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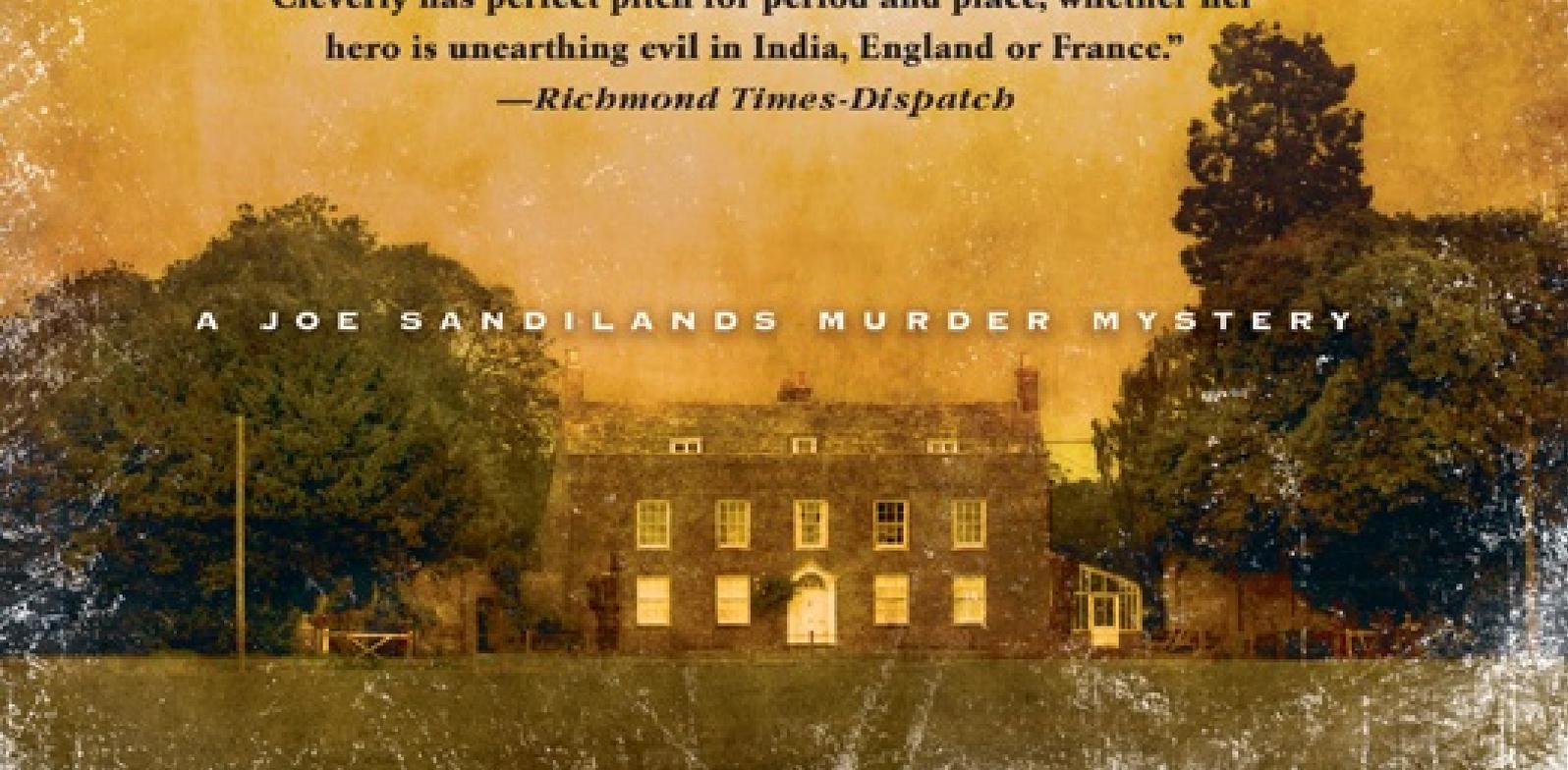
N O T M Y

B L O O D

"Cleverly has perfect pitch for period and place, whether her hero is unearthing evil in India, England or France."

—Richmond Times-Dispatch

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NOT MY BLOOD



Barbara Cleverly



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*This book is for
Daniel Joe,
my friend, advisor and grandson.*

*And for
Polly
whose flash of brilliance lit the way.*

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CHAPTER 1

SUSSEX, FEBRUARY 1933

Carrying more than a hint of snow, a southwesterly wind gusted up from the Channel, spattering the school's plate glass windows with sleety drops.

