

Draft

Between the Sea and Sky

Chapter One

My brother died at 45, in the summer of 1968. He fell from the top of cliff top at Saltdean, on the outskirts of his hometown of Brighton. I was more than four thousand miles away in Aden when it happened. It took me five days to arrange some compassionate leave, and then bum a lift on a Hercules to the UK, get into civvies and find my way from Brize Norton, via brief detours to Whitehall and the regiment headquarters in Kent, to finally arrive in Brighton. I had not seen or talked to him for fifteen years. It was too late now, so it did not seem that a couple more days would make any difference.

He had not left much, no wife, no children, not even a dog, just a basement office and a one-bed flat above, tucked away in a less than desirable part of Brighton. There was a battered pedestal desk at one end, an old Remington typewriter holding down a solid, but scarred pine table off to one side next to an equally bruised filing cabinet and a few threadbare chairs. The walls, once magnolia, were now tinged with nicotine as they tried to blend in with the dirty brown of the carpet. The window was set high up and frosted, presumably with the intention of preventing inquisitive passers from looking down on proceedings. I found it hard to imagine that the dull brass plate outside, marked John Granta LLB (Cantab) Solicitor and Commissioner of Oaths, would have generated any such curiosity.

I tried to picture him getting up from behind the desk, greeting each client, courteously inquiring about their problems, calming their concerns and carefully leading them through their options. Was that how he treated his customers? I had no real idea. But

I only knew the John from fifteen years ago. Surely he had changed since our last meeting? Then he had been capable and perceptive with a deep and shrewd appreciation of both the good and bad in human nature. He had been a man at the top of his game, with a double first from Cambridge, on a fast track pupillage in prestigious chambers, a member of Lincoln's Inn, in love with the Law and the senior partner's daughter. Less than five years later, it had all gone. A spectacular failure in court, a messy divorce from a disappointed and bitter wife, and an affair with the bottle left him with nothing. That must have changed him surely. But even then the law would not leave him alone. Or maybe it was the other way round. In any case, he spent the last thirteen years of his life in this dingy office, wrapped up in dealing with the minutia of ordinary life; contested wills, neighbours arguing over a party wall or granny's forgetful shoplifting offence in the magistrates' court. Maybe he had been happy, maybe he had been hiding from his past, maybe he found some sort of contentment in fixing other peoples' problems. I doubted I would ever know.

Even though I would never speak to him again, he still had some words for me. I had read them, an hour ago, in Willmott and Weatherby, another solicitor's office in a much more salubrious part of Brighton. Willmott, the senior partner, told me that my brother had named me as joint executor, along with Willmott and Weatherby. It seemed strange that a solicitor should need another solicitor to see them off this earth. For a moment, Willmott's office, with its heavy mahogany desk, and walls lined with law books and journals seemed rather oppressive. The thick carpet and heavy curtains gave it a rather dead acoustic, rather like a funeral parlour. One way or another, the final details of many people lives would be concluded in an office like this, even if their physical life concluded elsewhere.

“Who will bury the last solicitor?”

“I beg your pardon, Major Granta?”

I realised I had been daydreaming and had spoken my question aloud. Unconcerned,

Willmott continued,

“Now, to get to the matter at hand. Until the coroner issues the death certificate, I cannot conduct a formal reading of the will. But, since the will is essentially very simple, I can informally tell you of its contents. You are the sole beneficiary. This means both his business and personal assets pass over to you. His practice was not I’m afraid very active, but it is solvent, so there is a little money there - and of course, there are the business assets in terms of the office and contents. And then of course he had a small number of personal investments, and the house and personal possessions. The house and office do have a small mortgage, however. All of this comes to you.”

“I see. Well, I know nothing about the law. It was John that was fascinated by it - he loved the precision of the legal language and the intellectual puzzle of finding an elegant way of arguing that the law was always in favour of his client. I prefer the Army’s rather more robust approach to winning an argument - so I’m not quite sure what I will be able to do with a solicitor’s practice.”

