

CHAPTER 1

James Clifton stepped out of the newsagents, tucking his copy of the *Daily Telegraph* under the arm of his Savile Row suit jacket and crossed Hampstead High Street. He was thinking about his girlfriend, Kate, their meal last night, the way she slightly tilted her head towards him as she smiled when he held her hands across the restaurant table and told her as so many times before how much he loved her. Ten seconds earlier, or later, he wouldn't have been hit by the speeding Land Rover. Its radiator crunched against his ribs. His body was thrown six or seven feet. He hung in the air for a moment then hit the ground with a thud, rolled over and came to rest on his back on the opposite side of the road.

He lay unconscious in the early morning September sunshine that had a hint of autumn from a breeze that blew sheets of his newspaper across the pavements. The only visible signs of injury were gashes along his temple. Blood dripped from one, staining his white shirt with a red abstract pattern. Another dripped off his chin. The Land Rover driver snatched a glance in his mirror and accelerated away. A couple taking breakfast at a pavement café rushed to help. A woman shouted above the din of car engines "Don't move him" and dialled 999. Another passer-by said he should be covered up and kept warm, and rushed across the road to a charity shop. Hooters began to sound from motorists further back wondering why the traffic wasn't moving.

The police were the first of the emergency services on the scene and began shepherding people back. Within minutes there was the sound of an ambulance siren. One paramedic checked James's breathing then looked for injuries, examining his head, arms and legs. The other put an oxygen mask over James's nose and mouth, then secured a collar around his neck. Onlookers, mumbling and speculating, tried to press forward but the police kept them back. The pair eased James onto a scoop and gently slid him into the ambulance, radioing a blue alert, and within seconds they were on their way.

CHAPTER 2

Harry Clifton sat behind his large desk. He felt tired. From the strain of it all, he supposed, as he checked his Rolex. He wondered where James was. He'd told him nine sharp. He wanted this sorted once and for all between himself, his son, and Sidney opposite. And now it was half past!

"I told him nine. It must be the traffic. You want something Sidney? Tea, coffee?" He pressed his intercom and asked Lauren if James was in yet. She said no. Then he asked her to get someone to rustle up some coffees.

"Have you seen this morning's *FT*?" Sidney asked. He pulled a copy from his briefcase. The black headline stark against the pink background.

'CONTINENTAL NEAR IN CLIFTON TAKEOVER.'

Harry stared at his long-time friend. At the silvery hair, the horn-rimmed glasses.

"If they get control, Harry, they'll surely find out what you've been up to and you'll be in it right up to your neck and..."

There was a knock. Lauren came in with a tray. She and Sidney exchanged hellos. She asked after his wife and his daughter. Harry asked if James was in.

"Not yet."

"I want him up here as soon as he arrives."

"Sure!" She stopped at the door and with Sidney's back towards her blew Harry a kiss.

“Don’t worry, Sidney. It’ll all work out regardless of what the *FT* say. Because I got plans.” His intercom buzzed. Lauren said James’s phone was on voicemail.

Sidney checked his watch.

“Going to have to leave, Harry. Places to go, people to sue! Ring me when James turns up. Maybe we’ll get together this afternoon.” He was at the door re-clasping his briefcase when he said, “A piece of advice, although of course I know nothing about what’s been going on. Get rid of Highview ASAP; it connects you too easily to the fraud.” And he closed the door behind him.

Harry put his feet up on the desk. Sleepless nights had made his face drawn and white, the bags under his eyes a little heavier.

“Fuck it!” he exploded throwing his desk diary across the room. He knew he should have told James about Highview long before James found out for himself. Then again, perhaps not. His son was too honest. Harry wondered where it came from. Betty, of course! Bending the rules was one thing. But downright fraud? No. James wouldn’t have accepted it. He’d have insisted it stopped there and then and that was now easier said than done. Because there was so much work in the pipeline from the fraudulent contracts that couldn’t be unscrambled.