Mr. Rapson began to shout. Not a natural disciplinarian, he found he kept better control this way and was gratified by the knowledge that most of the boys at St. Magnus School, Seaford, were frightened of him. He affected a military style that most were familiar with from their own fathers. Peremptory and predictable. "Come along! No footer today, so we're going for a healthy walk. In pairs! Morrison! I said pairs! How many boys go to a pair? Two? That's right. Not three! Drummond? No one to walk with? Walk with Spielman. Come on, Spielman! Get a move on!"

Jackie Drummond didn't want to walk with Spielman. He didn't like Spielman. He had sticking-out teeth, and he never stopped talking, mostly giving rambling accounts of books he'd just read. At least he didn't expect a reply. This left Jackie free to work on his new plan: to run away as soon as possible.

Running away. The biggest sin you could commit, they said. But Jackie had heard of boys escaping from school—the older boys still talked about Peterkin, who'd run away ten years ago and never been brought back. Then there was Renfrew, who'd been in the year above Jackie. They'd said he'd been sacked for bad behaviour and sent to another school, but his best friend had other ideas. "Done a bunk," was his judgement. "Skipped off in the dead of night. Never even told me he was going." The best friend's knowing smirk gave out quite a different message. He'd collaborated. There were things he could tell. And probably had told—to the staff. Jackie learned from this. Even if he'd had a friend, he wouldn't breathe a word of his plans to him. If you're going, just go. Confide in no one.

For the hundredth time he reviewed the possibilities and consulted the list his mother had given him. He'd copied it into an exercise book to be on the safe side, but he carried with him the original in his mother's familiar handwriting. A charm. A talisman to be consulted when life got tough. There were Aunt Florence and Aunt Dorrie in Brighton, only five miles away. This option had the advantage that he could walk there, but the disadvantage that he could swiftly be brought back again. It was the first place they'd look. There were Mr. and Mrs. Masters in Camberley, but he wasn't sure where Camberley was, and he didn't like them very much anyway. His preference was for Uncle Dougal and Auntie Jeannie, his father's Scottish cousins in Perthshire. But Perthshire was a *very* long way away. And traveling on the

railways over here was expensive. The fare alone was over two pounds and, even with the best expectations of cash from his birthday, it would be weeks before he had the necessary funds.

Not for the first time he doubted his capacity, but a second look at Mr. Rapson, standing four-square in his college scarf and porkpie hat, ginger-coloured Harris tweed plus-four suit so nearly matching his foam-flecked and bristling moustache, convinced him that he had no tolerable alternative. And Rappo was shouting again.

“Before we set off we’re going for a little run. All of you—down to the corner and back again when I say go. Go!”

There was a wailing cry: “I’m cold, sir!”

This was Foster. Foster was recovering from a mastoid, and the biting wind gave him earache.

“Cold?” shouted Mr. Rapson. “Cold? Then run! That’s the way to keep warm!”

The run took its predicted course (Smithson fell and scraped his knee and had to go in to Matron), and the walk followed in the teeth of the rising wind, down to the end of Sutton Avenue. Jackie hoped they’d turn right and then with any luck the walk would lead past the station and give him another chance to check his escape route. He liked the phrase “escape route” and said it over to himself. “My escape route!”

“Yes,” he decided, “I’ll walk down Sutton Avenue, turn right at the bottom, go through that lane beside the biscuit factory. There’s not many street lamps here.” And if he wore his cycling cape over his uniform no one would know he was from one of the many preparatory schools in the town. As Spielman rambled on, unheeded, Jackie thought to himself, “Three weeks. That should be enough. I’ll go in three weeks!”

Back in the school changing rooms, Rappo called a halt to the shuddering, sniffing procession. “All right! Dismiss!”

The boys began to peel off their wet overcoats and hang them on the pegs to drip in dank rows.

“I said, ‘Dismiss!’ Don’t loiter about! Move!”

Spielman stood, looking goofy, as the boys would have said. Mr. Rapson’s voice rose and became shrill. His stomach ulcer made him tetchy. He was glad to discharge some of the tension on to a victim: Spielman had sat down—still talking—on a bench. “Blithering idiot! I told you to dismiss. I didn’t tell you to sit! Did I? No!” He leapt forwards and seized Spielman by his prominent ears and lifted him bodily to his feet. Spielman screamed in surprise and pain.

