

Apartment C

chapter 3

CARL SAT ON the balcony and eyed the passers-by. The woman from the beach appeared. He leaned forward. As she came into focus, he realised that this was a different woman, who, though still beautiful, was closer to his age. He felt embarrassed, suddenly conscious of his delinquency. Now that Angela was back, he was aware of his excitement, making him especially uncomfortable, as though scaling the barbed fence between paternalism and a more elemental desire.

Angela had dropped out of the sky, much as he had. In those first hours space opened up around him and he threw himself into it, telling the swarthy taxi driver at the airport to take him wherever he liked. The driver casually nodded and then drove like a drunken teenager towards the city, lurching one way then the other, now and then caught in tussles of beeping and gesturing. Construction work was going on all around; the hammering of pneumatic drills, the chant of a new world. Rows of towering witches hats ran alongside the highway, the roadwork half finished, scattered figures waving through cars. In the city, scorched men stood on the rooftops of old apartment buildings, raising buckets of cement on makeshift trolleys and screaming in hawking tongues over the dull noise of drills and traffic. Carl held his face up to the open window of the taxi, the chaos washing over him, its monotony soothing.

Only now did it seem incredible that the driver knew where to go. Then, Carl took it in his dream-like stride. As the driver swung around Columbus's Column, scattering a huddle of tourists, Carl saw the young bicyclist, as he often had over the past weeks, a few seconds after impact—his body perfectly curled

as though moulded from rubber, his bones bent into impossible angles. Carl's stomach contracted, vision clouded, for a moment he was falling. He pressed his hands into his thighs, breathing steadily, centring himself in space once again.

It had happened a month earlier after Carl had fled Brian Dunmore's office clutching his mother's Will. There was a weak *see you* and a small cry from the receptionist and he was back in the Fulham Road. Some years before his mother had become ill, she had sacked Carl as her lawyer and hired Brian in his place, for reasons of impartiality, she said. Carl had wondered then about his mother's intentions. Brian, it turned out, was far from neutral. The first husband of Carl's maternal aunt, he was always keen to give personal counsel—depending on the business at hand, his routine switching from garden gnome to brass Buddha. That afternoon, as Brian read out the Will, Carl had questioned his mother's possession of the apartment, which years before she had told him was sold. He wondered whether this was the reason she had taken Brian on as her lawyer. When he asked why she had kept it a secret, Brian had suggested, chin lowered into clenched hands, winged eyebrows raised, that Carl go to Spain to *sort it out*—it had been enough to drive Carl into the street.

A watery black band shrouded the sky, suspended above the low grey cloud. Of course, he should have turned away. Instead, feeling reckless, he looked up and basked in its darkness, following its path as it moved slowly across, gripped by the sensation that he was falling, that the earth was pulling him down. Finally, queasiness forced him to look away. Since his mother's death, it was as though he was seeing the world through someone else's eyes; his own eyes cast only upon himself. The footpath seemed a gross imitation, the overpriced restaurants and bars, packed with lunchtime business, cheap film sets, the clientele swaggering in sensational poses. He was conscious too of his reluctance to face Lucy, to tell her his secret.

As he passed a particularly garish café – gilded statuettes, fountains, mirrors –, he wondered whether he could simply vanish, quietly slip away, or at least delay his return home until he once again felt a primary connection to the world. Of course, he had to believe that such a time would come. Just then, a taxi appeared. The kindly looking driver, faded orange hair, twinkling blue eyes, leaned towards the passenger window and in an unusually falsetto voice told him to get in. He climbed into the cabin, closed his eyes and imagined being whisked away to a dense forested kingdom where he would quietly live out his days with the elves and fairies. After a while, he opened his eyes and looked out the window. It was the same toothed city. The clouds, now a uniform grey, hung humid and low, breathing down his neck.

They were approaching the intersection of Grays Inn and Clerkenwell

roads when Carl first noticed the cyclist. He was speeding like a lunatic along Clerkenwell Road, his whirling spokes giving the impression he was floating a few inches above the ground. His shoulder length hair was greasy and straggly and he wore a rough black beard. His jeans were faded and hung in shreds around the knees, and his white shirt billowed behind him. He could very well have been a vision, a ghost perhaps—vulnerable and unreal.

Carl formed all these impressions in a flash, because it was only seconds before he realised that his driver was making a left-hand turn into Theobalds Road, directly in front of the cyclist. The moment slowed as he watched the cyclist race towards them, his expression surprisingly serene. Carl choked a sound, the words caught in his throat, his body frozen. Perhaps his driver and the cyclist saw each other at exactly that same moment. That suspended moment when you know you are about to have an accident, when everything stops. He had always associated these moments with a kind of eroticism. Like giving into fate. Like succumbing to your ultimate fantasy. He hoped death would be like that. Like the greatest sexual act. He wondered if at this point the cyclist felt a rush of adrenaline. Everyone was waiting; the woman on the footpath clutching her red shawl, the young boy walking his bull terrier, the passengers on the bus standing at the traffic lights, the driver, Carl. They were all holding their breaths to see what was going to happen. What happened was unexpected and beautiful. The cyclist swung his bicycle out into an arc, all the time remaining within a few inches of the taxi. As they turned, the cyclist moved with them. Carl's back arched, his mind alert, he felt a swelling pride as he followed his impromptu dancing partner through the side window. The further they pushed out, the wider the arc drawn by the bicycle—throughout the movement keeping a perfect measure of distance.

