

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Fourth Angel

Robin Hunter

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

The Attack

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Acknowledgements

Copyright

About the Book

A thoughtful and civilized man shouldn't have to make this choice.

Until the day his wife and children are gunned down by terrorists, Simon Quarry knows what kind of man he is.

When the politicians and diplomats look the other way, he becomes the hunter, guided by rage as much as by the desire for justice. Wanted by the terrorists he's targeting as well as by the police he's evading, Quarry's grief for his murdered family becomes the engine of his revenge.

A revenge that exacts a heavy price.

THE FOURTH ANGEL

Robin Hunter



FOR PATSY

'And the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun: and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire.'

Revelation 16:8

The Attack

Andy Brice was fiddling his expenses when he first heard the shooting. He had tucked himself away at the back of the Athens departure hall, spread his bills in neat piles around the table and, unconscious of the racket from crowds and loudspeakers, settled down to his accounts. When the sound first came to his ears he was three hundred dollars ahead. A familiar tapping, then a short burst, then another. He raised his eyes slowly from the columns of figures and the piles of bills, and cocked his head, listening. There it was again. As if to underline the point, the air pulsed softly as an explosion dinned faintly above the noise inside.

Andy had heard these sounds before. They were his business and there was money in it. Glancing round at the throng packing the airport concourse, he saw no alarm, no consciousness on their faces that somewhere, something was going on. He opened his camera case, lifted out the Nikon, snapped on his longest lens, and with a swift movement of his arm swept the bills inside. He rose, slung the case over his shoulder and, camera in hand, headed towards the stairs, pushing his way through the crowd, climbing over luggage and barging through queues, until he found the stairway, and ran hard up the steps, looking around for an exit to the outside, to somewhere up high with a view.

As Andy arrived on the first level a man burst out of an office and ran ahead of him along the gangway towards the far door. Andy followed, ignoring a shout behind, ducking under the arm of another man who shot out of a door and tried to detain him.

'Press' said Andy, over his shoulder. 'What's up?' Then he was through the far door and out into the roaring sunlight. On the terrace, a flat roof overlooking the ramp, the sun beat down on him. There were two people already there, airport police, sheltering behind the low parapet wall on the far side, and Andy ran at a crouch to join them. He heard another crackle of gunfire above the engine noise, and dropped onto his knees beside the wall. The police stared at him.

'Press' he said again, in answer to their nervous glare, lifted his camera and, following their example, peeped slowly over the wall.

Out on the ramp, the big jet was on fire. He could see that clearly. The air was pulsing with heat above the open door, and the aluminium was beginning to peel back above the cockpit. As he watched, another burst of fire raked the aircraft, pocking the skin above the windows and, craning over, Andy saw the gunman, a dark figure clad in white airport overalls, crouched behind a moving stairway just below, the barrel of his machine gun jerking slightly as he fired. There was another, leaping into view as Andy focused his camera on the ramp, lying under the food trolley by the aircraft. As the camera whined, snapping off photo after photo, Andy saw this man rise and lob a grenade up through the black flame-flecked doorway of the airliner. There was a dull explosion inside, a gush of flame from the door, and then another one. Somewhere inside the aircraft the liquor trolley exploded, red flame threading the oily smoke. A door flew off at the back of the aircraft and the safety chute shot out, a tumble of bodies cascading after it, raked by gunfire, rolling, falling, collapsing across the

concrete as the gunman poured shots at them and into the doorway. The noise was tremendous, a blast of sound, of engines, of gunfire, and piercing yells and screams.

Then it happened, quite quickly. Above the wing the escape hatch window fell out. A woman appeared, crawling out of the aircraft, wreathed in black smoke. The escape hatch slid off the wing, crashing down onto the concrete, but Andy concentrated on the woman, twisting his lens fast, jumping her into sharp focus. She reached inside, back into the flames, and lifted a child out onto the wing as, clearly in the camera's eye, bright blood leaped and spread across her smouldering dress. The gunman just below the wall was firing up at her.