Jackie, hardly aware of what he was doing, rushed forwards. Indignation screwed his voice to a high-pitched squeal. “Leave him alone!” he shouted. “*Pagal!*” The Hindi word of abuse came easily to him. “Leave him alone!”

Mr. Rapson turned towards him in astonishment, and Jackie found his face within a few inches of Mr. Rapson’s waistcoat, girt with his watch chain. Rocking back on his heel and using all his small strength, he plunged his fist into Mr. Rapson’s midriff. He was crying with rage.

For a moment, time stood still. This was blasphemy of the most extreme kind. Such an outburst was totally without precedent. Masters hit you, you didn't hit them. Rapson was big and powerful, Jackie was small and insignificant. God only knew what would now ensue. The boys unconsciously began to back away, leaving Rapson and Jackie at the centre of a blighted space.

Rapson eyed Jackie, grim with menace. He inflated his tweedy ginger chest like an aggressive robin, and the boys shrank back farther. Smythe 3 hid his face behind a damp coat and whimpered. Finally, with chilling control, Rapson spoke: "I'll see you in my study after tea, Drummond. Six o'clock sharp! The rest of you—how many more times? Dismiss!"

The bell rang for tea. An audience gathered round Jackie. "You hit him! You actually hit him in the bread-basket! Gosh, you'll catch it, Drummond!"

"Did you see Rappo's face!"

"Six of the best," said Spielman, unimpressed by Jackie's intervention on his behalf, "at least. That's what you'll get. Six strokes on the stroke of six!" He began to titter.

Mr. Langhorne, one of the senior staff, was passing by on his way to supervise tea. He'd heard enough to guess what was going on. He gave Jackie a smile, saying jovially, "Take my advice. Fold a copy of the *Daily Sketch* in two and stick it down the back of your pants. I always used to. It helps."

The boys standing by laughed sycophantically, and Jackie went in to tea in total dismay.

He'd thought the day couldn't get worse but—wouldn't it just be his luck?—they'd been given luncheon meat, potatoes and beetroot, and he'd been put to sit next to Matron. Jackie was a well-brought up boy, and his father had taught him that good manners demanded that you make conversation with your neighbour. He did his best: "Do you know, Matron? Until I came to school, I thought that only servants had beetroot." He was aware that the remark had not gone down well, though he could not exactly see why. But then so many things had puzzled him since returning to England from his Indian childhood. The inevitable followed.

"Beetroot may be seen as only fit for servants from your elevated colonial viewpoint, Drummond, but some of us actually enjoy it. Be thankful for what you are given. You will stay here until you've finished what's before you!"

Jackie looked down at the mess on his plate. Beetroot juice seeping into the potato, turning it pink, luncheon meat slices curling at the edge, and a stale glass of water poured out a long time before. Matron went to whisper to Mr. Langhorne, and Mr. Langhorne said, "All dismiss except Drummond." And Jackie was left alone in the empty room, his plate still full before him.

But relief was at hand. Betty Bellefoy, who was in the estimation of the school the prettiest of the three parlour maids, took advantage of Matron's inattention and swept down upon him to whisk his plate away, replacing it with a dish of stewed plums and custard.

"Thanks, Betty," Jackie said, grateful.

“Ah, go on with you,” said Betty comfortably.

Jackie spent a long time over his stewed plums. The longer he took, the longer he could postpone his encounter with Rapson. Anything might happen. The school might catch fire. Perhaps his parents would appear in the doorway, or perhaps Uncle Dougal or perhaps the Brighton aunts. (Not impossible. They had once made an unscheduled visit.) But relief did not come. There was no way out. He was Sydney Carton on the scaffold; he was Henry V at Harfleur; he was Brigadier Gerard. What had he said?—“Courage, mon vieux! Piré took Leipzig with fifty hussars!” He passionately wished that fifty sabre-waving hussars would come clattering into the dining room and raze the school to the ground.

