



R - DAY

Everybody deserves a little revenge.

A Novel
by
P.T. Mayes

R-Day

Six Sample Chapters

by

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1.

The meeting ran late, the *fucking* meeting ran late. Damn *kaiga!*

I rushed from the Otemachi office back to my hotel room, swearing all the way. Took ten minutes to throw everything into the suitcase and settle the bill – ten minutes too long. Tumi suitcase swinging from my hand I caught a yellow taxi on the hotel forecourt and told the driver in bad Japanese that I would give him a five-thousand yen tip if he got me to Tokyo Station before eight.

“Where you going?” he asked me in heavily accented English as we pulled away. He had to say it three times before I understood him.

“Tokyo Station,” I replied, wishing he would just shut up and put his foot down.

“No, *where* you going?”

“London.”

The driver, a fat man with greasy cheeks and a tattoo peeking out of his left sleeve, actually turned in his seat to stare at me through his aviator sunglasses.

“London, *yuu-kay?*” When I nodded he gave a snort and shook his head. “You fucking crazy, man.”

“Yeah, I know. Please can you look out...*look out...*!”

He turned back just in time to avoid running over a salaryman who had come tottering out of a bar. He shouted something out of the window, palm pumping the horn. I doubted I would find any of his words listed in my Japanese phrase book.

I caught the N’Ex and never has a train journey seemed so slow. Of course the train arrived at the airport on time – it’s Japan after all — but *I* was late. I had missed the last flight to Heathrow Airport by five minutes. At the desk I was politely informed that “due to special circumstances” the next flight would not be for another twenty-four hours. Even though I knew it was futile I kicked up a stink. The poor man behind the counter grew quite red in the face as he tried to assure me that there was nothing he could do. When I asked him to check once more, he shook his head and went off to consult a colleague (probably telling him to get security to kick the angry gaijin out). And then a miracle happened. An emergency flight had been scheduled; it was going in twenty minutes. I could have kissed the startled man on the lips, but there were just too many things to do in too little

time.

I couldn't understand how the 20:50 flight from Narita had been given the green light — after all we were cutting matters pretty close — but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. I was one of only three passengers on board and when we took off I had to restrain myself from punching the air and cheering. Later, when the pretty flight attendant came around with my whisky and soda I asked her how this flight had got the go ahead. Tomoko leant over me and explained in a whisper that the Chairman of the airline was sitting five rows behind me. He had an emergency meeting in London on the sixth but had decided to fly in two days earlier due to the “situation”. Despite concerned colleagues pleading with him to cancel he had refused. He wasn't going to allow anything so insignificant as a little insanity stop him making money, and anyway it was good manners.

I glanced back at the small, balding, sweating man trying to lose himself in a magazine and said he looked scared shitless. Tomoko laughed and then put a hand over her mouth, realising what she'd done. Laughing at the boss was not good form.

“To tell you the truth, I don't blame him,” I said, then looked sharply at the girl. “What about you?”

“Nothing scares me,” she said and then quickly moved on to see to the chairman's needs, giving me a sideways look. I believed her.

I spent most of the sixteen-hour flight sleeping, watching movies, playing computer games and flirting with Tomoko, which beat all the rest hands down. I've been doing these regular business trips to Japan for about four years now and I've got a system to deal with jetlag — or at least delay it for a while. I needed to be as fresh as possible when I disembarked; I could not risk falling asleep on the job. I had to be alert, on the edge. *Sharp!*

We touched down just after five am. I hardly recognised Heathrow Airport without the crowds — it had become one huge, gleaming ghost town. There were signs up everywhere saying that from 6 am all flights, both in and out, were cancelled. A single, rather nervous security man was telling the odd straggler to leave as the doors would be locked dead on six — the airport had even put on a special minibus to ferry the people out. After picking up my luggage — easy to spot as my suitcase was the only one of three rumbling along the carousel — and spending five minutes freshening up in the gents (my light grey Gieves & Hawkes suit felt like it had been sprayed onto my body), I went looking for breakfast. When I bumped into my cute flight attendant looking lost (she was stranded in Britain for

the next twenty-four hours, just like her *oh so polite* Chairman) I asked her if I could treat her. There was still a little time left. She accepted gladly, her henna-tinted hair bouncing with her grateful nod. Only one café was still open and the bored man behind the glass counter wearing cellophane gloves poured black coffee but said there was no food. No deliveries this morning. I wondered what the management had levered against him to make him report for duty this morning – or was it bribery? Nobody with an atom of intelligence would be working today. From the few news reports I'd watched on the plane Britain could have had a giant "CLOSED" sign hung between Chester and Skegness.

"I can't believe how quiet it is!" Tomoko exclaimed, staring about her with her gorgeous almond shaped eyes. She was probably, as the Japanese say, "Christmas cake" – unwanted after the twenty-fifth – but no man with hot red blood pumping through his veins could have resisted her, and maybe that's the way she wanted it. Her English was excellent, the product of living in Canterbury for three years when she was a student, and she had a dirty laugh.

"It's June the fifth," I explained, "R-Day."

"Oh yes, I've heard of that," she said, nodding. "The R stands for...?"

"Readjustment, actually," I cut in, smiling. "But nobody calls it that except for the government."

"When I first heard about it on the news in Japan I thought it was a big joke."

"It *is* a big joke," I said, sipping my coffee. "A big joke in very poor taste, but that doesn't mean it's not true."

She looked puzzled. "Why?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's the government's way of trying to thin down the population a little. They seem to think all the bad people are going to do them a favour by bumping each other off, but it seems to me that just about everyone is jumping on the bandwagon. Why should it only be the criminals who have all the fun, eh?" When I saw her confusion I explained. "Isn't there someone you would like to get even with... given the chance? Anyone at all?"

She thought for a moment, absently stirring sugar into her coffee with a white plastic pick. "There was a girl in school, in Sapporo, where I grew up. Every morning she walked the same way to school as me, and every morning I would look out of my window and pray to see her pass before my mother pushed me out the door. If the girl saw me she would tease me and take my money, or steal something from my lunchbox." She said something barbed in Japanese that I

didn't understand. "I *hated* her."

"She sounds like a real bitch," I said. "If Japan had an R Day, what would you do?"

A strange, ambivalent smile crossed her lips and she glanced up at the ceiling before answering. "Nothing."

"Really?"

"She teaches kids now."

"Poor kids."

"No, I've heard she's very good with them. It seems she got all her spite and anger out on me." Her head moved coquettishly as she smoothed down her shoulder-length hair. "Maybe she felt guilty about what she did to me?" She shrugged. "And is there someone you'd like to get even with?"

I laughed. "Oh, Christ... well there's about a thousand people now that I come to think about it. Mostly for small things, trivial, you know, like not inviting me to birthday parties or eating the last piece of cake without asking me if I wanted it first."

"You've never been hurt? *Really* hurt?"

Her eyes flickered to my left hand, which was resting on the table by the cup. She was checking to see if I was wearing a wedding ring. It was safely tucked inside my jacket pocket. Some women go for married men, but they're more trouble than they're worth. Unattached women I can usually gauge pretty easily: the ones hoping for a one-night stand, the ones hoping for a love affair, or worse, long-term. The latter two I try to steer clear of while the former is my target; good time girls like Tomoko. Christmas cake and loving it.

"Of course I have," I replied, truthfully. "Who hasn't?" I sipped the coffee to hide my expression, which was as sour as the cream.