Carl became aware too of the tension pressing on his chest, conscious of the danger of two bodies moving at speed so close to each other. There was something else. He could not help feeling that the vulnerability of the cyclist gave him the upper hand. He had the power to dictate terms. The taxi was bigger and stronger and more likely to lose control, to strike without consideration of the long-term consequences—manslaughter or perhaps murder. As the driver completed his turn, the cyclist continued his arc towards the other side of the road.

“Bloomin’ ‘ell!”

The taxi driver's exclamation coincided with Carl's own little shriek as the cyclist ploughed into the fender of an old grey Mercedes. His body rolled up into the air, a flurry of white and blue, and across the bonnet and into the windscreen. It lay snugly against the slanted fractured glass, perfectly still, curled as a foetus. In those seconds, Carl felt overcome by embarrassment and faint disgust, as

though he had come upon a stranger having a fit. The taxi driver kept going past the car and through the intersection. Carl twisted around to follow the action, but within seconds, everything grew small.

"Get-way *mediterráneo*."

They had reached Port Vell. The driver lifted his hand in a vague gesture.

"Bild *Cataluña*."

Carl looked back towards the cranes and works going on behind them. They were expanding the port again, pushing it further south, transforming the dockyards into more shops and museums, as if they needed them. A few minutes later, Carl placed a wad of five hundred peseta notes in the driver's hand. He slipped the money into his jacket and murmured *thank-you* or *fuck you*, Carl couldn't be sure, before speeding off and leaving him in front of the Hotel Peru.

The hotel looked as though it had gone through several face-lifts; each floor of a different architecture—from stolid Georgian to giddy wrought iron. The facade too transformed from a raw red brick on the left-hand side through to a cream render on the right. The building next door was covered in scaffolding and this draped in fine green gauze. A canvas flag ripped in the breeze declaring *rehabilitación* and *mantenimientos*.

He pushed open the hotel door. A girl's voice, raised and hoarse, echoed down the stairwell. He dreaded walking in on a domestic dispute and hung back for a few seconds before climbing the stairs and noisily pushing open the door. Her hands clasped together, she was facing a man across the wide curved counter.

"Don't you understand?"

She turned as Carl entered the lobby, fixing him with orb-like brown eyes. Her face was pale, her eyes bruised and red. Thick dark eyebrows fanned over them, the delicate skin below the left one puckered by a silver stud. Her short roughly chopped hair, bleached to a fine white, stuck out like hay, a deep widow's peak giving her face a heart shape, echoing bow red lips. She wore a silky green dress, a brown knitted shawl draped around her shoulders.

"Hello."

"You're English?"

"Yes."

"I'm Welsh."

He wondered if she was about to tell a joke, but instead her cow eyes blinked back tears. She covered them with her hands, which were large and raw-looking as though she'd been scrubbing them.

"Buenos días. ¿ingles?"

He nodded at the man, surprised to see that he was wearing faded overalls splattered with paint, a third trimester belly resting in his lap. Carl guessed he was the landlord. He was dark with large hazel eyes crowned by thick heavy eyebrows, and would have once been handsome. The bottom of his face was an even brush of grey and black bristles, the top a simple plan of lines encrusted with flecks of white paint. Lodged behind one of his large webbed ears were three cigarettes like a strange tribal ornament. He now shrugged at the girl and curled his mouth into a clown's frown. Carl touched her arm, catching the fresh scent of lavender. She had broad shoulders, small firm-looking breasts and a slim waist. His gaze surprised him and he quickly looked away. She dropped her hands from her face, sniffed loudly and pulled a large white handkerchief from her bag. She gave it a quick shake. For a moment, Carl expected a dove to appear. She screwed the handkerchief into her eyes and blew her nose.

"I'm glad you're here."

He wondered if she'd recognised him.

"Yes, of course", he replied too quickly, sucking in the air. He could hear Lucy's flat matter-of-fact voice reproaching him for *fading out*.

"It's just that you're English and he doesn't understand and I need someone to help make him understand."

As she spoke, he noticed a small dark brown mole riding the left side of her upper lip, around it a meadow of fine blonde hairs.

"Understand what?"

"She-no-have-money."

The landlord spoke slowly and firmly, his head resting on his clasped hands, his blank expression one of boredom. The girl rolled her eyes, turned to him and reared her head with silent movie aplomb.

"She-yes-have-money!"

She turned back to Carl. "I've got at least five hundred pounds."

"That's good," he murmured, irritation suddenly radiating from his centre. He realised then that he hadn't eaten since morning. His stomach felt as though it had been punctured and turned inside out.

