

ROBERT GALBRAITH

AUTHOR OF THE #1 BESTSELLER
THE CUCKOO'S CALLING

The

SILK WORM

A CORMORAN STRIKE NOVEL

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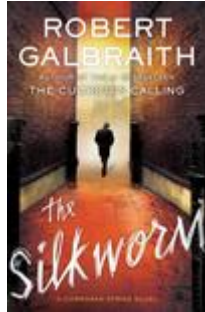
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To Jenkins,
without whom...
he knows the rest

...blood and vengeance the scene, death
the story,
a sword imbrued with blood, the pen that
writes,
and the poet a terrible buskined tragical
fellow,
with a wreath about his head of burning
match instead of bays.

The Noble Spanish Soldier
Thomas Dekker

1

QUESTION

What dost thou feed on?

ANSWER

Broken sleep.

Thomas Dekker, *The Noble Spanish Soldier*

“Someone bloody famous,” said the hoarse voice on the end of the line, “better’ve died, Strike.”

The large unshaven man tramping through the darkness of pre-dawn, with his telephone clamped to his ear, grinned.

“It’s in that ballpark.”

“It’s six o’clock in the fucking morning!”

“It’s half past, but if you want what I’ve got, you’ll need to come and get it,” said Cormoran Strike. “I’m not far away from your place. There’s a—”

“How d’you know where I live?” demanded the voice.

“You told me,” said Strike, stifling a yawn. “You’re selling your flat.”

“Oh,” said the other, mollified. “Good memory.”

“There’s a twenty-four-hour caff—”

“Fuck that. Come into the office later—”

“Culpepper, I’ve got another client this morning, he pays better than you do and I’ve been up all night. You need this now if you’re going to use it.”

A groan. Strike could hear the rustling of sheets.

“It had better be shit-hot.”

“Smithfield Café on Long Lane,” said Strike and rang off.

The slight unevenness in his gait became more pronounced as he walked down the slope towards Smithfield Market, monolithic in the

winter darkness, a vast rectangular Victorian temple to meat, where from four every weekday morning animal flesh was unloaded, as it had been for centuries past, cut, parceled and sold to butchers and restaurants across London. Strike could hear voices through the gloom, shouted instructions and the growl and beep of reversing lorries unloading the carcasses. As he entered Long Lane, he became merely one among many heavily muffled men moving purposefully about their Monday-morning business.

A huddle of couriers in fluorescent jackets cupped mugs of tea in their gloved hands beneath a stone griffin standing sentinel on the corner of the market building. Across the road, glowing like an open fireplace against the surrounding darkness, was the Smithfield Café, open twenty-four hours a day, a cupboard-sized cache of warmth and greasy food.

The café had no bathroom, but an arrangement with the bookies a few doors along. Ladbrokes would not open for another three hours, so Strike made a detour down a side alley and in a dark doorway relieved himself of a bladder bulging with weak coffee drunk in the course of a night's work. Exhausted and hungry, he turned at last, with the pleasure that only a man who has pushed himself past his physical limits can ever experience, into the fat-laden atmosphere of frying eggs and bacon.

Two men in fleeces and waterproofs had just vacated a table. Strike maneuvered his bulk into the small space and sank, with a grunt of satisfaction, onto the hard wood and steel chair. Almost before he asked, the Italian owner placed tea in front of him in a tall white mug, which came with triangles of white buttered bread. Within five minutes a full English breakfast lay before him on a large oval plate.

Strike blended well with the strong men banging their way in and out of the café. He was large and dark, with dense, short, curly hair that had receded a little from the high, domed forehead that topped a boxer's broad nose and thick, surly brows. His jaw was grimy with stubble and bruise-colored shadows enlarged his dark eyes. He ate gazing dreamily at the market building opposite. The nearest arched entrance, numbered two, was taking substance as the darkness

thinned: a stern stone face, ancient and bearded, stared back at him from over the doorway. Had there ever been a god of carcasses?

He had just started on his sausages when Dominic Culpepper arrived. The journalist was almost as tall as Strike but thin, with a choirboy's complexion. A strange asymmetry, as though somebody had given his face a counterclockwise twist, stopped him being girlishly handsome.

"This better be good," Culpepper said as he sat down, pulled off his gloves and glanced almost suspiciously around the café.

"Want some food?" asked Strike through a mouthful of sausage.

"No," said Culpepper.

"Rather wait till you can get a croissant?" asked Strike, grinning.

"Fuck off, Strike."

It was almost pathetically easy to wind up the ex-public schoolboy, who ordered tea with an air of defiance, calling the indifferent waiter (as Strike noted with amusement) "mate."

"Well?" demanded Culpepper, with the hot mug in his long pale hands.

Strike fished in his overcoat pocket, brought out an envelope and slid it across the table. Culpepper pulled out the contents and began to read.

"Fucking hell," he said quietly, after a while. He shuffled feverishly through the bits of paper, some of which were covered in Strike's own writing. "Where the hell did you get this?"