"Don't you feel angry at any of them?"

"Sure, but I'd simply prefer never to see or think of them again. That's enough for me."

"And what about the people *you've* hurt? Do you worry they might come looking for you?"

This is the question everyone asks themselves on R-Day: How many people have I hurt, how many people have I angered, how many toes have I trodden on; and of those how many harbour dreams of getting back at me? Apart from those

groups exempt from “readjustment”, such as politicians (of course), doctors, nurses, the army and police; everybody stays home on June the fifth. They stock up on food and water and lock the doors and bar the gates — some go so far as to board up the windows and block the chimneys — and await daylight with the dread of vampires. For most nothing happens and the day passes uneventfully, but for some there comes a knock on the door — and the strange thing about people seeking revenge is, they’re never the ones you would expect it of.

The only answer I could give to Tomoko’s question was to shrug and say that I hoped not, which was the truth. We both looked up when the security man ambled over, eyeing us fearfully. He warned us that we had five minutes left and then hurried off.

“Where are you going now?” asked Tomoko.

I didn’t have time to get into a discussion about my motives, so I said I was going home.

“Aren’t you scared about the roads? I’ve heard they might be dangerous today?”

I shook my head. “I expect they’ll be quiet. If there is any trouble at least I should see it coming a mile off.”

She paused and looked down self-consciously. “I’m staying at a hotel here, you could always...?”

I looked into her eyes for a time and could see the girl wasn’t kidding. There was a nervous, hopeful smile on her face, her eyes guarded, as if she was expecting to be rebuffed.

Reaching across the table I took her hand. “On any other day of the year I would have said yes without hesitation, but today I have to get back to London. I really wish I could stay because you’re a very attractive girl, Tomoko, and I would love to spend some time with you.” It pained me to see her courageous, hurt smile. “Maybe if you give me your hotel room...”

“I’m on the first flight back to Japan after midnight,” she replied quickly.

“I’ve got another trip to Tokyo scheduled in a fortnight’s time.”

She gave me a business card and I treated it like any other business card I’d ever received from a Japanese — like a holy relic. I looked at my watch and then at the security guard, who was hovering in the background like bad a smell. “We’d better go, it’s almost six. Come on, I’ll walk you to your hotel.”

“I’m not taking you out of your way?”

“Not at all, the hotel’s close to where my car is parked.”

The look of relief on the guard’s face was almost comical as we left the terminal. The minibus took Tomoko to her hotel first and I was strongly tempted to throw everything to the wind and follow her inside. Instead I leaned forward to kiss her on the lips, unsure if she would pull away or not. She didn’t. Her lipstick, freshly applied, tasted of cherry.

“Take care,” she said, then whispered something in Japanese into my ear. I hope she was wishing me luck. She waved to me as the minibus pulled away, and I waved back for as long as I could see her.

Good God, I needed all the luck I could get.

2.

The car park, a huge construction barely more complex than half a dozen layers of concrete piled on top of each other, smelt disagreeably of damp and stale urine. I didn't see another human being as I walked through the chilly galleries, car keys jangling from my middle finger, although there were still plenty of parked cars; abandoned babies left by people just like me, people doing business overseas, going on holiday or simply hiding out. Unlike me they were not so foolish as to return on the worst day of the year. They were going to stay away — far away — until all this nonsense was over and done with for another year.

As I got close to the spot where I'd parked my BMW — up on the third level — I got a horrible feeling I would find it gone. Stolen. But no, there it was, looking rather sad for itself. Car parks always make cars — however luxurious and highly polished — take on something of their drabness, like boring chameleons. I think it has something to do with the way concrete deadens light, seems to suck all the lustre out of it, lay it flat. When I pressed the button on the key fob the resulting beep sounded unnaturally loud in this house of concrete cards. Opening the door I noticed a scratch just above the front wheel arch, which I was sure hadn't been there when I had parked on Monday. Swearing out loud (there was nobody around to object) I knelt and examined the damage. The scratch was too clean to have been caused by a collision; it looked more like the work of either a key or a tool. A screwdriver? Clearly someone had done it deliberately, but if that was the case then why do it so low on the chassis, where most people wouldn't have notice it? Why not proudly right across the door or bonnet? Fuck knows what goes through those bastard's minds as they spoil the things others have worked damned hard for... *years* for. Jealousy was probably at the root of it — a primitive emotion almost as powerful as the desire for revenge itself

As there was little I could do about the damage right then, I climbed into the car, where I was greeted by the strong perfume of a Eucalyptus car freshener. It felt good to grip the leather steering wheel once more, feet on rubber, the sense of being surrounded by steel. When I turned the key the engine burst into silky life — oh, the pleasure of good German machinery — and slipped the gear stick out of neutral. Down the curling access ramp I drove and at the bottom the automated tollbooth's yellow striped barricade rose, allowing me to pass. The parking charge would be

forwarded directly to my credit card account.

I was glad to be out on the open road once more – and for the first time I could recall it really was open. Apart from the red spec of an old Volkswagen Beetle bumbling along in the distance I had all three lanes to myself– I could even have driven on the opposite side of the road, if I'd wanted to. If only it could be like this every day. For some reason I started whistling a tune I'd heard in Tokyo, a bubbly little J-pop song that I thought was sung by a five-year-old girl, (Later I saw the girl on TV, and she was certainly not five, nor did she dance like a five-year-old). Fortunately with the road so empty there was barely any need for me to concentrate on my driving, so I began to plan my day ahead. Even if everything worked out in my favour I still had an impossibly large number of things to do over the next nine hours.

I ran the conversation I'd had with Chris last Sunday through my mind, trying to remember his words exactly, and then I tried to recall something my mother had told me a few months back about my brother — a fact I'd paid very little attention to at the time, but had since taken on a great deal of importance. No, it was gone. If there was even the slightest chance she remembered — and the chances were she would – then I had to see her, question her. If she couldn't remember then my quest would be over before it had even started.

My thoughts were interrupted when my mobile phone began to play Beethoven's fifth.

It was Rebecca, my wife.

“Hi, darling,” I said. I knew it was illegal for me to drive and talk on my mobile at the same time, but who the hell was going to fine me today? “You must have read my mind; I was just about to call you.”

“How was the flight?”

I was steering with one hand. “Fine. I practically had the whole jet to myself. How are things there?” I glanced at the clock on the dashboard, the time was ten minutes past six — R-Day had begun.

“I've got the news on but there's nothing yet, thank God. They think it's going to be worse than last year. So far it's just been political comment and lots of warnings to stay indoors and close the curtains.”

“You'd better listen to them.”

“You can be sure I'm not putting so much as a toe outside that door until today's over.” The tone of her voice changed, became more confiding. “I've been

worrying about you, Anthony, what with you being on that plane and all.”

“I was quite safe. Japan doesn’t have an R-day.”

“*Nobody* has an R-day apart from us... nobody else’s stupid enough! They’ve just had a psychologist on TV saying that last year’s R-day was quiet because nobody could quite bring themselves to believe that it was really happening, but now they know it’s for real the crazies are going to come crawling out of the woodwork.”

“He actually said that, on TV?”

“Word for word. Promise me you’ll be careful, Anthony.”

“I’m always careful.”

“No, I *mean* it.”

The time had come to change the subject. “Is everything set for this evening?”

