



ROBERT
GALBRAITH

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE
HALLMARKED
MAN

A CORMORAN STRIKE NOVEL

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To Séan and Nadine Harris, who gave me back what I
thought I'd lost forever.

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**MULHOLLAND
BOOKS**

I had dipped in life's struggle and, out again,
Bore specks of it here, there, easy to see,
When I found my swan and the cure was plain;
The dull turned bright as I caught your white
On my bosom: you saved me—saved in vain
If you ruined yourself, and all through me!

Robert Browning
The Worst of It

PART ONE

Concerning the mines themselves he was not called upon for an opinion... all he had to do was to follow the veins and win the ore in paying quantities...

John Oxenham
A Maid of the Silver Sea

1

*Oh often have I washed and dressed
And what's to show for all my pain?
Let me lie abed and rest:
Ten thousand times I've done my best
And all's to do again.*

A. E. Housman
XI, Last Poems

The windscreen wipers had been working their hardest ever since the BMW had entered the county of Kent, their soporific swish and clunk aggravating Cormoran Strike's exhaustion as he stared out through thick rain, which had turned the deserted road ahead to gleaming jet.

Shortly after he'd boarded the sleeper train from Cornwall to London the previous evening, his detective partner's boyfriend, who Strike always referred to inside his head as 'Ryan Fucking Murphy', had called to say that Robin had come down with a high fever and sore throat and would therefore be unable to accompany Strike on today's visit to their newest prospective client.

Everything about this call had annoyed Strike, and an awareness that he was being unjust – because this was the first time in six years Robin had taken a sick day, and if she had a temperature of 104 and a swollen throat it was perfectly reasonable for her to ask her boyfriend to call on her behalf – deepened rather than alleviated his grumpiness. He'd been counting on Robin driving him into Kent in her old Land Rover, and the prospect of several hours in her company had been the only point in favour of keeping this appointment. A mixture of professionalism and masochism had

stopped him cancelling, so after a quick shower and change of clothes at his attic flat in Denmark Street, he'd set out for the village of Temple Ewell, in Kent.

Having to drive himself wasn't only depressing, but also physically painful. The hamstring in the leg on which a prosthesis had replaced the calf, ankle and foot was tight and throbbing, because his sojourn in Cornwall had involved a lot of heavy lifting.

Ten days previously, he'd dashed down to Truro because his elderly uncle had suffered his second stroke. Strike's sister, Lucy, had been helping Ted pack up for his imminent removal to a nursing home in London when, in her words, 'his face went funny and he couldn't answer me'. Ted had died twelve hours after Strike had arrived at the hospital, his niece and nephew holding his hands.

Strike and Lucy had then proceeded to their uncle's home in St Mawes, which had been left to them jointly, to arrange and attend the funeral, and to make decisions about the house's contents. Predictably, Lucy had been horrified by her brother's suggestion that they might hire professionals to empty the place once they'd removed those sentimental items the family wanted to keep. She couldn't bear the idea of strangers touching any of it: the old Tupperware once used for picnics on the beach, their uncle's threadbare gardening trousers, the jar of spare buttons kept carefully by their late aunt, some of them belonging to dresses long since donated to jumble sales. Feeling guilty that Lucy had had to cope with Ted's final lapse from consciousness alone, Strike acceded to her wishes, remaining in St Mawes to lug boxes, nearly all of which were labelled 'Lucy', out of the house into a rented van, to throw rubbish into a hired skip and take regular breaks in which he administered tea and comfort to his sister, whose eyes had been constantly red from dust and weeping.

Lucy believed the stress of Ted's removal to a nursing home had brought on his fatal stroke, and Strike had had to force himself not to become impatient with her repeated bursts of self-recrimination, doing his utmost not to match her fractiousness with ill-temper, not to snap, nor to become irritable when explaining that just because he didn't want to take more of the objects associated with the most

stable parts of their childhood, it didn't mean he wasn't suffering as much as she was from the loss of the man who'd been his only true father figure. All Strike had taken for himself were Ted's Royal Military Police red beret, his ancient fishing hat, his old 'priest' (a wooden cosh with which to finish off fish still fighting for life), and a handful of faded photos. These items were currently sitting in a shoe box inside the holdall Strike hadn't yet had time to unpack.

Mile by mile, with no company except the emotional hangover of the past ten days and the aching of his hamstring, the dislike Strike had already taken towards today's prospective client mounted. Decima Mullins had the kind of accent he associated with the many wealthy, wronged wives who'd come to his detective agency hoping to prove their husbands' infidelity or criminality in hope of securing a better divorce settlement. On the evidence of their only phone conversation to date, she was melodramatic and entitled. She'd said she couldn't possibly visit Strike's office in Denmark Street, for reasons she'd disclose in person, and insisted that she was only prepared to discuss her problem face to face at her house in Kent. All she'd deigned to divulge so far was that she wanted something proven, and as Strike couldn't imagine any possible investigative scenario that didn't involve proving something, he wasn't particularly grateful for the pointer.

In this unpropitious mood he proceeded along Canterbury Road through a landscape of bare trees and sodden fields. At last, windscreen wipers still swishing and clunking, he turned up a narrow, puddled track to the left, following a sign to Delamore Lodge.