Wild with elation, Andy stood up, careless of the gunfire, aiming his camera at the gunman who stood out clearly, shooting up at the woman. She fell over sideways against the fuselage, sliding down the wing, and then the child ran, clambering over her mother, moving out along the wing, running, running. Andy swore and swung his lens to bring her into focus again to catch that contorted face, the hair burning brightly in the sun, her clothes on fire. And he caught her too, just at the end of the wing, still running on, screaming, out into space as she fell, down to the concrete below. He heard the thud of her body hitting the concrete, saw the smoke puff out from her clothes, noticed that he was out of film and that the shooting had stopped.

Andy was breathless. He looked down and saw the gunmen standing up, kicking their weapons away from them, turning, hands in the air, towards the slowly advancing police. He saw the burning aircraft, the ragged, smoking escape chute, the huddled bodies, and began to load more film into his camera. Under the wing the child's body continued to smoulder, but Andy's thoughts were already elsewhere.

'You beauty,' he said aloud, pressing his lips to the barrel of the lens. 'We've just made a bloody fortune.'

Chapter 1

On the day his family died, Simon Quarry was sitting in his London office, teaching an author the facts of life. His office was a large, comfortable, friendly room, lined with books, thickly carpeted. The broad leather-topped desk at which he sat was well appointed with all the usual paraphernalia of office life, an angle-lamp, telephones, a bowl of flowers. The whole effect was balanced by the buff-coloured files and stacks of folded galleys, several manuscripts sagging from their folders in a slight but comfortable disarray. More manuscripts rested on an adjoining side table, in front of a leather-framed photograph of his wife and two young daughters. The overall impression was one of relaxed affluence, of a man who enjoyed the good things of life without worrying unduly about them, and Quarry himself gave the same impression.

Quarry was tall, slim, slightly rumped, his jacket slung behind his chair. He sat sideways to the desk, his long legs stretched out before him, ankles crossed. One elbow rested on the desk, the fingers of one hand playing with a pencil while he ran the other hand through his hair from time to time, head turned attentively towards his guest. The atmosphere, however, was tense. Quarry eventually put down his pencil and sat upright in his chair, holding up a document before the eyes of his author. The snapping voice slowed.

'I take it' said Quarry, 'that you have actually read this contract? Because that is what it is, a contract, a legal, binding agreement. I do hope you realise that, and realised it before you signed.'

James Dugdale, author, biographer and enraged visitor, slapped the document aside, the cup rattling in the saucer he held in his other hand. He was a small man, red of face, sandy haired, wearing what Quarry thought of privately as 'author kit', baggy flannels, a Fair-Isle pullover, a jacket with leather at the cuffs and elbows. Dugdale fumed.

'I've seen more contracts than you've ever signed, Quarry.'

Quarry nodded and settled back in his chair, waving his hand to indicate in turn the files, the papers and the manuscript on his desk.

'Good,' he said smoothly, smiling at Dugdale. 'So let us look at what we contracted for. Here we have your original manuscript, readers' reports, amendments, edited copy, more edited copy, re-typed pages and various sections. And here,' he held up a sheaf of folded sheets, 'here we have the galleys. But one moment,' he went on, as Dugdale opened his mouth to speak, 'the largest amount of paper we have here is this file.' He tapped a thick brown folder. 'This file,' he continued, 'is full of rude letters, various inaccuracies and carping comments from you, plus replies, more or less soothing, from half my staff.'

'I'm not happy with what your firm is doing to my book,' retorted Dugdale. 'I won't have my work cut to ribbons by those incompetent clowns you choose to employ.'

Quarry smiled. It was not really a nice smile. 'Opinions of what they are doing will vary,' he conceded lightly. 'My incompetents, as you call them, have done you a service. Can I refer you back to the contract, to specifics this time, not opinions? This manuscript was delivered eight months late and, may I point out, fifteen thousand words short of the length we originally commissioned. That's short weight,

Mr Dugdale. It contained five distinct areas steeped in plagiarism and two highly libellous statements about members of Her Majesty's present government. From an esteemed political biographer, that can hardly be described as a professional job. It needs work, Mr Dugdale, work! As it is, it won't do. Not for the Quarry Press, not for your reputation.'

Dugdale's complexion had deepened to a further shade of red. 'If you aren't happy with my book,' he cried, 'then don't publish it. I've been published by the best publishers in the country. I don't need any lessons from you, Quarry. So, I say it again, if you don't want it, I'll take it somewhere else.'