“This evening? Oh yes. I got all the ingredients for the meal yesterday, the asparagus, the lamb and the dried apricots and raisins. I couldn’t get the amoretta biscuits for the dessert so I got strawberries instead. Did you remember to buy the wine?”

Damn!

“Er... yeah, I’ve got one.” I lied, grimacing. “Anyway, there’s still that bottle of merlot on the top of the fridge.”

I had been meaning to buy a good bottle of wine in Tokyo but it had completely slipped my mind. I could only hope there was still a market or offlicense open somewhere; otherwise my “virtual” bottle of wine would have to suffer a “virtual” accident.

Of all the 365 days in the year why did the government have to make today R-Day — June the fifth — my wedding anniversary? But then the government wasn’t entirely to blame: any other wife would have been happy to postpone celebrations by twenty-four hours and go to a restaurant — which was how we usually celebrated — but not Rebecca; such things as anniversaries mattered to her. Mattered a lot. As all the restaurants were shut she had insisted on cooking us a meal. Try as I might I could not dissuade her. Rebecca was, to put it politely, pig-headed.

“What wine did you get?” she asked.

“It’s a surprise.”

“Something good?”

“Er, you could say that.”

She hesitated. “Anthony, you are coming straight home, aren’t you?”

“Not quite, I want to go and check on my mother first, “ I said, my grimace growing. “She got pretty scared last year and I felt guilty about not checking up on her.”

“Okay,” said Rebecca and, making no attempt to hide the displeasure in her voice. “But don’t stay too long. I want you back here before midday, okay?”

I considered telling her that might not be possible and decided against it. If my mother had forgotten the information I required then I would be coming home sooner than anticipated. In a way I hoped she had; it would certainly take a load off my mind.

“That’s exactly what I intend to do,” I said, noticing a strange cloud on the horizon – like an inky smudge. “Have you seen the weather forecast for today?”

“I think they said it was going to be cloudy, but otherwise okay.”

“No rain?”

“Except in Scotland.”

No surprise there. The cloud was growing up ahead, a swirling mass of darkness. I wondered if it was a flock of birds.

“Whatever happens today, Anthony,” said Rebecca, putting on her no-nonsense voice that she always used when she wanted me to take notice of her. “I want you to promise me you’ll be back here in time for the meal. I don’t want you being out late today.”

“I’ll be back long before then.”

“*You* promise?”

“I promise.”

She laughed suddenly. “I’m going to hold you to that. Good God, you’d *better* be on time, Anthony, or else!”

“Or else what?”

“I’ll leave that to your imagination.” Purring, she terminated the call. Rebecca always liked having the last word in any conversation. She made a sport of it.

You wouldn’t imagine it from looking at her, a rather tall blonde woman with startling hazel eyes, sharp nose and generous chin, but if you mixed Nicole Kidman’s looks, Einstein’s genius and Satan’s mischief you would come up with a creature very like Rebecca. And if her mother, sister or friends knew what she was like in the bedroom I’m sure they would have disowned her pretty-much instantly,

being rather religious and po-faced in nature. Of course it doesn't shock or worry me, but then I've never had much time for prudish women. Virginity doesn't interest me... experience does.

Looking up at the sky I saw the black cloud had grown, staining the sky with a particular grubbiness that could not be natural. It was smoke, and from the size of it, smoke from quite an inferno.

I turned on the radio and hopped stations until I found Malcolm Binyon, a particularly bilious individual who laced the daily news with a healthy dose of cynicism and gallows humour that particularly appealed to me. Over the years he had been sacked by over a dozen radio stations and yet, what with his popularity, he always bounced back somewhere or other... until he crossed the line again. Binyon didn't give a flying fuck. He'd even said so on air and got sacked for doing so.

And as if you hadn't noticed, today's the fifth of June — R day — that R stands for "readjustment" folks — if you thought it was "revenge" then you're just plain wrong, wrong, wrong! No, the government claims R-Day will relieve the pressure on the courts, which have been stuffed to the gills with all those dastardly legal actions of late, like someone slipping on a banana skin or scalding their lips on — get this — coffee that's actually hot! Do I blame the ambulance chasing lawyers? Nah. I blame the politicians — when given a choice always blame the politicians. I hope whoever it was who thought up this particularly odious piece of leg-shit-tation gets targeted himself — but, oh no, I've just remembered, politicians can't be targeted, can they? So they're all safe and sound, barricaded in their luxury Mayfair penthouses and country estates, waiting for us hoi polloi to cap each other. When the hell are we going to wise up and insist that politicians take a university degree in truthfulness and ethics before they can sit down on one of those lovely green leather benches my wife keeps trying to get hold of for our sitting room? The only way that's going to happen is if it becomes law...! And who makes the law, pray tell? Yes, you guessed it, the politicians. The chances of a decent man — or woman — getting into parliament is in direct inverse proportion to the chance of them not voting themselves another pay raise! Democracy be damned! If the ancient Greeks weren't so busy bugging each other I'm sure they'd be turning in their graves!

Good old Binyon. I couldn't help but grin as he was clearly careering towards another sacking. He called them his "notches on my bedpost."

And I suppose you're all wondering if I'm scared some nutcase is going to come

after my sorry ass? — after all I must have upset one or two people in my time. Well, if anyone's stupid enough to come and get me they'll have to get past the electric fence, across the pit of poisoned spikes, past the Dobermans (who I can assure you haven't been fed for the last three days) and the army of renta-guards who are encircling me right at this very moment – hell, I should know, the one with his back to me has just farted mustard gas! Christ knows what he ate last night. If anyone can get past all that lot I'll be pleased for them to take a pot shot at my head. Hell, I'll even stand still for them!

I switched the radio off and drove on in silence for a few minutes, my mind pleasantly blank, hypnotised by the stuttering white lines. I began to daydream of Tomoko, all alone in her hotel room, emerging fresh from the shower, a white towel wrapped around her middle, her wet hair dripping like ink onto her slender shoulders. She was pining for her sushi and her Hello Kitty, but as neither was to hand she would gladly accept any substitute; even a course red-faced *gaijin* like me. She saw me spying on her from the doorway and beckoned me closer, a shy and yet undeniably wicked smile on her broad face. As I approached her she sat on the side of bath and pulled open her robe. My imagination gave her a figure more alluring and seductive than she probably possessed in real life, but who was I to complain as I reached out a trembling hand to caress a single, impossible round breast with a nipple like a dimpled piece of pink candy. My eyes were drawn to her lap. Her legs were crossed and where flesh intersected with flesh a small fan of wiry black hair sprouted. A few drops of moisture glistened on her thighs.

An image broke through the fantasy: a flag waving on a hilltop.

I blinked.

Flap flap flap.

No, not a flag on a hilltop, in the *middle of the road!*

What?

I blinked again. There was no flag. A man was standing right in my path, frantically waving his hands over his head. Such was my surprise it took me a second longer to react than it should. My foot hesitated and then slammed down on the brake pedal so hard I almost broke my ankle. Too slow... still going too damn *fast!* The man's pale face seemed to loom in the windscreen as I careered towards him, tyres screeching. I savagely turned the steering wheel to the left; so fast I appeared to have grown four arms – *six!* – and yet the car hardly seemed to be turning at all. It was still hurtling towards the madman like a blunt-tipped arrow.