Harry went to the window, and stared out over Regent’s Park and to the west at the BT Tower. At the irregular line of steel- and glass-fronted office blocks shimmering in the sunshine among which his flats and housing developments

made him money. Lots of it. He picked up his diary, then looked up Sean Crossland, a private detective he used now and again, and dialled.

“Mr Clifton. How are you?”

“Fine, and you?”

“I’m good.”

“Got a little job for you, Sean.”

“What kind?”

“*Your* kind!”

“Oh?”

“Not on the phone.”

“When d’you want to meet?” Sean asked.

“As soon as possible,” Harry replied.

“Tomorrow?”

“Where?”

“I’m over in Hackney all day. D’you know it?”

“Very well. It’s where Mrs Clifton lived when she was single and where I did my first deal.”

“There’s a pub, The Duke of Urswick, just by Hackney Downs station. Say 7 p.m.?”

“See you then.”

Harry switched his mobile off and gently tapped it against his jaw. Crossland was going to be important, he told himself, because the way out of this mess was going to take savvy and a few dirty tricks. He ran a hand through what was left of his hair. It had all seemed so easy at the start. Because only he knew

about the preferences in the selection of tenders. And Frank, of course! It couldn't work without Frank, his partner in Highview.

Lauren buzzed to tell him there was a police officer in reception wanting to see him.

“Concerning?”

“He won't say.”

“What d'you mean, won't say?”

“Says he wants to speak only to you .”

Harry wondered what about. It couldn't be to do with Highview because that would be CID or the Fraud Squad. Not a copper on his own. So what then?

CHAPTER 3

The policeman introduced himself as PC Paul Rogers, as Lauren closed the door.

“Mr Clifton? Mr Harry Clifton, right?”

Harry put on an off-the-shelf smile and offered a chair, which was declined.

“You are Mr Harry Clifton, is that right?”

Harry nodded.

“Sorry to labour the point. I just wanted to ascertain...”

Harry didn't care for ascertain. Ascertain sounded official, ascertain sounded like trouble!

“How can I help you?” he asked.

“It's to do with your son, Mr James Clifton.”

“What's he been up to?” Highview flashed through his mind. He wondered if James had said something after all.

“Perhaps you'd like to have a seat, Mr Clifton?”

Harry's first thought was that he'd been arrested. But there was something about the policeman's awkwardness, asking him to sit, that activated a parental sixth sense.

“What's happened? Where is he?”

“Please have a seat. I'm afraid your son's been involved in a road traffic accident.”

Harry shivered and with a mouth that could not command saliva said,

“How bad? He's not...?”

“No, sir. But I understand he's sustained some injuries.”

He wondered if he was being told the complete truth. Didn't they do that sometimes? Withhold all of it in order to delay the shock?

"You can tell me. How bad?"

"I really don't know. Can I get you some water?"

"Lauren! Lauren!" Harry shouted.

She came into the office and asked what had happened.

"James has been in an accident. Cancel my appointments. I'll ring from the hospital."

Rogers had offered him a lift as it was on his way back to the station. Harry caught the constable's eye in the driver's mirror. He asked if he knew if James was in theatre.

"I couldn't say, sir. I wasn't the officer accompanying him."

"How did anyone know to contact me?" James must be conscious. How else would they know who he was? His anxiety subsided. He felt comforted at the thought, until the policeman said,

"The hospital staff found some business cards. The station rang your reception and were told that you were Mr Clifton senior."

"Oh, I see!" He slumped back, bit his thumbnail, looked out of the window. It had become overcast then it started raining, lightly at first then heavier, hitting the road like bullets, soaking the grey streets. He pulled out his mobile and rang his daughter.

A nurse showed him into the relatives' room and told him someone would be with him shortly. There was a framed print of the *Laughing Cavalier* above a

coffee table upon which sat a box of tissues. There was a green settee, an armchair opposite. A television screen on a wall and in the corner a dead potted plant. He was struck by its plainness, its anonymity. The room was decorated and furnished for its purpose, he thought, grief. He moved to a window with a beige venetian blind half hoisted. The rain had eased to a drizzle. Leaves and sweet wrappers swirled before catching in a drain grille.