One by one the last remaining staff left. Matron went out closely followed by Mr. Langhorne, which was often the case. And Jackie was left alone in the darkening room with Betty. Three plums eaten and the stones carefully arranged on the rim of his dish. *Tinker, tailor, soldier....* He counted them again. That was a good place to stop. He’d settle for soldier today. Jackie had been rather taken with the one in the verse Mr. Langhorne had made them learn last week. The swashbuckling chap who was “full of strange oaths ... bearded like the pard ... sudden and quick in quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation even in the cannon’s mouth.” He wanted desperately to be old enough to swear and have a beard. He’d shown already that he was quick in quarrel. The whole school would be talking about his punch to the Rapson midriff. But, now, in the outfall, he felt much more like the frightened child his father had once hugged and called his “chocolate cream soldier.”

He screwed his eyes shut in an attempt to fight back tears. In his imagination his father’s big hand tightened around his, rough and reassuring.

Two plums remaining ... *sailor ... rich man....* Settle for “rich man”? Money was a good way of getting out of trouble. He would make a lot of it, buy up the whole school and close it down. That wouldn’t be bad. Perhaps he should force down the last two plums? Betty looked anxiously at the big school clock and back at Jackie, her eyes wide with appeal. She sighed.

Good manners overcame even the paralysis of terror, and Jackie roused himself. Never keep a lady waiting. He handed his plate up for the maid, and she dashed off into the kitchens in a gust of relief, muttering a word of thanks.

Time to move on and take his medicine.

He got up and put his chair away. What had Lloyd 2 said? “Don’t worry too much. It’s only a tickle. It’ll be over in five minutes. Brace up, Drummond! You’re a toff! Everyone’s saying so!”

A toff. At least “the bubble reputation” seemed to be coming his way. All he could do was shape up and try to deserve it.

On wobbly legs Jackie crossed the darkened hall, turned into the deserted corridor and began to climb the stairs to Rappo’s room. Into the cannon’s mouth.

CHAPTER 2

CHELSEA, LONDON. 1933.

Joe Sandilands stood looking down on the restless, steel-grey surface of the river reflected in the lights of a tugboat and listened while the bell of Chelsea Old Church struck the hour. His sister Lydia joined him, handing him a glass of whisky.

“The snow’s really coming down now,” she said. “Glad I rang Marcus to say I’d better stay over. Let’s hope it’s no more than a flurry and I can get a train in the morning. I don’t want to be snowed up in Chelsea staring at the Thames for a week.”

“No fun being marooned in London when you’ve already emptied Selfridges of its goodies,” Joe agreed. “I can see that. It’s the only time you’ll deign to visit me—when you need to go shopping.”

“There are compensations.” Lydia grinned. “It’s quiet here. No girls shrieking about the place. No husband asking how much I’ve spent. Grown-up conversation. And I thought, since we seem to be staying in tonight, we could listen to that play on the wireless. We’ll make a start on the box of chocolates we didn’t open at the theatre.”

Joe swished the curtains together, turned on another lamp, and emptied half a scuttle of coal onto the fire. “I loathe February. Nothing much happening.”

“The calm between the New Year madness and the spring urges,” Lydia said, nodding. She looked at the clock. “Come and settle down. Curtain up in two minutes. I say—you won’t be interrupted, will you?”

“That’s the big advantage of my new job. Any bodies found floating in the Thames get the attention of one of my superintendents.” Joe sank into an armchair. “And no one knows I’m here. Well, go on, then. Switch it on.” He eyed the radio console with misgiving. “Warm up its valves, tickle its tubes or whatever you do.”

Lydia approached the gleaming black bakelite altar and knelt before it. She began her ministrations, twiddling knobs and whispering encouragement until, after a series of nerve-rending shrieks and bleeps, a station tuned in. Dance music gushed into the room. A reedy tenor was warbling, “A room with a view and you ... ou ... ou....”

Joe laughed. “There! Noel Coward agrees with me. *Some* girls would appreciate a river view in Chelsea! No—hold that one—the play’s on straight after the Greenwich time signal.”

Jack Hylton’s band signed off in a smooth crescendo, and they’d counted the first five of nine pips when the telephone rang.

“Ah! Somebody knows where you are,” said Lydia.

Warily, Joe went to pick up the receiver. “Flaxman 8891, Joe Sandilands here.”

There was a pause and then a hurried and breathless small voice spoke. A boy’s voice. “Hullo? Hullo? Is that my Uncle Joe?”

Joe paused, unsure how to reply. He flashed a puzzled glance at Lydia. His sister had two offspring, both at home with their father in Surrey. And both girls.

“Yes, this is Joe,” he said carefully, “but who are you?”

“It’s Jackie, sir. Jack Drummond. I think I’m in a terrible crisis. This is an emergency.”