And then, just at the point when the car began to turn, he took off *to his right*... straight back into my path! Realising his mistake he hunched down and crossed his arms before his face – as if doing such a thing would make a damn bit of difference. I closed my eyes, pulling hard on the steering wheel as if it was an extension of the handbrake, hoping that it might hasten my stop.

In a game of chicken between man and machine, the outcome isn't just guaranteed, it's messy.

Bloody messy.

3.

When I didn't feel the inevitable crunching impact that I had braced myself for, I opened my eyes. The man was cowering before the bonnet of my BMW, still very much alive. I had missed him by inches. Quickly glancing in the rear-view mirror to make sure the motorway was empty behind me I allowed my breath to escape in a single long wheeze and thumped my forehead against the top of the steering wheel arch. At any other time of the year I would have been at the head of a mile long pile-up, my precious flesh all but indistinguishable from tangled metal.

With thumping heart and quivering legs, I kicked open the door and jumped out as the man uncurled from his crouch, staring at his limbs as if he couldn't quite understand how they were still attached to his body.

"*What the fuck are you playing at, you jerk?*" I roared, restraining myself from taking a swing at him. "*I could have bloody killed you, you fool!*"

"I... I'm sorry," he spluttered, blinking like crazy. "My car broke down." He poked a finger at a Fiat parked haphazardly on the hard shoulder. "I have to get to the Central Hastings Hospital! It's urgent. You have to take me there!"

I couldn't believe the man's gall. One minute he was practically attempting suicide, the next he was demanding favours of me.

"Me, take you? Are you fucking kidding me?"

He shook his deeply flushed face and muttered something under his breath, I think it might have been another apology. When he saw that I was heading back to my car he ran after me.

"Please, you *must* take me to Hastings!"

"I don't have to take you anywhere, mate," I said as I climbed into the driving seat.

He actually grabbed the top of the car door to stop me from closing it. His face was crimson with desperation. "Please, listen to me for one moment. My wife's in hospital, she's having a baby!"

"Congratulations," I said coldly, giving the door a hard tug. He let go before he lost his fingers. "Give her my best will you."

To my disgust he began to plead with me.

“I can’t get hold of a mechanic and there’s no answer from any of the rescue services. I promised my wife I’d be there for her! I promised her I’d be by her side. Please, it’s...” He gawped at me through the window when I started up the engine, not quite believing that I was going to abandon him here. He scrabbled at his jacket pocket and brought out a leather wallet, counted through the cash – not enough – took out his chequebook and a silver-plated Parker pen. “I can make this out for anything you want,” he said, the pen’s nib already resting on the amount line. “Just tell me how much you want and it’s yours. Name your price. Anything! Go on.”

This madman really was desperate, but I didn’t want his money and I certainly wasn’t about to change my plans to accommodate him.

For a moment my hand rested on the stick, about to push it into drive, then I sighed and slapped the steering wheel with both palms. “When’s she due?”

“Any moment. We’ve been going to these courses for the last few months, breathing exercises, you know. I gave her my word I’d be there for her, when the time came.”

“I know, you’ve said that a dozen times already.”

“How many more times do I have to say it?”

Oh shit, I knew I was going to regret this.

“Climb in,” I said, making it sound like a rebuff.

“Really?”

“Yes. Now get your arse in here before I change my mind!”

“One second. Just... one... second!”

The man raced back to his car, opened the door and fished out a black briefcase from inside. If jumping into a car were an Olympic sport this man would have taken gold.

“You’re a lifesaver,” he said in earnest, sliding the briefcase under the seat and fixing his seat belt. “I don’t know how I can repay you.”

“You can repay me by keeping your mouth shut,” I said irritably. Hastings wasn’t entirely out of my way, but it was going to cost me a good hour, at the very least. I was going to have to put my foot down.

* * *

“So, what’s your name?”

We were doing a hundred on the M25, heading for the A21, and the motorway was so empty I barely needed to glance at it. Still, I had to keep my eyes peeled for speed cameras, even though I’d heard they were switched off for R-Day. I couldn’t take the chance of getting another fine.

“M... Michael,” he said nervously.

“I’m Anthony,” I said. “You were lucky I came along when I did. From the looks of these roads you could have been waiting there a long time before someone else came along.”

“That’s why I ran out into the middle of the road,” he replied. “You wouldn’t have stopped if I hadn’t.”

Too damn right. We drove on a little way in silence. I noticed that Michael was repeatedly squeezing his fists in his lap, like he was milking an invisible cow, but said nothing about it. A wife about to drop on R-Day, no wonder his nerves were eating him alive. Despite my anger towards him I could not help but feel a little bit sorry for him as well.

“So when did you hear that your wife had gone into labour?” I asked.

“I... I was staying at a motel in Gretna Green – I was coming back from Edinburgh. They called me three hours ago and I’ve been driving ever since. The motel warned me they would kick me out before six anyway.”

Black tyre streaks stretched across the motorway, terminating at the boundary, which was marked by a single savage dent. Fragments of car tyre and a single aluminium hubcap lay amongst the posts.

“Your first?”

He nodded mechanically. “Have you...?”

“No, no kids. Not yet at any rate.”

“How long have you been married?”

“Five years today.”

“*Today?*” He stared at me. “It’s your *anniversary?*” He shook his head in amazement when I replied that it was. “Well, isn’t that a coincidence?”

I hadn’t really thought about it but yes, Michael was right, it was a coincidence. What’s that word for a happy coincidence? Serendipity? Well this wasn’t that, this was a *bad* coincidence, something rotten. I wondered if someone had thought up a word for *that*?

“At least you know what to call the child now,” I said. At his puzzled expression I explained: “Anthony if it’s a boy, Antonia if it’s a girl.” I was trying to lighten the mood, but he just stared at me. “I was only kidding. Do you know what it is?”

“We...we talked about it and decided we didn’t want to know; not until the... until the big day, you understand?” The man’s stutter seemed to come and go as it pleased. “We don’t care what it is, just as long as it’s got ten fingers and ten toes. That’s the most important thing, isn’t it?” He laughed awkwardly, more for my sake than his.

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“So why haven’t you... you know?”

“When Rebecca and I got married our careers were just taking off— so we decided to leave it five years. And anyway how many couples do you know who got married, had two kids straight off the bat and then split up a year later? We wanted to make sure our marriage was rock-solid before we had to do the nappy-changing, sleepless-night thing.”

“And that was five years ago?”

“That’s right.”

“So?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Probably.”

“You don’t seem too keen?”

When I glanced at Michael I saw that he was staring at me, a penetrating gleam in his eyes.

“I have enough friends with kids to know what it does to you.”

“The responsibility?”

“Yes, the responsibility. I’ve never felt I was really ready... Still don’t feel ready.”

He gave a short, unhappy laugh. “I don’t think anyone is until it happens to them. Being responsible isn’t something you can choose to be, it’s what you become because you have no other choice.”

I looked at him again, his head was bowed and his hands were squeezing once more. As I was keen to move the focus away from me I asked Michael how long he and Sam had been married.

“Nine months,” he replied starkly.

Oh, so my comment about “rock-solid marriages” wouldn’t have gone down well then.

“Have you decided on any names yet, you know, other than Anthony and Antonia?”

“Jack if it’s a boy, Carol if it’s a girl.”

Another damn couple with no imagination. Poor kid.

“Yeah, I guess those will work.”

We drove on passing a Ford abandoned on the hard shoulder (nobody in sight), and in the distance a lorry was tooling along in the fast lane. I was relieved to know we weren’t the only nutcases out today, after all stupidity likes company.