“Mr Clifton?”

Harry turned and said yes.

“My name’s Rita Thorpe, Senior Nursing Officer. One of the team first attending your son.” She was tubby, with a warm friendly voice.

Harry offered his hand. The same feelings of panic and disbelief when the policeman had broken the news came back.

“How is he?”

“On his way to theatre from resuscitation. He has a punctured lung.” She paused, fingering glasses on the bridge of her nose, secured with a thin gold-coloured chain around her neck, allowing the better news to register before the bad. “But there’s a head injury.”

“Head injury! Head injury! What kind?”

“We’ll know better after the test results.”

Harry sank into the armchair holding his own head.

“When will you have them?”

“Very soon. How old is your son?”

“Twenty-six. No. Twenty-seven.” He tried hurriedly to think of his date of birth. But it wouldn’t come.

“On any medication?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is your wife here? Might she know?”

“Betty... That is, Mrs Clifton died several years ago.” He had difficulty saying it even now.

“I’m sorry. Is there anyone who could be with you?”

“I rang my daughter. She’s on her way. You’ll let me know about the tests?”

“Of course.” Rita smiled. “Be assured, Mr Clifton, your son is getting and will be getting the very best of treatment.”

“But he will be okay?”

“He’s receiving the very best attention and treatment, I promise you.”

Harry closed his eyes and a picture of James swam before him. He was over six foot. A pug nose that seemed out of place on a long, slender, handsome face. Jet-black hair, as Harry’s had once been, but his brushed completely back and held there with just the lightest touch of gel. It troubled Harry he couldn’t recall James’s date of birth. It was in August, last month. He remembered taking him for a meal. But it hadn’t been a success. His son hadn’t had much of an appetite and had hardly spoken. It had been before James found out about Highview. So Harry couldn’t think of what else it might be.

He checked his watch, a present from Betty in the days things had been good between them. 11.15 a.m. He decided he’d wait an hour. Then go looking for an update. He’d make sure the best *was* being done. And if it wasn’t he’d see about James being moved to a private hospital. The London Clinic or The Nuffield.

The door opened. His daughter, Vicky, and her husband, Jeff, stood for a moment in the doorway. Just looking at Harry. Neither spoke. Her crying had given her an exhausted look, and without make-up on, like someone in mourning.

“We got here as soon as we could.”

“Hello,” Harry said. He moved towards her, was within inches of kissing her cheek when she moved away leaving him and his lips stranded.

“What’s the news?” she asked

“On his way to theatre.”

“Jesus! How bad? Have they said? We asked a nurse out there. But she could only say that someone had already been in to see you.”

“He has a punctured lung.” He hesitated for a moment then added “and they’re doing tests for a head injury.”

“Jesus! My poor Jimmy. We managed to speak to the policeman that accompanied him here,” she said in a faltering voice.

“And?”

“Turns out it was a stolen car. A witness got the number plate.” She pulled a tissue from her jacket pocket. “He said some officers might want to speak to us... I suppose that’s if...” She found a corner of it and dabbed at bloodshot eyes, then blew her nose. New tears dripped down her cheeks and meandered into her mouth. “Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy! My poor, poor darling!”

Jeff put an arm around her.

“It’ll be all right, doll!”

“Will it?” She noticed Harry moving towards her and stepped closer to Jeff so that her father’s move was thwarted.

Harry sank his hands into his coat pockets, upset that a second approach had been frustrated.

She dropped the tissue in a waste-paper bin and stopped at the print of the *Laughing Cavalier*.

“Bit sick, don’t you think! Someone smiling down at all the misery that must go on in here.”

“That’s the National Health for you!” Harry replied.

“They’re all the same these rooms, aren’t they.” The sadness in her face from the pain and distress within was slowly replaced with a look of enmity. “Just like the one at St Mary’s while we waited on Mummy. Don’t you think, Father? Oh! Of course, you weren’t there.”