“Drummond?” Joe tried to make sense of what he was hearing. And, suddenly connecting, whispered, “Drummond.”

A recurrent nightmare gripped him, tightening its fingers around his throat. Struggling to find his voice and keep his tone level and reassuring, to sound like the staid old uncle the boy obviously took him for, “Jackie?” he said. “Well, well! Jackie! We’ve never met! You must be ... let me think ... ten years old by now?”

“Nine actually, sir. I’m going to be ten next month.”

“And where are your parents?”

“They’re in India. They brought me over to school in the summer, stayed for a while, and went back home. I spent Christmas with my aunts in Brighton.”

“I see. And this emergency—you’re going to tell me you’ve run out of pocket money, is that it?”

“No sir. This is real trouble I’m in. I was given your telephone number, but they said I wasn’t to use it unless I was in a crisis.”

“Where are you, Jackie?”

“I’m at Victoria Station. I’m in the stationmaster’s office. The lady policeman brought me here. I hadn’t got a ticket, you see. She’s waiting outside. They’re going to arrest me for traveling without a ticket. I’m scared. ...” The voice, which had been resolute, now had a break in it. “What shall I do, Uncle?”

“Well, what you do,” said Joe as calmly as he could, “is three things. First, stop worrying. Second, see if you can get yourself a cup of tea. Third, don’t hang up but put the phone down. Go and get the policewoman to come and speak to me. Oh, and fourth, Jackie, I’ll be there with you in twenty minutes. Look, it’s not the end of the world to be caught traveling without a ticket. I’ll bring some cash and bail you out.”

The reply was hushed, a voice trying to force down hysteria. “It’s not that, it’s not that at all, Uncle. You see, I’ve ... I’m afraid I’ve killed my form master.”

THE POLICEWOMAN’S VOICE was young, concerned and educated. “Good evening, sir. I take it I’m speaking to Assistant Commissioner Sandilands? Your nephew had your name and number clutched in his hand when I spotted him trying to

creep through the barrier. I ought to have taken him straight to a place of safety, I know, but....”

“You did exactly the right thing, Officer....”

“Huntingdon, sir. Emily Huntingdon, W.P. 955.”

“Good, well, listen, Huntingdon, I’m on my way. We have a delicate situation on our hands. I have reason to believe the boy may be a witness to a crime. Keep him safe where he is, will you? And I want you to make sure no one else approaches him, not even the local beat bobby.”

There was the slightest pause before Officer Huntingdon replied. “Understood, sir.”

“Now who on earth was that?” said his sister. “Who’s Jackie?”

Joe was already struggling into a pea-jacket. He picked up a flat cap with a leather peak he’d borrowed from a Thames bargeman and said, “I’m not absolutely certain, Lydia, but there’s trouble with a runaway boy. At Victoria Station. They’re holding him until I can get there.”

Lydia glared in exasperation. “A runaway? But why would you be involved, Joe? They don’t call out a grandee like you on a snowy evening to deal with a runaway!” Her expression softened. “Still—on a night like this ... poor little chap! But I thought you had women police patrols to round up the waifs and strays of London?”

“This is a rather special runaway, Lydia. Pass me those gumboots, will you? Oh, and it’s quite likely I shall be bringing him home with me.”

WINDING A MUFFLER round his neck, Joe clumped down three flights of stairs to the dimly lit hallway. Inevitably, a door opened, and the hearty voice of his landlord, ex-Inspector Jenkins of the Metropolitan Police greeted him. “Late call, sir?”

“Yeah, late call, Alfred.”

“Wrap up warm, then! It’s coming cold. Oh—sir! You can use the lift again on the way back. They’ve been in and fixed it.”

“My sister will be glad of that, Alfred. I’ll tell her.”

Joe stepped out into the street and to his relief there was a light in the cabbies’ shelter on the embankment. To his further relief there were two taxis in the rank and he ran across the road to claim one of them.

“Victoria Station,” he said. “And get me as near to the stationmaster’s office as you can.”

“No difficulty, sir,” said the cabby, ringing down his flag.

The snow was thickening as they drove the last few yards up Buckingham Palace Road and Joe looked anxiously at his watch. Twenty minutes, he’d said, and twenty minutes it was. He shouldered his way along the platform to the stationmaster’s office and saw, standing feet apart, hands behind her back, the reassuring figure of a policewoman.