“The pregnancy has been real rough on her,” said Michael. “She used to get morning sickness so bad she can’t do anything but lie there and groan for hours on end. I had to sit beside her with a bucket in my hands, just in case she... you know. Her ankles are so swollen they’re like *out here!*” He put his hands out as if he were a fisherman demonstrating the size of a whopper he’d once caught. “And there isn’t an inch of her that doesn’t ache. At night I have to massage her feet for at least an hour before she can get to sleep. I think we’ll both be relieved when it’s finally over.”

“Sounds like you love her a lot,” I said, smiling.

Michael was quiet for a time, then suddenly asked: “Do you love *your* wife, Anthony?”

“Of course, I do,” I replied, somewhat taken off-guard by his question.

“Isn’t she worried about you being out today?”

“She worries about everything. If it’s not this then it’d just be something else. If she had her way I’d be covered from head to foot in bubble wrap twenty-four-seven.”

“Tell me about her?”

“There’s not much to say; she works in public relations – she’s pretty good at it – and likes...” My mind churned. Although I had known Rebecca for close on eleven years and I was intimately acquainted with every square millimetre of her body, now that I had been called on to sum up her character in a couple of sentences I found I could not do it. “Her favourite colour is green, her favourite fish is skate and she watches ‘When Harry Met Sally’ at least twice a year and... and I’m not sure what else there is to say.” I decided to replay the compliment. “What

about Sam?”

I thought Michael would rattle off his wife's details like the tickertape you see in those old black and white movies, instead he gave me a strangely sour look and stared out of the window. I can only guess how he was feeling; if I were in his shoes I would have been dying with anxiety. What a day to have a kid on, and I thought I was unlucky with the wedding anniversary and all.

It's true what they say: there's always someone worse off than you. It's a strangely comforting thought.

4.

We drove on, past Westerham and Sevenoaks. To cover the silence I turned on the radio and flicked through the stations, my ears assaulted by hissing snatches of words and blasts of music. Being polite I asked Michael what music he liked but when he just shrugged I settled on some good old rock n' roll — I like to listen to rock n' roll when I'm stressed. The miles swept past, carrying us on towards Hastings and the hospital, our soundtrack thoughtfully provided by The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, The Who, Hendrix, Springsteen and Emerson Lake & Palmer. All the classics.

Half way down the A21 I turned down the radio and tried to strike up another conversation only to find my passenger had completely retreated into himself. Although he appeared to be staring out of the window I guessed the view made as much impression on him as if we were driving through a tunnel. It was a struggle drawing three words out of him on any subject... even R-Day, so I decided not to press him further.

When Stairway to Heaven, one of my favourites, came on, I turned the radio up again.

For the first time I wondered why Michael was going the wrong way down the M4 if he had come down from Scotland. Wouldn't it have been better for him to cut through the Blackwall Tunnel? That would have taken hours off his journey. Maybe he was one of those people who always avoids London if he can help it — I could certainly understand him wanting to steer clear of the Big Smoke, especially on a day like today.

“What were you doing in Edinburgh?” I asked absently, not really expecting him to answer.

“I'm a sales rep,” he replied. “Shoes.”

“Good money?”

“So, so,” he made an indistinct move of his head, neither a nod nor a shake. “The new lines aren't doing too well. There's a lot of competition out there; especially from the Chinese.” He glanced at his watch and then at the green luminous hands of dashboard clock. “What about you?”

“I run a company manufacturing precision computer components,” I said. “Most

of my business comes from the Far East. I've just got back from a trip to Tokyo."

"The furthest east I've been is Great Yarmouth," he said gloomily. "What's Japan like?"

"Interesting. Actually it's a little weird, but I like weird."

He nodded, as if such a thing was common knowledge.

"But then I guess any culture looks strange when looked on by an outsider," I said. "They probably think we're just as crazy as we think they are. Take today, for example, when I tried to explain R-Day to the boss of a company I was in a meeting with he just looked at me as if I'd gone crazy. He thought I was pulling his leg, or whatever the Japanese equivalent of that is." I waited for a response. I got none. Michael's face was grey and heavy, like stone. "Don't worry, we'll get there in time."

"I knew I shouldn't have gone on that business trip. I shouldn't have left Sam all alone. I was a fool."

"You couldn't know it was going to happen today."

"No, but she was so close to term. I wanted to stay but she insisting that I go; said she'd keep her legs crossed until I got back... after all I'd only be gone for two days. What the hell can happen in two days? I *promised* her I'd be there by her side. I gave her my word!"

"If she's had the baby I'm sure someone would have called you by now," I said, wanting to calm him down. "You haven't received a call, have you?"

He shook his head, then just to make sure he took out his mobile and checked it. "No."

"See, everything's going to be fine."

Michael gave me a strained smile and nodded his head.

The roads were becoming a little busier – hopeful, foolish people thinking they were safe — but nothing like what it should have been on a normal weekday morning. I breathed a silent sigh of hollow relief as we entered Hastings, a typically grubby seaside town that looked no different from any other I'd ever seen — places that had once been grand when Queen Victoria sat on the throne, but now that she was long dead nobody much cared about. I was eager to unload my package as quickly as possible so that I could get on my way to Dover and my impatience was making my usually smooth driving somewhat jerky and erratic. I'm a bad driver when I'm in a mood, and I was in a *bad* mood, although I thought I was hiding it rather well.

“I take it you know the way to the hospital?” I asked Michael. “I came down here about twenty-five years ago for a family holiday and all I can remember is the way to the amusement arcades, but that’s about it”

“No problem,” he replied and started giving me directions. Down this road, up that road; turn left; turn right, until road signs took up the job and guided me the rest of the way. I have no words to describe the relief I felt when I saw the typically white bulk of a hospital looming before me, but instead of instructing me to turn into the parking lot Michael asked me to drive on a little way and park close to a telephone box. The diversion seemed odd but I kept my concern to myself. There had to be a perfectly rational explanation.

As I parked I saw Michael look hard at his watch. His hands were tensing again, fists clenched so tight his knuckles were as white as porcelain, fingernails digging half moons into his palms.

I waited, expecting him to ask me to pull away at any moment and return to the hospital, but all he did was stare at his watch.

“Michael?” I asked.

He held up a finger. “Just one minute.”

I had a bad feeling about this.

“Michael, what are we waiting for? The hospital’s right behind us. Let’s go.”

“Please, Anthony. Just another minute, please.”

Now he was looking out at the short row of shops opposite: a grubby newsagent, a hairdressers and a corner store — all shut. Between them were doorways leading into flats; the one Michael was staring at was painted bright orange.

“I need to visit a friend,” he said, quickly climbing out of the car. “I’ll only be a few minutes.”

“What the hell do you mean, visit a friend? What going on?”

“It’s important.”

“I’ll give you five minutes,” I yelled through the wound-down window.

“That’s all I can afford.”

He nodded and I watched him walk up to the door, drumming the steering wheel with impatience. He reached for the doorbell, hesitated and then pressed the button. He waited, one shoulder hunched against the doorpost, and when the door opened a crack — I could not see by whom — he spoke urgently with them for a moment before they allowed him in. The door closed and I sighed to myself. To pass the

time I tuned into Malcolm Binyon again.