Actually, I had had quite a lot of experience with the law in my military career. Mostly, I had been doing my best to step around the obstructions of the international laws of various countries, with the intention of avoiding their courts and jails. But I had no desire to transfer this experience and get embroiled in the genteel torts and disputes of a English seaside town.

“Most likely I would probably end up selling the practice and the house. Is that likely to be problematic do you think?.”

“No, not all, Major. It would be exactly what we expected. The terms of the will mean you will inherit the Director’s shares in the business. You can then either employ a

solicitor to run the business or simply sell you share in the business to existing practice. But we are perhaps getting a little ahead of the procedures. For the moment, we need to get a death certificate - or least an interim certificate so that the funeral can go ahead. And I imagine you will want to look over the properties and perhaps spend a little while before you make any plans. There is one more thing. John left a personal letter for you.”

Willmott passed me a thin envelope, impressively sealed with a large blob of sealing wax. My name was handwritten on the front. I broke the seal and extracted the single sheet of paper. It simply said:

*Cremation not burial. I'd rather get it over with now, and forestall any further burning in the afterlife. Jonnie.*

He was just trying to be humorous, but neither I nor Willmott smiled. That's not how it worked - it was your soul that burnt in perpetuity. Instead, Willmott gave me a folder of documentation including the address of the morgue, a list of funeral parlours and my brother's office and flat keys.

I had seen too many dead bodies to have any immediate desire to see another, so I put the morgue at the bottom of my mental to-do list. What difference would it make? I knew I would need to make arrangements for the funeral, but I had no doubt John wouldn't mind waiting a little longer. I would need to speak to the coroner and Police, but that could wait too. Mostly I wanted some time to think. I had often reminded the cadet officers in my classes at Sandhurst that Wellington had once said 'Time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted', and if they managed to emulate his track record, they would be doing fairly well. So I had leisurely walked the mile and a half along the Brighton front, past the four-star hotels and the Regency squares, resisting the Kiss Me Quick hats and the halter skelter on the Place

piers, and the penny arcades and the fish and chips on the Western Pier until I eventually reached Portslade. John's accommodation was in a street leading up the hill away from the front. He had the bottom two floors of a Victorian townhouse, in the middle of what must have once been a moderately fashionable terrace. I stood, looking around his office, the only witness now to the last years of his life, trying to sense who my brother had become, trying to recall his face, trying to recall if he had ever called himself Jonnie. I was certain he hadn't. That perhaps was when I started wondering if someone had killed him and why.

The police verdict was accident death. And perhaps they were right. They had presumably seen any evidence at the scene, the circumstances of the discovery of the body, and they would, I hoped, have looked for evidence of any third party participation. They had apparently found nothing but just a careless accident. The coroner would look carefully at the post mortem result and the police report, and no doubt agree. There probably would not even be a formal inquest - the coroner could simply release the body, write up the paperwork and John would be tidied away with the minimum of effort. It did not sit comfortably in my stomach though. The John I knew would never have been that careless to step off a cliff in the middle of the night. He was too prudent, too rational to allow a simple slip to end his life. Maybe, though, he had changed in fifteen years. Maybe the missteps of his youth had finally caught up with him and led him to that cliff top, and over the edge, accidentally or even on purpose. Somewhere in my stomach I had a feeling though that I should not believe that. The family motto *numquam dedere pugnam - never surrender the fight* had been drummed into us from birth. Whatever his battle had been, it was over now, but I was still here to conclude his campaign.

I spent a couple of hours going through the office and flat. I had been right. The papers in his desk and filing cabinet did indeed show a story of wills, divorces, disputes between neighbours, evasion of speeding tickets, briefs for petty thieving, embezzling the

charity shop's funds and so on. It was a colourful if depressing view of humanity. The accounting ledgers showed his accounts to be modestly but not greedily profitable. I found nothing that would suggest anyone would want to kill him. Nor indeed any reason he might want to kill himself.

By that time, it was just past one o'clock. I wondered what John would have done for lunch. There was little food in the flat. What there was was over ten days old and looked decidedly dubious. I locked up and stepped out into the street in the search of sausage and chips.

[1767 words]