If anything, Quarry's smile broadened. 'Ah! I thought you'd say that. Let us be honest, Mr Dugdale. You have been carping about what we are doing to your manuscript. What we are doing is to turn it into a book. Incidentally, the book will be *ours* also, not just yours, with the Quarry Press imprint on it as well as your name. Your manuscript was just not good enough. I know it, and you know it. You've been published by a lot of people because, good as you are when published, you are notoriously difficult to work with, and most people are relieved, if not actually glad, when you take your work elsewhere. Smokescreens won't work here, Dugdale. I only hire people who can do their jobs, and when complaints like yours filter onto my desk, it means we take them seriously. So, I have examined your complaints. I have read the manuscript, checked the sources, read all your whinges and our replies, and in my opinion you are ninety-nine per cent wrong. Wait ...' He held up his hand as Dugdale's mouth opened. 'We won't publish your book if ...' Quarry continued, 'if you refund the advance, plus the sum paid over for expenses, plus the costs incurred by us on the book to date, not counting the delays, a sum which, as at this morning, we calculated as ...' he picked up a coil of

paper from the desk and smoothed it out, '£6,832, plus a few pence.'

Dugdale's eyes blinked hurriedly. 'I don't have anything like that sum,' he said sharply, 'and you damned well know it.'

'Of course I know it,' replied Quarry firmly, 'which is why I raised the point about the contract.' He picked up the contract and handed it across the desk. 'Look, Dugdale, if we hadn't wanted the book we wouldn't have commissioned it. We respect your work, and when you are good, you are very good. But we are good, too, and a little mutual respect goes a long way in this business. So, let me tell you where we both stand. I have a simple rule for this company, Mr Dugdale. We make a deal and we stick to it. Just in case our authors think differently, and some of them do, I must refer you to clause nine of that famous contract. In simple terms it means that we can turn your biography into a blue movie if we want to, and there is not much you can do about it. The rule in business, Mr Dugdale, any business, is that the man who pays - says. Now, let us discuss how we are going to solve our problem.'

It was not a happy meeting. When Dugdale had at last capitulated and shuffled out, the annotated manuscript under his arm, Quarry sat on for a while, idly putting order into the papers on his desk, stacking the files neatly again, slipping a rubber band around a bundle of loose papers. Although he was well into his forties, Quarry looked, and most of the time felt, at least ten years younger. When he had restored order to his desk, he stretched his arms high over his head, linking his fingers and stretching until his back creaked. Then he loosened his tie, rose from his chair, walked swiftly towards the office door and flung it open.

'Ruth!' he called out. 'Is there any chance of some more tea? I have slain my daily dragon and deserve a biscuit. What a brute! That man works on the theory that there is

no point in being difficult when, with a little extra effort, you can be bloody impossible.'

Ruth Frazer, Quarry's secretary, partner and confidante, looked up from her typewriter and smiled at him. She was an amiable, competent lady, a few years younger than Quarry, and they spoke like very old friends.

'Yes' she replied. 'I know. He was ranting at me while we waited for you. Told me he was furious and not used to being kept waiting. What did you do to him? He flung out through the door in what some of our other authors would describe as a fair tizz.'

'Not if they want to get published by us they wouldn't' grunted Quarry. 'Bring in the tea and I'll tell you all about it.'

When Ruth returned with large mugs of tea and the remains of a packet of biscuits, Quarry was back behind his desk, his chair pushed back against the wall, his feet resting on a pile of books. He looked, as usual, cheerful.

'It's typical' he remarked as Ruth put down the mugs. 'When we have guests, even professional pains-in-the-A like that one, out comes the bone china, and when we're alone, it's the mugs. Is there no respect for authority in this company?'

'We must make a good impression, and Mr Dugdale, as he himself will readily tell you,' said Ruth primly, the corners of her mouth twitching in a smile, 'is a very well-known author. When he's feeling modest, that is.'

'Mr Dugdale is a pain in the arse,' replied Quarry shortly, dunking a biscuit into his tea. 'Do you know, he began by' They spent ten minutes or so discussing Dugdale and his ilk, before Ruth looked at her watch and stood up.

'It's getting on,' she said, 'and I have lots to do before the post goes, even if you haven't. There are several contracts for you to sign, and you ought to at least read the minutes of last month's editorial meeting before the next one tomorrow. What time does the family get back?'