Everyone I know who has got even an atom of sense in their brain has gone abroad today. Apparently the number of passengers over the last few days has been at max capacity. Airport security practically had to beat the hopefuls off with pointed sticks. Seems Paris has more British nationals than Britain does at the moment — if we wanted to mount an invasion and reclaim Burgundy for our nation, now would be as good a time as any.

Across the road an old man approached the newsagent, took one look at the closed sign and then walked on, a disgruntled look on his face.

Apparently the yanks have got some observers over here. Seems that they're interested in holding an R-Day of their own. Good God, if they go ahead with it they'll probably cut a quarter off their population at a —

I switched off the radio and silence fell upon me like a boulder. Normally at five minutes past eight o'clock on a Wednesday morning this street would have been heaving from end to end with traffic — engines revving, the hiss of rubber on tarmac, the odd angry ejaculation of a horn — instead it was as still and as silent as the proverbial grave. I glanced irritably at my watch; Michael had been gone five minutes already. What the hell was he doing? And then, as I sat there fuming, it hit me that there was no reason for me to wait here any longer. I had got Michael to within walking distance of the hospital and his wife; my good deed for the day was done. I was free to go.

Starting up the engine I was just about to pull away when I caught sight of a black thing pushed almost, but not quite entirely, underneath the passenger seat. Swearing under my breath I killed the engine, leant over and pulled out Michael's briefcase.

“Shit!” I said out loud.

Now I would have to wait for him after all... unless of course I went looking for him first. As I didn't want to stay here a moment longer than I had to, that seemed the more preferable option. Never, *ever*, do anyone a good turn, they'll just turn around and bite you for your trouble.

Carrying the briefcase I walked across the road to the orange doorway. As I got closer I could see that the door had once been dark blue, but the thin once-over of orange emulsion couldn't stop the original colour from peeking through. Pressing the doorbell I waited. When there was no answer I thumbed the doorbell again — twice. The door cracked open and a man with shrunken cheeks and a startlingly

shiny bald head stared at me suspiciously through the slit. His age was indeterminable; he could have been anywhere between twenty and forty years of age.

“What do you want?” he said abruptly in a thick Scottish accent.

“The man who just came in here forgot this,” I said, holding up the offending article. “Do you think you could give it back to him?”

Narrowed eyes snapped to the briefcase and then back to me. “He’s not here.”

“But I just saw him walk in...”

“He left five minutes ago.” He was already closing the door on me.

I held out the briefcase. “Can I leave...?”

“No,” the man replied through the tiniest of cracks. “Fuck off.” The lock clicked.

I couldn’t understand it, I hadn’t let the doorway out of my sight. Nobody (and especially not Michael) had either entered or exited the building in all that time. But had I? No, there were a few times I had turned my attention away from the door — for example when I turned on the radio or watched some passerby — but for no longer than twenty seconds... thirty at the most. Could Michael have slipped through the door and carried on to the hospital in that narrow margin of time? Or was there another way? A back way? I decided to leave the briefcase at the hospital reception, and if he didn’t find it there, well then to hell with him.

It was no more than a three minute walk to the Central Hastings Hospital’s front entrance, and when I got there I found my way barred by two security men. They were standing before the automatic doors, flanking two grey plates, each plate as tall as a man but only a few inches thick. I recognised the metal detectors immediately from my travels — nobody trusts anybody these days. Quite clearly the hospital wasn’t taking any chances on R-Day. Every patient and visitor was to be screened and searched for weapons before being admitted.

I gave the guard to my right the briefcase, my wallet, car keys, watch and pen. He slipped the briefcase through an X-ray machine while I stepped between the plates — no bells went off — and he must have been content with what he saw because he handed it back to me without comment. Briefcase in hand I walked down the wide corridor of lime and cream, the polished floor dimly reflected the glare from the fluorescent strips on the ceiling. The place smelt of disinfectant, stale food, and, underneath that, something disagreeable; not quite shit, but close to it. I walked on until I came to the reception area, which was unusually quiet for a major hospital at this time of day. Lines of empty brown chairs were arrayed before the

Chinese receptionist, making her look a little like a lecturer about to give a talk on a subject nobody cared to hear.

Just wait until R-Day really gets started, I thought bleakly. Let's see how they'll cope then?

I asked her if she'd seen Michael pass and when she looked blank I described him to her. She shook her head and said she hadn't seen anyone in over half an hour. Puzzled I walked on (she didn't try to stop me), following the signs pointing the way to maternity. Michael must be there. I passed nurses and doctors about on their business — few of the patients were up at such an hour. I was the only visitor and nobody thought to challenge me. Arriving at the maternity ward I found the desk empty and there was nobody in authority around to ask. So it seemed that I would just have to look for him myself. I turned my attention to the doors to either side of the corridor (decorated with a crudely painted pageant of Mr Men and Little Misses). When I peeked through the first open door two heavily pregnant women glanced up from novels. I gave them an apologetic smile and moved swiftly on. Where the hell was Michael? I checked the next room, two women sleeping; the one after that was empty.

It was then I heard a thin, strangled scream, and two loud, ear-bursting *pops* that turned my guts into ice. The screaming was coming from the room at the end. *Michael?* I dashed towards the open door, and stepping through it I froze.

Michael was standing over a sleeping woman, a sleeping beauty, the smoking muzzle of a pistol clutched in his shaking hand aimed at her chest. Nearby a nurse, an Indian woman, was crawling away, a hand clutched to a bloody wound high on her right shoulder. Her mouth was open, as if she were screaming still, but now no sound was coming out. Every time she moved her hand she left a red handprint behind her. Blood was splattered across one wall — probably from where the bullet had ripped through her body — and in such a small, unventilated room the explosive stung my nose and throat like acid.

“*Michael!*” I exclaimed and the man turned to look at me, his eyes as hollow and as lost as any I have ever seen, and I can tell you I've seen a few in my time.

The woman, his wife, was still, but there was something too composed about her expression; too serene. Wouldn't the nurse's screams have roused her? A deep pain like a rusty coat hanger stabbed into my side as I took a step towards her. Now I could see that her slumber was the deepest one possible. Hidden by folds of white linen near where her hands were crossed over her chest there was a single hole, the edges charred, the fabric peppered with a sooty residue.

“You said you loved her?”

“I do.” He sounded indignant. “*I do love her!*”

Behind me I heard rushing footsteps and shouts. I knew people were approaching but didn't turn to look. The security guard's shirts were so white that when they stood beside me it felt like I was being flanked by ghosts. I could smell the nervous sweat on their bodies, sweet and cloying.

Turning the gun on us with a lurch (the shock of what he had just done seemed to have disrupted his balance) Michael ripped a piece of paper from his top pocket and threw it down on the floor. “I've got a licence. There's nothing you can do to hold me.”

Nobody made a move to pick up the slip of yellow paper. Everybody knew it was genuine; they had seen examples in the newspapers and on TV.

Looking at that body again I felt cold inside. I wondered if Samantha had perceived the difference, slipping between sleep and death in a heartbeat. Can the sleeping sense death approaching? Do they see it in their dreams, like a shadow?

“What about the baby?” I asked, looking around for the baby. None could be seen. Only adults were eligible for an R-licence, although that hadn't stopped more than four thousand people applying to rid themselves of unruly toddlers, moody teenagers, unwed pregnant daughters and layabout sons. *Skeletons in the closet*. They all got visits from the police and some of the kids got taken into care. Fucking hypocrites.

“Where's the baby, or did you have a license for it too, Michael?”