Harry removed his coat and dropped it on the settee. He was wondering whether to defend himself yet again for his absence that night, for which she knew the reason only too well, when his mobile rang.

“Clifton here. Not now! I’ll ring you back. I said I’ll ring you back.” He clicked off and tossed the phone onto his coat.

“Trouble?” Jeff asked. He had thick eyebrows that met. He buttoned his suit jacket that couldn’t hide a paunch.

“Gertmans, our investment bank, about Continental’s bid. It’s nothing I can’t handle. We’ll be all right. You’ll see! My vote, Vicky’s, James’s and support from a few institutions. We’ll be all right,” he repeated.

Vicky looked up, making eye contact with her father for the first time since arriving. She had large brown eyes like her mother, like James, set in a small

oval-shaped face framed in blonde hair. She had a small, perfectly straight nose not the courtesy of genes. But of Harley Street.

“Jimmy’s for the takeover. For Continental,” she said.

“He’s changed his mind.”

“Since when?”

“Yesterday.”

“No, no! I don’t think so. I spoke to him just the other day and he was for it.”

“Not any more.”

“Why?”

“Probably came to his senses,” he said, as his mobile slid down his cashmere coat and onto the floor.

Jeff mouthed “HOW COME?” to Vicky as Harry bent down to pick it up. She put a finger across her lips and shook her head.

Harry watched Jeff leave to get some coffees, then leaned against a wall staring at the blank TV screen. Vicky sat in the armchair.

“It’ll be okay. You’ll see. He’s in good hands” he said.

She took some deep breaths and was on her feet before his outstretched hand found her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me!”

She slammed the door so hard behind her that it swung back on itself and bounced against the wall.

CHAPTER 4

She found a seat up the corridor from the relatives' room, closed her eyes and rested her head against the wall, trying to find some calm from the distress. Images flashed in her mind's eye. Harry, the room, James. She searched in her bag for some paracetamol and a small bottle of water when her mobile rang.

"Hi, babe! Can you speak?"

"Oh, Steve! Steve!" she exclaimed, then looked around to make sure no one had heard.

"Vicky, darling! What is it? Whatever's the matter?"

"Jimmy's been in an accident."

"Serious?"

"Very!"

"Oh, baby, I'm so sorry."

"He's in theatre."

"Christ! *That* serious!"

"I'm at the hospital now." She put a pill on her tongue and washed it down.

Then another. "We all are."

"Who's all?"

"Jeff and my father."

"Oh, baby, I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?" But given their circumstances, she knew there wasn't. "How you doing?" he added.

"Okay, sort of." She held the phone closer to her ear as though she was holding him closer. "I miss not being with you."

Someone tapped her shoulder. She panicked for a moment thinking it might be Jeff. But it was a nurse.

“Miss Clifton?”

“I’ve got to go. Someone wants to speak to me. I’ll ring you back.”

He told her he loved her.

“Me you, too,” she replied.

“I’m sorry to trouble you. I saw you coming out of the relatives’ room. Are you Miss Clifton?”

“Mrs Turner. James Clifton’s sister. What’s happened? Is there any news?”

The nurse sat beside her.

“No. Not yet. It was just that I was locking Mr Clifton’s stuff away when his mobile rang. It’s a pretty sophisticated phone. I’m afraid I inadvertently pressed a wrong button to turn it off. We’re so understaffed. I don’t have the time to inspect the different phones people have and how they’re operated.”

“Don’t worry if you’ve broken it. It’s the last of his problems right now!”

“I’m sure I haven’t. Broken it, I mean. The thing is, I took a call.”

“I see.”

“A Mrs Pamela Martin. She seemed pretty upset, something about being stood up, until I explained.” She pulled a slip of paper from her pocket. “This is her number. She asked if someone could ring back ASAP.”

“Thanks. I’ll take care of it. Any idea how long my brother’s likely to be in surgery?”