‘Their flight is due in around six, but I want to leave early to miss the traffic out to Heathrow. I might ring and check that it’s on time, but if there is nothing much to do here, I’d rather wait at the airport.’

‘I expect you’ll be glad to see them. It’s been over a month since they left.’

‘You can say that again’ said Quarry. ‘I’m too old to be left like this, but I can’t go gallivanting off for a month at a time like Eleana and the kids can. Anyway, enough gallivanting for them, they can stay home and look after the master of the house for a while, or at least until the Christmas holidays. Then I think we might all go skiing. But the kids will want to stay at home now, I expect. They like it at home. I suppose it’s having their own toys and friends around.’

‘It might be an idea to ring first and see if the flight is on time,’ agreed Ruth. ‘Do you want me to do it, or shall I give you a line?’

The first intimation that something might be wrong came on the five o’clock news. Quarry was cutting his way through the early evening traffic driving forcefully out west onto the M4 motorway, when the announcer said simply, ‘Reports are coming in of a terrorist attack on an Israeli airliner at Athens Airport. Athens has been the scene of terrorist incidents in the past, notably when an Air France jet was hijacked to Entebbe some years ago. No details are yet to hand but we will bring you more news as it reaches the studio.’

Quarry frowned and leaned forward to turn up the radio, a little concerned but still unworried. He pushed the BMW a little harder through the traffic, moving into the outside lane and increasing his speed to the limit as he reached the motorway. Ten minutes later he had parked the car and was crossing the walkway towards Terminal 2. There had been no further news about the aircraft.

As he reached the concourse and turned through the crowds towards the arrival gate, a man and a woman came towards him. Preoccupied, Quarry had passed them before he realised that the man was supporting the woman and that both were crying. He hesitated, looking back, and noticed for the first time that a crowd of people were milling and shouting around the El A1 counter. He looked up at the Arrival monitor, and waited until the screen rippled and announced, *Flight 841: Await Information*.

Quite suddenly, Quarry found it difficult to breathe. He went across towards the crowd, his heart pounding heavily, and gently but firmly pushed his way through to the counter. The desk was lined with people shouting questions at the harassed white-faced staff. Quarry reached across the counter and grasped a hostess by the sleeve.

'What has happened to 841?' asked Quarry. His voice sounded unreal, too loud, but she hardly seemed to hear him. The girl shook her head and snatched her arm away.

'You must await information. We have no details yet. We don't know anything ... please! We have no information. As soon as we have something we will tell you.'

'My wife and family are on that flight,' said Quarry urgently. 'What in the name of God has happened?'

The man at Quarry's elbow turned towards him roughly. 'Wait your turn,' he shouted into Quarry's face. 'I have family on that flight, too. Wait your turn. Miss ... Miss ...'

The crowd surged forward again, their weight pressing at Quarry's back. There were screams now, the sound of sobbing, a clamour of voices rising up, beating on his ears. Quarry stared back at the man, his eyes wide, hostile, and then nodded quietly.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'please excuse me, but we are all concerned.' He turned to the girl again. 'Can't you see what's happening here? Please phone your office and get the manager down here. You must give us some news or there will be a riot here. Can't you see that?' His plea

worked. The manager appeared, a lounge was opened and the crowd ushered into it, security guards fending off the rapidly growing numbers of pressmen who attempted to follow them, and closing the doors.

Expressionless stewards moved about offering coffee and drinks, until the door opened again and several men came into the room. One was a uniformed policeman and at the sight a further tremor swept through the crowd, but it was an older man who spoke, looking around the room, his eyes everywhere but on the faces before him.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he began, ‘I must ask you all to be calm. There has been some very, very bad news ... about our Flight 841 ... at Athens.’

‘For God’s sake!’ a woman’s voice shrieked from the crowd. ‘Tell us what’s happened.’ The crowd roared and rose to their feet, falling back as the spokesman raised his arms again for silence.

‘There has been an attack on 841. The aircraft has been set on fire ... and there are many casualties.’

A great, almost breathless wail went up from the crowd. People sat down suddenly, clasped hands to their faces, clung together or turned away from the group, but the majority surged forward, to surround the spokesman, yelling for news, calling out for more information, wanting names, names ...