“Huntingdon?” he asked.

She saluted neatly. Not many of the female officers could do this naturally. She looked bright, efficient, friendly. She did not, beyond a point, look

deferential. No one could add grace to the hideous high-crowned, wide-brimmed hat, nobody could look feminine or even female in the uncompromising blue serge skirt and the clumping shoes, but she managed, Joe noticed.

“Where’s the miscreant?” he asked, showing his warrant card.

“No miscreant, sir, you’ll find,” she corrected him with a smile. “No miscreant at all. Just a boy in trouble. Not uncommon around here.”

“Thank you for dealing with this. Enter your report. Say that I assumed custody. I’ll make it right with your governor, and I’ll take the lad in charge for the time being.”

“Your nephew, sir?”

“Not even that,” said Joe. “He’s newly arrived from India, and you know how it is in India—or perhaps you don’t? Any family friend becomes an honorary uncle. Or aunt.”

“I have one or two of those myself, sir.” Huntingdon’s smile was gracious, her eyes watchful. “Shall I come in with you?” she asked. “I think what our prisoner needs more than anything is something to eat, if I may suggest, sir. He’s had nothing really since breakfast as far as I can work out.”

Gently Joe pushed the door of the stationmaster’s office open and stood in silence looking in. He saw the stolid figure of the assistant stationmaster doing the crossword on the back of the Evening News, a company of teacups at his elbow and an ashtray brimming with cigarette ends in front of him. The general smell of police stations in the middle of the night greeted Joe, familiar and reassuring.

He tightened his jaw, breathed in, and steeled himself to take his first look at Jackie Drummond.

With legs swinging, a small fair-haired boy clutching a cycling cape about his shoulders looked up anxiously. An Afghan bag with a broad strap lay at his feet.

“Now, what on earth do I say?” Joe asked himself as they stared at each other. What he did finally say, with relief and a rush of recognition, was: “Jackie! I’d have known you anywhere—you’re very much like your mother!”

The small face, pinched, pale with bruised circles under the eyes, was suddenly lit by a radiant smile. “And you look quite like my dad!”

Joe held out a hand. “Come on then, Jackie, let’s be going. We can talk as we go. I’ll take your bag. Say goodbye to the stationmaster.”

“Goodbye, sir,” said the boy dutifully, “and thank you for having me.”

And, as they left the office, “Say goodbye to Constable Huntingdon.”

In the most natural way in the world, the boy shook hands and lifted his face for a kiss. “Thank you, Constable,” he said politely, “for looking after me.”

“I enjoyed looking after you. See you again soon, Jackie, I hope,” said Constable Huntingdon. “Oops! Perhaps I oughtn’t to say that!” she added, suddenly self-conscious, and seemed pleased with the swift grin of understanding the boy gave her.

Hand in hand they returned to the waiting taxi and set off once more through the slushy streets, gas lamps flickering in the rising wind and reflecting from the wet pavements.

“Have you been to London before, Jackie?” Joe asked.

“Once. Daddy brought me up for shopping. We went to Hamleys and the Tower and Madame Tussauds.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes, very.”

“Well, come on, we’ll find you something. I should think you’ve drunk enough tea tonight to float the Normandie.”

The boy smiled shyly. “Yes,” he said, “they kept giving it to me. I don’t really like tea very much.”

“We’ll find something else. Cocoa perhaps? Now, unless I’m wrong about this, you’ve run away from school?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I expect you had a reason?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You said you’d killed your housemaster?”

“No, sir. Form master.”

“Oh, all right. Form master. Anybody know where you are?”

“No, sir. I don’t even know where I am myself.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. We’re going to get you something to eat, and then we’re going back to my flat, and then either you’re going to bed or you’re going to tell me what’s been happening. Whatever you’ve done or *think* you’ve done, you’re safe now. Nobody’s following you. Nobody’s going to catch up with you.”

They dismounted at the cabman’s shelter. “What place is this?” said Jackie dubiously, not leaving go of Joe’s hand.

“It’s a cabman’s shelter,” said Joe reassuringly. “They have them all over London though not so many as there used to be. It’s a place where taxi drivers can get something to eat.”

“It looks like a railway carriage.”

Long, low, weather-boarded and painted park-bench green, it had a small black projecting iron stovepipe giving out a smell of coal smoke and food, and a notice saying “Licensed Cabman Shelter no. 402.”