Michael began to say something, but it was lost in a stutter.

“*Why?*” I asked again, pressing him.

“W... why the fuck do you think?” he spat. When the injured nurse found her voice again Michael span around and pointed the gun at her. “*Shut your fucking hole or I'll shoot you again, you bitch! Shut up, I said!*”

The poor woman shoved her blood-greased fist into her mouth and ground it against her teeth, eyes staring at the madman with the smoking pistol. She muttered something unintelligible through a bubble of saliva and mucus.

“What was that?” he said, “What was that you said?”

At last the nurse found her voice. “The baby... the baby was stillborn. I'm... I'm sorry.”

Michael rocked back on his feet as if her words had folded their syllable fingers

into a fist and laid into him with a will. He was fucked; he'd killed his sleeping wife and badly wounded a registered nurse. And his child was dead. There was no need for me to remain here in this room that smelt of mingled blood and gunpowder. I took a step back towards the door, making the two guards (armed only with black nightsticks) loom forward. I felt like a soldier backing out of a dangerous mission into no-man's land. Nobody tried to stop me as I pushed my way through the small group of nervous nurses, doctors and patients jostling outside in the corridor, all silent and pale, heads bobbing like turkeys in an abattoir as they tried to see what was going on inside the room without putting themselves in harm's way. I walked back to the reception as calmly as I could, eyes locked ahead, spine shot through with pins of steel.

Stepping out into the car park I became aware of a distinct heaviness in my right hand and when I looked down I saw that I was still carrying Michael's briefcase. There was a bin nearby and when the briefcase proved too large to fit inside I simply sat it on top, like a leather lid. With a black cloud building in my head I lurched back to my car, climbed inside and drove away. For a long time the white expanse of the hospital loomed in the rear-view mirror like a tombstone, and when I turned a corner and it vanished from sight I hoped the darkness would lift from my soul a little. It didn't.

5.

How long I drove down nameless roads and faceless streets I cannot recall — after the horror in the hospital time and distance meant nothing to me. I made turns at random, crossed junctions and played the roundabouts like they were a game of Russian roulette. My driving was ragged, mechanical, every turn of the wheel a sharp jerk. The diversion took me to a place that looked like a landscape from another world: a forlorn, desolate spot where the road was bordered on both sides by a great grey expanse of pebbles. Nearby a luminous power station hummed with invisible energy while ahead the bulbous spires of two lighthouses, one old and one new, pointed towards the dull sky. The air smelled strongly of ocean; that briny dark green smell that always makes me think of a child's seaside bucket filled with seaweed, shells, rotting driftwood and sea-polished stones.

Abandoning my car I stumbled across the wet shingles that ran, in several deep tiers, down to the choppy, cardboard grey sea. Every footstep sank deep into the shingle and when I lifted my foot the wet stones were flung high into the air. Fine spray speckled my face and when I licked my lips I tasted salt. At last I sank to my knees beside the sea, the cold water almost touching my trousers. Every time the tide went out the sound of the water rushing over the pebbles sounded like the scraping of bone on bone. On the horizon I could see fishing boats rocking with the tide, either going out or coming in, I didn't know. Were there safe out there? I knew R-Day didn't extend out of the UK's territorial waters.

I had assisted in the murder of a young mother. Somehow her almost peaceful expression, hands laid on her belly as if she were dreaming of holding her laughing infant to her breast, seemed more horrible than everything else. I would have preferred it if she had screamed and cried and fought for life. We all hope that when our time comes we die in our sleep, surrounded by our loved ones, but with youth that feels like a copout... a cheat. The young should face death with their eyes wide-open, fight it right up to the last moment. Struggle for life. Never admit defeat.

Why had Michael shot his wife after all the things he'd said to me? I was racked by guilt; confused, frightened.

Was the moisture on my face my tears or spray from the sea?

Feeling sudden cold on my knees I stood, my trousers dripping wet. Clutching a handful of stones I flung them over that dark surface. They instantly sank under the muddy waves, swallowed by the tide's relentless agenda. I needed to take my mind off the images, sounds and smells that haunted me. I had to free myself because the day was still young and I needed a clear head for what lay ahead. Taking the mobile from my pocket I tapped in a number I never stored in memory.

"Tony!" said Lena, sounding surprised. "I've been waiting for you to call. How was your flight?"

I said it was okay, all things considered. Lena, just like Rebecca, said she was glad I had got back in one piece, and then: "Where are you now?"

"To tell you the truth I have no idea," I said, staring about me. "Looks like the end of the world." I picked up another pebble and flung it low at the sea, trying to get it to skip, but the waves were too rough and the stone sank again. "You staying in today, baby?"

"I'm not as crazy as you, Tony, I'm following their advice on TV. Just to make sure nobody gets in I tried to jam a chair under the door handle. That trick always works in the movies, but when I tipped the chair back the top didn't even reach the doorknob." She giggled. "You should see one of the presenters on the BBC news, he looks like he knows he's a marked man. Probably that weather girl; I bet she can be a real mean bitch when she wants to be." She paused, her voice concerned. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm on my way to my mother's place right now to make sure she's alright. I might even call in on you, if I'm passing by."

"Don't bother, I'm not seeing anyone today."

"Not even me?"

"*Especially* not you, Tony!"

I was hurt. "Why not? Don't you trust me?"

"'Cos I know you'll try and get me back for all those times I had a headache or had to wash my hair. Screw me to death... or something cruel and unusual like that."

When I laughed the image of dead Sam began to fade from my head a little. "I think I'd be the first to die."

Lena gave a dramatic sigh. "You men will never forgive us for being able to have multiple orgasms, will you?"

“Never.”

She was silent for a moment. “It’s your anniversary today, isn’t it?”

Did I hear a touch of jealousy in her voice? “That’s right.” I didn’t expect her to give us her congratulations, and she didn’t.

“What are you doing?”

“Rebecca’s making a meal for eight o’clock. If I’m late I’m dead meat.”

She laughed. “Good luck.”

My predication for being late will haunt me until the day I die — and when I do I’ll probably arrive in heaven a second after St. Peter locks the Pearly Gates for the night. Nature seems to have hardcoded bad timekeeping into my DNA just as she gave Rebecca optimism and Lena patience. I guess I got the raw deal out of the three; wouldn’t be the first time and I doubt it’ll be the last.

“What are you chuckling about?” asked Lena, sounding suspicious.

“Oh, nothing, I was just thinking about that BBC guy you were talking about. Did anyone say anything?”

“No, but they were all giving him funny looks. At one point, when he thought the camera was off him, he took out this huge handkerchief and wiped his brow. He was sweating like hell and I don’t think it was the lights.”

“I wish I’d been there.”

Lena lowered her voice. “I wish you were. Seriously.”

“You don’t have anything to worry about, do you?”

“I don’t think so. And you?”

“There was this weird incident last week. I pissed off a guy when I cut him up for a parking space. Do you know what he said to me?”

“No.”

“‘See you on R-Day’. I hope he was just kidding, but I’ve been hearing that threat more and more often over the last few weeks. It’s a bit like saying you hope someone gets cancer and dies.”

“That’s horrible.”

I took a deep breath; Sam was walking towards me across the shingles, one hand massaging her swollen belly. I blinked and she was gone. Sea mist?

“You will be careful, won’t you?” said Lena and I heard the concern in her voice. “I don’t like the thought of you being outside today, not even to see your

mother.”