Quarry pushed his way back through the crowd. He asked no questions, caught no eyes. He sat down at the back of the room, waved away a girl offering coffee, but took a whisky from a passing tray. As he raised it to his lips, his hands started to shake.

Quarry let himself into his house a little after midnight, and closed the door quietly behind him, dropping the car keys onto a tray they kept by the door. Another set of keys, those to his wife’s car, was already on the tray. Quarry picked up her keys and examined them carefully. With the keys

dangling from his fingers, he walked slowly around the house, switching on the lights as he moved from room to room, so that the windows, one by one, blazed out into the night. He stopped in the kitchen, opened the door of the fridge and gazed for a while at the newly stocked shelves, the bottles of milk, the cartons of orange juice.

‘Children should drink lots of milk,’ he said aloud. ‘It helps them grow well. Yes. Lots of milk. Lots of vitamins, things like that.’

He returned to the hall and plodded up the stairs, turning along the landing into their bedroom. The lights from the floor below seeped up through the bedroom windows, lighting the room, and he made no move towards the light switch. He walked over to the bed, pulled back the coverlet and took a small wrapped package from under a pillow, before opening the wardrobe doors. A light came on inside, flooding the row of dresses on their hangers, and he leaned his face into them, smelling the familiar perfume. He stayed like that for some time, his throat tight, his eyes closed.

Then, still holding the package, he went down the corridor into the girls’ bedroom, switching on the lights as he went. He sat down on a chair close to the door, and looked around the room gradually, at the dolls and toys ranged along the window ledge, the shelves of books, the pop posters on the walls. There were two beds, each pillow piled with presents. Quarry rose and sat down again on the nearest bed, turning the presents over slowly with one hand.

‘Welcome home, kids,’ he said slowly. ‘Welcome home.’

Somewhere in the house a telephone began to ring, but Quarry just sat there, beside the presents he had bought to welcome home his dead children. After a while the phone stopped ringing, but in a short while it rang again, and continued to ring, on and off, for most of the night.

Chapter 2

Pausing in the corridor, Martin Clissold tugged gently at the hem of his jacket, smoothed a stray hair carefully back down over one ear, and smiled contentedly at the effect. Then turning, he tapped lightly on the door and without waiting to be asked, slid inside.

‘And how is my favourite secretary today?’ he asked, resting his back against the door and letting the handle turn inside his fingers.

Sitting behind her desk, Ruth looked up from her typewriter, regarded him steadily for a moment and sighed audibly. She was wearing a grey silk blouse, a black scarf tied neatly at the neck. She looked tired. The skin beneath her eyes was a little puffy, and as she looked at Clissold her mouth was firm and unsmiling.

‘Martin,’ she said, ‘if there ever was a time when I could well do without your shop-worn charm, today is the day. To be quite frank, I can do without it at any time. Don’t you *ever* get tired of oiling your way around the office? Aren’t you getting a little old for it? Since I’ve started, may I add that but for the fact that you are good at your job, I’d ask Simon to fire you. To be frank, Martin, you’re a pain. I think I dislike you intensely. No, I don’t *think*, I’m sure of it.’

Martin Clissold had the sense to look slightly taken aback, but long habit carried him along. ‘My, my,’ he said lightly, ‘we are prickly today, but that’s not surprising, I suppose. My humble apologies, Madam. What I really

wanted to know is how is he today?' He nodded at the closed door of Quarry's office. 'And how did it go?'

Ruth looked past Clissold, out of the window. 'Considering that Simon has just returned from burying his wife and his children, he is quite remarkably calm. But for God's sake, how would you feel? How do you think funerals go? They aren't usually very jolly.'

Martin raised his hands defensively. 'OK, I'm sorry. I would have liked to have been there, but what can one say?'

'Nothing,' replied Ruth. 'There's nothing anyone can say, so say nothing. The funeral was close friends only but the mob was provided by the press, a charming bunch of morons. They've been hanging round Simon's neck like vultures for the last month, ever since it happened.'

'But I am one of the directors,' put in Martin. 'I know we all sent wreaths and so on, but I still think ... I think I should have been there.'

'Look,' said Ruth, 'what has happened is *personal*. Simon's family are dead. Today was the funeral. The man has enough troubles. What has your bloody directorship got to do with it? It's not a business matter. There's no profit in it. Can't you grasp that?'