“Yes, it is like a railway carriage and if the cabbies get to know you, they’ll let you eat there. I don’t think they’re supposed to; it’s supposed to be reserved for them. The man who runs this one’s an old friend of mine. I sometimes take people here for a quiet chat. Let’s go on board and see what we can find.”

They stepped from the cold street into a welcoming fug. “Evening, Frank,” said Joe to the whiskered man behind the counter. “Something for this gentleman to eat. He’s hungry.”

“Evening, Captain! Hungry is it? Well, what about shepherd’s pie with onion gravy?”

“Oh, I’d like that,” Jackie said eagerly.

“And to follow? We’ve got spotted dick with a dollop of custard?”

Jackie’s eyes lit on a basin of steaming pudding studded with dark currants, and he nodded.

“I think that would be entirely appropriate,” said Joe. “Make that two of everything, Frank, if you please. We’ll sit ourselves down.”

The boy settled and looked around him with suspicion. “ ‘Captain?’ he asked. “Why did that man call you ‘captain,’ sir?”

Joe could not hide a smile. Whatever else, this was a true colonial he was entertaining to supper. Death, flight and arrest the child was apparently taking in his stride, but the niceties of rank—that was worthy of question by a child reared in the Indian Civil Service.

“I was a very young captain in the Fusiliers when Frank first knew me.... Early days of the war ... Mons. I was winged manning the barricades—uselessly—against the first German onslaught on France. My rank did improve,” he reassured the lad, “but it’s the dashing captain image that’s stuck with me. I don’t mind at all. We all need a reminder of where we’ve come from. It’s a compliment.”

There were two other dark figures in the shelter, busy with substantial servings of pease pudding. They greeted Joe. “Evenin’, Guv.” One looked at Jackie and rolled his eyes in a pantomime of alarm. “Cor! That’s a right nasty piece of work you’ve got under restraint, Guv! If ’e makes a break for it, count on us for back-up!”

To Joe’s dismay, the boy began to tremble and look towards the door. Joe leaned forwards and whispered: “Just joking, Jackie. You’re safe here. Food’ll be up in a minute. No rush, but perhaps you could tell me a little bit about what happened this evening?”

At once the boy’s eyes glazed with remembered fear. His hand went to his eyebrow, and he began to rub at it with the knuckle of his forefinger. Accustomed as he was to interrogating suspects to cracking point, Joe recognised the gesture as a sign of acute distress and cursed himself for an insensitive fool. He reached over, seized the little hand, and gave it a squeeze. “There’s no hurry,” he said once more. “Just take your time.”

The boy took a while to pull his thoughts together and then burst out: “Well, it’s Mr. Rapson! I hate him,” he added almost apologetically. “Everybody knows I hate him, and when they find he’s dead they’ll know it’s me that did it.”

“I’m not sure of that,” said Joe, “but go on.”

“Well, they will know because I’ve attacked him before.”

“Great heavens!” Joe said lightly. “Are you telling me you’ve got previous? I mean ... that you’re a seasoned beater-up of form masters?”

Jackie gave him a pained smile. “Just once, sir.” And then he burst out: “I hit him! I went for him! Perhaps I shouldn’t have done. But I don’t think I was wrong. There’s a boy in my class called Spielman, and he’s not ... not really all there, you know. He makes silly faces. He can’t help it.”

“Silly faces?”

“Yes. Like this.” He gave a demonstration. “And he looks—well—loopy. He’s got big ears—great big ears and sticking-out teeth and everybody teases him. And Rappo’s the worst of all. He’s always going for him, making him stand out in front of the class, and this afternoon he pulled Spielman up by his ears. By his ears! Spielman started crying. It must have really hurt him. He’s only just got over a mastoid. I lost my rag, and I went and hit Rappo.”

“Hit him?”

“Hit him in the stomach. With my fist. As hard as I could manage. That hard, sir.” He held out for inspection a small hand whose knuckles were skinned and swollen. “I got him in his watch chain. And then he went into the usual Rappo Rant. ‘See you in my study after supper, Drummond!’ and all that.” Jackie shuddered and fell silent. “Pretty scary!”

With a flick of a tea cloth, plates of shepherd’s pie appeared on the table.

“Mustard, sonny? Ketchup? Cupper tea?”

“No, no cupper tea, thank you, but everything else, please.”