Strike, whose mouth was full of sausage, jabbed a finger at one of the bits of paper, on which an office address was scribbled.

"His very fucked-off PA," he said, when he had finally swallowed. "He's been shagging her, as well as the two you know about. She's only just realized she's not going to be the next Lady Parker."

"How the hell did you find *that* out?" asked Culpepper, staring up at Strike over the papers trembling in his excited hands.

"Detective work," said Strike thickly, through another bit of sausage. "Didn't your lot used to do this, before you started outsourcing to the likes of me? But she's got to think about her future employment prospects, Culpepper, so she doesn't want to appear in the story, all right?"

Culpepper snorted.

“She should’ve thought about that before she nicked—”

With a deft movement, Strike tweaked the papers out of the journalist’s fingers.

“She didn’t nick them. He got her to print this lot off for him this afternoon. The only thing she’s done wrong is show it to me. But if you’re going to splash her private life all over the papers, Culpepper, I’ll take ’em back.”

“Piss off,” said Culpepper, making a grab for the evidence of wholesale tax evasion clutched in Strike’s hairy hand. “All right, we’ll leave her out of it. But he’ll know where we got it. He’s not a complete tit.”

“What’s he going to do, drag her into court where she can spill the beans about every other dodgy thing she’s witnessed over the last five years?”

“Yeah, all right,” sighed Culpepper after a moment’s reflection. “Give ’em back. I’ll leave her out of the story, but I’ll need to speak to her, won’t I? Check she’s kosher.”

“*Those* are kosher. You don’t need to speak to her,” said Strike firmly.

The shaking, besotted, bitterly betrayed woman whom he had just left would not be safe left alone with Culpepper. In her savage desire for retribution against a man who had promised her marriage and children she would damage herself and her prospects beyond repair. It had not taken Strike long to gain her trust. She was nearly forty-two; she had thought that she was going to have Lord Parker’s children; now a kind of bloodlust had her in its grip. Strike had sat with her for several hours, listening to the story of her infatuation, watching her pace her sitting room in tears, rock backwards and forwards on her sofa, knuckles to her forehead. Finally she had agreed to this: a betrayal that represented the funeral of all her hopes.

“You’re going to leave her out of it,” said Strike, holding the papers firmly in a fist that was nearly twice the size of Culpepper’s. “Right? This is still a fucking massive story without her.”

After a moment’s hesitation and with a grimace, Culpepper caved

in.

“Yeah, all right. Give me them.”

The journalist shoved the statements into an inside pocket and gulped his tea, and his momentary disgruntlement at Strike seemed to fade in the glorious prospect of dismantling the reputation of a British peer.

“Lord Parker of Pennywell,” he said happily under his breath, “you are well and truly screwed, mate.”

“I take it your proprietor’ll get this?” Strike asked, as the bill landed between them.

“Yeah, yeah...”

Culpepper threw a ten-pound note down onto the table and the two men left the café together. Strike lit up a cigarette as soon as the door had swung closed behind them.

“How did you get her to talk?” Culpepper asked as they set off together through the cold, past the motorbikes and lorries still arriving at and departing the market.

“I listened,” said Strike.

Culpepper shot him a sideways glance.

“All the other private dicks I use spend their time hacking phone messages.”

“Illegal,” said Strike, blowing smoke into the thinning darkness.

“So how—?”

“You protect your sources and I’ll protect mine.”

They walked fifty yards in silence, Strike’s limp more marked with every step.

“This is going to be massive. Massive,” said Culpepper gleefully. “That hypocritical old shit’s been bleating on about corporate greed and he’s had twenty mill stashed in the Cayman Islands...”

“Glad to give satisfaction,” said Strike. “I’ll email you my invoice.”

Culpepper threw him another sideways look.

“See Tom Jones’s son in the paper last week?” he asked.

“Tom Jones?”

“Welsh singer,” said Culpepper.

“Oh, him,” said Strike, without enthusiasm. “I knew a Tom Jones in the army.”

“Did you see the story?”

“No.”

“Nice long interview he gave. He says he’s never met his father, never had a word from him. I bet he got more than your bill is going to be.”

“You haven’t seen my invoice yet,” said Strike.

“Just saying. One nice little interview and you could take a few nights off from interviewing secretaries.”

“You’re going to have to stop suggesting this,” said Strike, “or I’m going to have to stop working for you, Culpepper.”

“Course,” said Culpepper, “I could run the story anyway. Rock star’s estranged son is a war hero, never knew his father, working as a private—”

“Instructing people to hack phones is illegal as well, I’ve heard.”

At the top of Long Lane they slowed and turned to face each other. Culpepper’s laugh was uneasy.

“I’ll wait for your invoice, then.”

“Suits me.”

They set off in different directions, Strike heading towards the Tube station.

“Strike!” Culpepper’s voice echoed through the darkness behind him. “Did you fuck her?”

“Looking forward to reading it, Culpepper,” Strike shouted wearily, without turning his head.

He limped into the shadowy entrance of the station and was lost to Culpepper’s sight.