“You have my word on it. Are you sure I can’t see you today?”

“No, I’ll be okay. I’d prefer to know you’re home, safe and sound, even if it is with *her*. Come and see me tomorrow instead.” She hesitated. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I said gently. Lena’s natural tenderness made her a girl in a million. I loved her dearly.

Before returning the mobile to my jacket pocket I conducted the little ritual I always performed after talking to my mistress: I skipped through the phone’s options and deleted all records of our conversation. I knew Rebecca snooped on my calls when my back was turned. For some reason she didn’t entirely trust me — probably had something to do with my lurid history. Before we met I had something of a reputation for being a ladies’ man around town. A Casanova. Or to put it bluntly, a dog. I’ve slowed down considerably since then, but that’s more down to lack of time than lack of opportunity. I’ve never done drugs (well, not much outside of university anyway), never smoked or really been one for tipping back the hard stuff — beautiful women is my drug of choice, and the day I go cold turkey is the day I die.

Rebecca.

6.

Sensing an impending panic attack, Rebecca decided to try to take her mind off her worries by making sure that everything was ready for the evening meal. Opening the fridge door she sorted through the contents, taking out the ingredients she wanted one at a time and lining them up before her on the countertop. There was the asparagus, the eggs for the hollandaise sauce, cubed lamb, chillies, dried fruit, onions, fresh strawberries and cream. Starter, main course and dessert.

All that was missing was the wine. No celebration was complete without a decent bottle of wine. On any other day the bottle of merlot on the top of the fridge Anthony had mentioned would have been rejected out of hand, but today she was willing to slum it.

Once all the food had been returned to the fridge Rebecca again found herself at loss. She trudged into the living room, threw herself down on the sofa, stabbed the ON button on the remote but could only bear to watch a few minutes of the grim-faced news presenter prophesising the carnage to come. So far the official death-count was only in the low double figures, but the experts expected it to explode into the hundreds by the afternoon, surge in the evening and reach its zenith in the hours before midnight. They were talking *tens of thousands* of casualties. It seemed that the majority of the public perceived (and they'd done a MORI poll to prove it) that revenge wasn't just a dish that should be served cold, but a dish that should be served under the cover of night. Depressed, she switched the television off and padded into the dining room where she grabbed up her battered Penguin copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, which she'd been picking at over the last three weeks, but only managed to scan half a dozen lines of the dense text before she threw it down. The words were getting as far as her retinas, but no further.

When the telephone began to ring out in the hall she ran to it, snatched up the cordless handset and pressed it to her ear.

"Yes?" she asked. Her heart was pounding so loudly in her ears she could barely hear what the man was saying. "Are you sure it's done?" She carried the phone into the kitchen, stood facing the window. Outside two green finches were sitting in a pear tree, chattering to each other. "Why has it taken you so long to call me? I've been waiting over three hours for you to call. I almost went crazy." She listened, nodding erratically, eyes shut. "Yes I understand; eleven o'clock.

Hopefully I should know well before then. Can you give me that number again?" Taking the calendar down from the wall she scrawled the telephone number in the white border of one corner, only inches from the photograph of a rustic French farmhouse; then jotted "11 pm" below it and ringed it twice. "Thank you."

Rebecca put the handset down on the table and became as still as possible — as if even the slightest movement was unbearable — then shook herself violently and took one huge ragged breath. For a second she considered what she should do with the telephone number, knowing she could not leave it out in full view. She tore off the corner, folded the dagger-shaped slip of paper down the middle, took it into the dining room and slipped it between the pages of her novel, like a bookmark. The terrible sense of frustration that buzzed inside her body was like a sonar echo caught between the walls of her ribs, constantly rebounding, building, rebounding, building. In an attempt to quench her frustration she showered, tried to eat some buttered toast, but could only manage two small bites. The toast was like sandpaper in her throat. The only thing that seemed to agree with her was strong coffee with lots of sugar, which she drank in the living room to the accompaniment of Ella Fitzgerald on her iPod. The frustration had receded to an ever-present gnawing sensation inside her belly, as if she had swallowed a feral cat. On an overwhelming impulse whim Rebecca laid the cup aside and slipped three fingers below the waistline of her trousers, below her cotton panties, her fingers exploring through the soft patch of pubic hair until they found the spot that always brought her comfort and reassurance. She closed her eyes, deepened her breathing and slightly arched her back as her quick fingers brought a warm rush of sensuality. By varying the speed of her fingertips she was able to keep herself tantalizingly close to the edge of orgasm, allowing the urge to ebb and wane... ebb and wane. She knew she could keep herself in this delicious plateau state for well over an hour if she so wished, but today her need for release was too great and she became a willing bystander as her hand took control, moving frantically; stroking, shuddering; building a towering palace that would come crashing down in the most delightful way. Her eventual orgasm forced such a grunt from her throat she was shocked by the pure animalism of it. She thought she sounded like a bitch in heat.

Exhausted, she collapsed into the sofa's embrace, one arm drooping over the side, allowing every muscle to relax. A thin sheen of sweat shined on her upper lip, forehead and chest.

Her release was fleeting. Barely five minutes had passed before the gloom reasserted itself once more. Rebecca washed her hands and face, trying not to catch

her reflection in the mirror... it was unavoidable. She observed the dark rings under her eyes and the greyness of her skin, the small wrinkles that became more and more pronounced with the passing of the years, however many expensive and “scientifically proven” preparations she used. She didn’t see the young, attractive girl Anthony assured her she was, instead she saw a tired woman worn down by life; a woman profoundly alone despite the apparent security and happiness of her marriage.

Tearing herself away from the mirror she returned to the living room and turned on the television once more. A nervous-looking reporter was standing on a motorway, a crashed petrol tanker burning out of control behind him vomiting a thick column of black smoke into the air. He was shouting into his microphone: “*We know that three people have died in this inferno – we caught sight of their bodies through the smoke – and still the fire brigade refuses to allow so much as a single engine out of their stations. Should another blaze occur close to a petrol station, or in a block of flats, without a fire service to put it out, the loss of life could be catastrophic.*”

Rebecca couldn’t understand why Anthony insisted on visiting his mother today, especially after enduring an eighteen-hour flight from Tokyo. He hadn’t been at all concerned about her last year, so what made this R-Day so special? Anthony had been acting strange for the last few weeks; hiding things from her, being evasive and making up feeble excuses when she asked him what was wrong. Rebecca thought she knew her husband’s character and history well enough to guess what his secret was. His secrets were the same: they had long legs, big boobs and lips as red as menstrual blood.

But she had secrets of her own. *Dangerous* secrets.

If Anthony insisted on playing games today he was going to get the surprise of his life.

A shout from outside made her stare through the window. A boy was kicking a ball around on the little green. His mother came out of a house, yelling at him to come in *right now*. When he ignored her she stormed over, grabbed him roughly by the arm and dragged him protesting into the house, leaving the ball rolling on the grass.

Rebecca couldn’t help but smile. Men never learned, did they. Why did they always insist on doing exactly what they shouldn’t?

Thank You.

Thank you for reading these sample chapters of R-Day. I hope you enjoyed them?

If you want to read the complete novel you can find links to it on my website.

<http://www.ptmayes.com>

Otherwise hotfoot it over to your local Amazon store where you will find it listed amongst the kindle ebooks.

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All the best - P.T. Mayes