Between mouthfuls, Jackie resumed. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have hit him, but I didn’t think Dad would have minded. Once, he saw a soldier, a private in the East Yorks, hitting a little Indian man, and Dad really let him have it! Felled him to the ground,” he added with relish. “And my father’s a ... well, you know my father. He said you always ought to stand up to bullies, and this seemed to be the same. Don’t you think?”

“Yes,” said Joe, “I do think. And I know Andrew would have done just the same. He’s not a man to stand by and see injustice done.”

“That’s right, sir!” Jackie nodded with pride. “He’s not strong, my dad, but he never lets a game leg hold him back.”

“No indeed,” said Joe softly. “I’ve stood shoulder to shoulder with Andrew in—er—difficult circumstances and been glad of his strength.”

The pie disappeared at surprising speed. The pudding followed. Jackie’s face acquired some colour, but his speech began to slur and his eyelids began to droop.

“You don’t have to finish,” said Joe comfortingly.

“I want to finish.”

Tea-towel round his stomach, the proprietor walked over to them. “You all right, son? Had enough have you? There’s more if you want it.” And then to Joe, “Time this one was in bed, I think, Captain?”

Joe had come to the same conclusion. He’d decided that Jackie was the type of witness whom you couldn’t hurry, but who, if left to himself, would produce, by degrees, an accurate statement. “Just one thing,” he said, “and then we’ll go home. After this confrontation with Rappo you decided to run away?”

“Oh, no. I decided to run away a long time ago. I was only waiting until I’d collected enough money to get to Uncle Dougal in Scotland. But I had to, well, bring my plans forwards a bit and go for it tonight. I was ready. I had my running away bag all packed.” He gestured towards his shoulder bag. “I knew

I had to get away before anyone found me, and then I thought, I'll use the number Mum gave me. Killing someone's an emergency all right, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Joe, "you did the right thing."

While they'd been in the shelter the snow had begun to lie and wind-blown snow was sticking to the southerly face of the power station chimney stacks. Slated roofs were turning from grey-blue to white.

"That's where we're going," said Joe, pointing, "that lighted up window there. That's my flat. My sister—your Aunt Lydia, I suppose—is at home and still up, you see. People sometimes think it's a funny place to live, but I like it."

A reassuring figure in dressing gown and slippers, Lydia was standing in the hall as Joe unlocked the door.

"Hullo!" she said. "And who's this?"

"Jackie Drummond, Aunt Lydia. I'm sorry to be arriving so late."

Though clearly puzzled, Lydia moved smoothly into action. "That's quite all right, Jackie. I took the opportunity of making up a camp bed in the box room. You must be exhausted! What about a nice hot bath and then bed? Here, let me take your cape."

Lydia put out a motherly hand to unbutton his cycling cape and the boy abruptly pulled away from her in alarm, clutching it tightly round his shoulders.

"What's the matter, Jackie?" said Joe.

Jackie looked from one to the other and then, apparently coming to a decision, took off his cape and handed it to Lydia. Lydia gasped. Joe swallowed. The front of the boy's uniform, white shirt, grey shorts and grey blazer were covered in rusty-red stains.

"It's not my blood, sir," whispered Jackie. "It's Mr. Rapson's."

JOE AND LYDIA stared at each other and then at Jackie in silence for a moment until Joe collected himself.

"Well," he said, "first things first. And the first thing is to get out of those clothes and into a bath. Have you got pyjamas in your exit bag? Good. Lydia, why don't you take him? Put his clothes in a bag and keep them together. They just might be evidence. Of something or other.... Go with Aunt Lydia, Jackie."

Lydia slipped an arm round Jackie. "Come on then," she said, "let's posh you up a bit. And we'll see if we can find a plaster for that hand. You look as though you've gone five rounds with Jack Dempsey." They left the room together.

When Lydia returned Joe was staring out of the window at the dark river and the fluttering snow. He turned, and brother and sister looked at each other in amazement.

"It's all right," said Lydia, breaking the awkward silence, "he's enjoying his hot bath. I gave him your model battleship to play with. Tell me, Joe—what is all this? You look absolutely shattered! You've looked as though you've seen a

ghost ever since you came back with that boy. Just what *is* going on? What *has* happened to him? Who's Mr. Rapson? And, for heaven's sake—who is *he*?"

"Lydia," said Joe, "you're not going to believe this—I'm not sure I believe it myself but ... oh, God, could I be wrong about this? I think ... I'm almost certain ... that boy is my son!"