The key thing was to see how you all responded.’ He paused, nodded, and gave me one of his warm, intimate smiles. ‘And you responded very well.’

Bill was on the brink of offering me a partnership. I had worked so hard for this moment, sacrificed everything for it, including Henrietta. It was what I had always wanted. It was something I could show my mother: look at the shiny new life I have made for myself, all the money I’m making, the status I have.

But Mum was dead. And if she were alive and she knew what I had done to get to this point, she wouldn’t be proud of me at all.

A stab of grief was added to the shame.

What a fool I had been. I didn't want to be this man's partner; I wanted nothing to do with him. I needed to get back to London as soon as possible and talk to Henrietta. Not just for two hours over lunch. For a week. Two weeks.

For a lifetime.

I caught Professor Behbehani's eye. She knew. She knew they had screwed up. They hadn't found their partner.

'My God, look!' The fake detective was staring at the video screen. While we were talking, Manuela had entered the dining room. She was walking towards Trent, her back to the camera, to the bear. Behind her, she was clutching a long carving knife from the lunch buffet. Trent hadn't seen it yet; his expression was a mixture of embarrassment and complacency.

I dashed from the conference room and sprinted down the corridor to the lobby towards the dining room.

And then I heard Trent scream.

‘Whew,’ I said when Peter had finished.

‘Are you still going to join Labouchere?’ he said, pouring the last of the second bottle of Sancerre into my glass.

I shook my head. ‘So that’s why you quit?’

‘Yes. As did Harald, and Manuela, of course. They split up.’

‘Understandable, I suppose.’ As had Peter and Henrietta. Whatever Peter had said to keep his wife, I knew she hadn’t gone back to him. In fact, when I had last seen him four months before, the divorce papers were just coming through.

‘Did Manuela actually kill Trent?’

‘Yes. It was covered up. I don’t know how the hell they did it – we did it. It required all Bill Labouchere’s considerable organizational skills and influence. We all felt complicit so we all helped. We thought Manuela had suffered extreme provocation, but we couldn’t be sure the courts would see it that way. In my opinion it was Bill who really killed Trent.’

‘Did Bill think that?’

‘I think Bill did feel guilty, yes. More important, if the details of Trent’s death had got out it would have finished the firm. It turns out that impersonating a police officer is a felony in New Hampshire. Given the outcome, O’Leary and the other actors would definitely have been prosecuted, as would Bill and Professor Behbehani for setting the whole thing up. They would probably all have gone to jail.’

‘But what did you do about Trent?’

‘We said he never arrived at Lake Lenatonka. We reported him missing on Monday to the police in Manhattan where he lives. We said he was under suspicion for fraud – we referred to Project Assegai. Bill arranged for someone to make his body disappear, and the car he drove up in from New York. Neither was ever found.’

‘What about the hotel staff?’

‘Paid off. The rumour was the clear-up exercise cost the firm over two million dollars. The worst thing was Trent’s family.’ Peter winced. ‘That’s bad. They still don’t know what happened to him; whether he’s still alive.’

It wasn't just bad, it was murder. I couldn't believe they had got away with it, but then people like Bill Labouchere did get away with things. It seemed to me that if Manuela de Sena had killed someone it should be up to a judge and jury to decide if she was guilty, not Peter and Bill Labouchere.

'And Labouchere Associates is still going strong?' I asked.

'Going from strength to strength. The others stayed on as if nothing had happened. Charlie Campbell was even made a partner. No one mentions Lake Lenatonka. Ever.'

Then Peter frowned. He had seen someone over my shoulder. 'Oh, Christ,' he said. 'I forgot we arranged to meet here. For God's sake, don't mention any of this, will you?'

'No, of course not.'

I turned to see whom Peter had spotted. Coming towards us was a tiny dark-haired woman in an expensive, low-cut cream suit and high heels. She was drop-dead gorgeous and the noise level in the bar fell as every man turned to watch her make her way across to us.

She smiled when she saw Peter, a wide warm smile, and kissed him quickly on the lips. Peter swallowed. 'Mike, I don't think you've met my wife, have you?'

She turned her smile to me. 'Hi,' she said in an American accent. 'I'm Manuela. I've heard so much about you.'

'Likewise,' I said. 'Likewise.'

About the Author

Michael Ridpath is the author of eight financial thrillers, the *Fire and Ice* series of four crime novels set in Iceland, and two spy novels set at the beginning of the Second World War.

Financial Thrillers

Free To Trade

Trading Reality

The Marketmaker

Final Venture

The Predator

Fatal Error

On the Edge

See No Evil

Fire and Ice Series

Where the Shadows Lie

66° North

Meltwater

Sea of Stone

Spy Novels

Traitor's Gate

Shadows of War

Before becoming a full-time writer, Michael Ridpath worked in the City of London as a bond trader and venture capitalist. His first novel, *Free To Trade*, reached number two in the *Sunday Times* Bestseller List for three months, and was translated into thirty-five languages. He is a former Vice Chair of the Crime Writers' Association. He lives in North London.

To find out more about Michael's novels, visit his website at www.michaelridpath.com, or sign up to his newsletter: <http://eepurl.com/b3RLAz>

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First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Michael Ridpath

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