'*You went,*' pointed out Martin, 'and I think I should have been there, that's all I said. Why are you being so difficult? Can't you see my point of view?'

Ruth ignored him, pushing her chair back hard against the wall. 'Do you know, it's actually true what they say about the press. Journalists really do ring up and say, "How did he feel when he saw the picture in the papers?" Did you see that picture of little Sarah running along the wing with her hair on fire? That awful picture.'

'Yes, I did. Who didn't? It must have been on every front page in the country, even abroad. I saw it in *Paris Match* anyway, just last week. A double page inside spread.'

'Well, they want to know his reactions. You know the sort of thing ... "Tell me, Mrs Jones, how did you feel when you saw young Johnny fall under the steamroller?" What do they think he felt, for God's sake?'

'What did you say?' asked Martin Clissold curiously.

'I'm afraid I forgot I was a lady. Several times in fact. Now I've told young Maureen to block all press calls at the switchboard, but what's the use? I expect they are picketing his house as well. They won't leave the poor man alone.'

Clissold eased himself away from the door, walked over to the window and looked down into the square. 'There are a few hanging about outside now,' he said, 'and photographers, even a TV crew.'

'Bloody bunch of vultures,' said Ruth viciously. She got up and moved across to join him, glaring down from the window at the little knot of pressmen clustered by the railings outside the office.

'I hardly like to ask,' began Clissold, 'but, just out of curiosity, how did he react? I bow to none in my admiration of Simon, but he is a curious fellow at times. A trifle unpredictable, dare I say it.'

Ruth looked at him again, closely, that hint of contempt back in her eyes. 'If you *really* want to know, he asked me to ring around the papers for a print of that photograph.'

Clissold's astonishment was genuine. 'He what! I can't believe it. That's incredible.'

'He wants a full-plate, half-tone print of that terrible photograph. Glossy and bled, if possible. He was quite specific.'

'But Good God!' said Clissold, shaking his head. 'What sort of man would want a picture of his kid burning alive? Why? Did you ask him?'

'I didn't ask, and unless you feel like becoming rapidly unemployed, neither should you,' said Ruth briefly. 'He's

not too predictable at the moment. If I were you, I'd leave Simon severely alone.'

'He must be cracking up. It's not surprising after all. Perhaps he'd be better off going away for a while. You know, Ruth, I've been wanting to say this for some time, though perhaps this isn't the moment but, well, let's face it, he's been slacking off over the last year or so. Everyone has noticed it.'

Ruth frowned at him. 'He spent twelve years building up this firm, and as his children are ... were ... growing up, I expect he wanted to spend a little more time with them. That's why he cut down a seventy-hour week to a mere sixty-hour week. He even stopped working at weekends. That's hardly dereliction of duty.'

'Even so,' said Clissold. 'Look, you and I could run things here. Perhaps he'll want to sell up. There really isn't any point in all this now. I've had lunch with one or two people in the last couple of weeks, and I think there would be offers around if he was interested in selling. With the existing management ...' He stopped as Ruth looked hard at him, shaking her head slowly from side to side.

'You're another of the vultures, aren't you?' she said wonderingly. 'Just like those others outside. You've decided to look after number one and see if there are any pickings for you in this affair. You'll go far, Martin Clissold, if no one steps on you. Have you been crawling round the City suggesting that someone tries to pick up Simon's firm for a knock-down price while he's down on his knees? So that you can run it once he's been eased out.'

Martin Clissold looked pained. 'Face facts, Ruth. I like Simon, God knows. But he's well into his forties and you know how he doted on those kids. Anyway, everyone always said Eleana was the real driving force behind him. He's so easy going, not a keen businessman like this company really needs, especially now. And, well, there's that photograph. That's not normal. Anyway, Simon didn't do it

on his own. We all helped to make this company one of the best publishing houses in the country. And if Quarry can't hack it any more - not that anyone would blame him for that, after what happened - then we ought to think of managing without him. He'd probably be glad to get shot of it anyway. It must have knocked all the stuffing out of him.'

Ruth laughed out loud. It was a short, unamused and far from pleasant laugh. She moved away from Clissold to take another look out of the window, before returning to face him again.