"It's the ATM. It won't give me my money."

"It's probably out of order."

She smiled showing square chimpanzee-like teeth.

"You believe me at least."

She jerked her head at the landlord, whose eyes were now half closed as he continued to scrutinise her, and lowered her voice.

"He's suspicious of everybody. I've been here for almost a month but he still

thinks I'm trying to cheat him. He won't give me back my passport until I pay him. I'm supposed to be going down to Valencia tomorrow."

Carl was tempted to tell her that he didn't care, that he was feeling weak and just wanted to eat. Instead, he turned to the landlord.

"Can I leave my suitcase...?"

He nodded. Carl gestured towards the door.

"Let's go to the machine."

She gave a victory shake of her fists, which loomed threateningly above him for a moment.

"Thank you!"

She turned on her heels, tan mules that suited her solid ankles and shapely legs, and pushed open the door. In an instant, she grew into a woman, her firm thighs and slim hips visible beneath the silky material of her dress.

The landlord gestured behind the desk. "I lock your bag here."

Carl handed him his suitcase. "The girl will bring you the money."

He turned his reckoning eyes upon Carl, tallying his chances, and murmured "Good luck."

It was a warm evening. Now there were many more people promenading on the street. Carl freely contemplated the girl. She was pretty in an old fashioned way. Her unusually large eyes, round face, bow lips and short hair gave her the appearance of an actress from a nineteen twenties peep show; a pale sylph strewn in garlands of mauve flowers, wriggling through some Greek fertility dance.

"Dirty old prick."

He wondered if he had spoken aloud. Lucy had mentioned his increasing absentmindedness that several times caught him by surprise.

"He pretends to be an artist. I've never seen anything he's painted. He wears his paint-splattered clothes to impress girls. Good luck to him. He says I'm a gypsy...says I should go home, settle down, marry the boy next door..."

She gestured along the street.

"The machine's down there. Got a name?"

He felt like a child who had lost his mother in the crowd.

"Carl."

He put out his hand. She looked at it and then reached out.

"Angela."

His was a practised shake – years of diplomacy – a firm but non-committal hold.

He kept his head down as they circumnavigated couples and families, conscious of being recognised, though there, in Barceloneta, he thought it unlikely.

"Are you worried about being seen with me?"

Her eyes held him, the stud glinting against her pale skin.

"It's okay." She continued. "I don't mind."

Carl pinched his shirt – it was surprisingly humid for September – and glanced up at the faces floating by. Some were smiling and others vacant, busy with their affairs—brooding husbands, angry wives, fickle children. Occasionally, a couple appeared out of the dull round of family business, dazed by the breathlessness of early love. He looked for Angela. She was several yards in front. As he hurried to catch up, he felt a surge of emotion, wanting to be recognised, to tell someone why he had left his life in London. But the faces streamed past and, for the moment, it was a lost cause.

They reached the ATM. Angela inserted her card and keyed in the pin number. She pressed a series of buttons and waited. The machine beeped and pushed out the card. She went to take it but the machine pulled it back in and then spat it out again.

"I don't understand."

She turned the card around in her hand, running her fingers over the magnetic strip.

"Are you sure you've got this money left?"

"Yes."

"No one else has access to your account?"

"No."

Her eyes began to well.

"Let me try."

He wasn't sure what he had in mind. Still, he wanted to cover every possibility before the question of a loan came up. It wasn't the money, but the involvement. He had come here to be alone, Lucy's silence carrying thick in his ear. He wondered though whether this was an excuse and he was simply scared of what life had in store, scared that it may not be much, after all. He slipped the card into the slot and stood back.

"Key in your pin number and press OK."

She stepped up to the screen and did as he asked.

"Is your account credit or other?"

"It's MasterCard... I loaded it with money before I left."

"Which button have you been pressing?"

"Other. It doesn't list..."

He pressed credit and then other. This time the screen came up.

"You mean I've been pressing the wrong button?!"

She pushed the 5000-peseta button. The machine whirled, clicked and spat out the money in five crisp notes along with her card and a receipt.

"You did it! You bloody well did it!"

She bundled the money and card into her bag and stepped up to him. He stepped back and she forward. For a moment they danced a pas de deux. She laughed and planted a kiss on his cheek. His hand flew up to the spot as though he had been burnt. She blushed.

"I've made a fool of myself."

"Go back to the hotel and pay the landlord."

"Is that an order?"

He realised that he had raised his voice.

"Of course not."

"I want to take you out to eat. I know this place. It's cheap and the food's good."

"I can pay."

Her face glowed. "You know I've got money."

He looked past her for a moment and then found her eyes. They were narrowed as though she'd caught him out. He felt his mouth draw up into a tight smile.

"Another time?"

She lifted her shoulders. They were unusually broad and square for her slight figure.

"That thing with the machine—it's never happened before."

She turned and walked away.

"See you..."

His voice fell dead. He wondered whether the story about the money had been true after all.