“Fraid not. He’s not long gone up. So I suppose a while. I’m sure someone will come down to see you as soon as there’s any news.”

Vicky looked at the scribbled name, trying to remember if she knew her. But nothing registered. She hoped it wasn't a new girlfriend. Because she liked Kate, his present one. But then who was she to be judgemental about playing fast and loose. She rang and while she waited for the call to be answered thought about James. She felt tears welling up at the image in her mind of a car hitting her brother. She shook her head to shake the thought out of it. She wondered again who Pamela Martin might be? Unknown. Or a lapse of memory brought on by all the distress. When the call was answered, she said,

“A nurse gave me your number and asked me to ring.”

“And you are?”

“James Clifton's sister, Vicky Turner.”

“Wait; I'm driving!” Pamela Martin came back on the line a few moments later. It was the voice of an older woman, in her forties or fifties. “The nurse said there had been an accident. How is he?”

“Can I ask who you are? I don't recognise your name.”

“A business friend of your brother.”

“I see. Not good. Vicky passed on the details

“I'm so sorry, really, we both are. We wish him a speedy recovery.”

“We?”

“My husband and I. We were due to have a business meeting with James this morning. We couldn't understand why he hadn't shown up or rung.”

“Oh, I see. Well, if it's business I'll get Mr Clifton senior; he's just along the way.”

“Don't!”

The command startled her.

“Mrs Martin, if it’s business, my father will be au fait with whatever it is.”

“No, he won’t.”

“Then just bring him up to speed.”

“No.”

“Pardon me!”

There was a pause on the line.

“This has put us in an awkward position, Vicky. I just hope you can be trusted with a confidence.” She hesitated again and said, “I guess I’ll just have to take a chance.”

“I wouldn’t do anything to harm my brother.”

“Let’s hope not. Gosh! This is awkward.” She asked Vicky to hang on again, mumbled something to her husband and was back on the line. “Okay. I’m not going to go into any great detail. But James is buying a site from us.”

“So?”

“Originally on behalf of Clifton Developments. Then last week he phoned Lenny, my husband, to say he wanted to buy the site for himself. Harry wasn’t to know anything about it. And isn’t to,” she emphasised. “That’s what today’s meeting was about.” Vicky said she understood. But she didn’t. “I’ll ring George Lester, James’s solicitor,” Pamela continued, “over at Roystons and let him know what’s happened.”

“You mean Sidney Beckman.”

“No.”

“But Sidney handles all Jimmy’s legal stuff!”

“Not for this deal. Can I have your word you won’t mention any of this to Harry? I can’t tell you the sorts of problems it would create. I wouldn’t have said anything at all if you weren’t about to pass this call over to him.”

“What’s going on, Mrs Martin?”

“How’s your arithmetic?”

“My arithmetic?”

“Let me invite you to add two and two! I’ve got your number on my phone. I’ll get back to you if I need to. In the meantime my very best wishes for James. We hope he makes a speedy recovery. Let me know how he’s doing. We’re both very fond of him. We go back away. Not as far back as with Harry. Nevertheless I’ve always liked James. He’s one of the few straight talkers in this business.”

“That’s kind of you to say.”

“I won’t ever forget what he did about that West End flat James was selling. A couple were buying one from him. Between exchange and completion the wife was diagnosed with cancer. So they weren’t going to complete. James told Beckman to verify it was true. And if it was to tear up the contract and give them their deposit back.” She paused for a moment and added. “There’s not many people in this business that would have done that. Speak soon!” and she was gone.

Vicky leaned her head against the wall again. The cold plaster sent a refreshing shiver down her neck. She ran the conversation again in her head. So James was going into business for himself. And then another thought took hold. If he was leaving the company, why vote against the takeover now? Voting for it, for

separation from her father, made more sense. She gave it another few moments' thought, then dismissed it. It could wait, given what was going on. She drank some more water and as she did so, spotted Sidney Beckman walking towards her.