'I've misjudged you. You aren't just an irritating smoothie with the gift of the gab, are you?' she said. 'You really are a first-class, self-seeking swine. Let me remind you that the Quarry Press has been going for over sixteen years, and it took Eleana, Simon and me, plus one or two others, a good few years before we needed overpaid mouthpieces like you. You joined us - and I have your file over there - about three years ago.'

'As a director,' interrupted Clissold. 'I came in at the top because that's where help was needed. And I don't like your tone.'

'As an executive director,' stressed Ruth. 'No shares. Simon and I now own all the shares. And now you think the time is right to move in, his wife hardly cold in her grave, elbow the old man aside and be sitting pretty. Amazing!'

'He'll sell,' said Clissold confidently. 'He doesn't care any more, you'll see. I'm sure of it. A good offer and he'd pack this company in tomorrow.'

'You don't know Simon,' said Ruth. 'He keeps you because you're good at your job. That's his only criterion, as I told you. I think you would be wise to keep your ambitions to yourself until Simon decides what, if anything, he wants to do. If you cross him, you'll regret it. And that's my last warning.'

'Oh yes?' said Clissold sharply. 'Do I hear undertones there? Echoes of a threat? If it goes as I think it will, I'd

like to think we could work together. I'm not going to stay on unless we have some changes. So don't you forget that either.'

'Now, that is a threat,' said Ruth, unworried. 'I'm trying to tel you something about your employer. He's a very nice man. I like him. He's kind, very fair, but no fool. He's been hurt, but he'll get up again. He also has excellent connections and very long ears. I expect your little lunch parties are not unknown to him and, as I say, he isn't a good man to cross.'

'Well, you know what I think,' said Martin abruptly, walking across the room to leave. He stopped at the door and turned towards Ruth. 'Incidentally, perhaps you could keep this conversation to yourself. All right?'

'Just go away' said Ruth. 'Please ... go away, and don't hurry back.'

Clissold glanced towards the door of Quarry's office and left, shaking his head. When he had gone, Ruth got out a handkerchief, blew her nose hard and reached for the telephone. 'Maureen,' she said when switchboard answered, 'get me the Press Association please. I want a private word with the picture editor.'

Quarry was sitting in his usual position behind the desk, his feet up among the litter of files and papers, a glass of Scotch in his hand, when Ruth came into the room and sat down opposite him. She looked quickly at the glass, and at the half-empty bottle on the desk.

'Panic not' said Simon, catching her glance. 'I am not taking to the bottle. In fact it tastes awful at this hour, but if you fancy a belt of booze, you know where the glasses are.'

'Maybe I will.'

Ruth went over to the open cupboard among the bookshelves, and Simon heard the chink of ice and the

scrape of glass and bottle. Presently she came back, sat down again, and raised the glass towards him.

'Cheers' she said.

'Cheers' said Simon, lifting his glass in response. 'By the way, thanks a lot for coming along this morning ... and for keeping those bloody press people away from me. It hasn't been much fun for you either, this last month. I'm very grateful to you.'

'I've been glad to help' said Ruth. 'It's nice to have something to do and we all ... all the staff ... we all feel so useless. Well, almost all of us' she added reflectively.

They sat on for a while, companionably, until Ruth had to break the silence, putting her glass on the desk and looking directly into Simon's face.

'Tell me' she said, 'where do we go from here?'

'You tell me' said Simon. 'At this moment I feel a little, well, spent, is the word that comes to mind.'

'We go on, of course,' said Ruth firmly. 'What else can we do? Life goes on.'

Simon swung his feet down off the desk and leaned across the top towards her, his elbows on the top, his chin resting on clasped hands. 'And that's it, is it?' he said curiously. 'Someone comes along, blots out my life, but life itself goes on? That's show business, etcetera, etcetera. Correct me if I'm *wrong*, but I think I have experienced a fundamental change recently. Go onto what? Tell me what we go on for.'

'Life does go on, Simon,' Ruth pointed out softly. 'You are still here. So am I. So is this firm. We go on because that's all there is to do. I don't like clichés, God knows, but as I said, life goes on, with or without ... people. They come, they go, life goes on. There isn't any choice.'

'But not as before,' said Simon bleakly. He looked suddenly tired and shaded his eyes with his hand for a moment before looking at her again.

'Hardly' agreed Ruth.