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By Robert Scragg

What Falls Between the Cracks

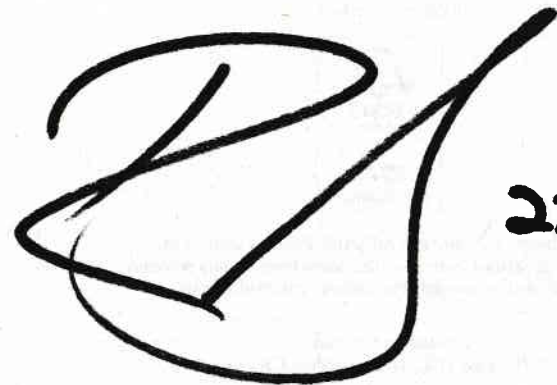
Nothing Else Remains

All That is Buried

End of the Line

END OF THE LINE

ROBERT SCRAGG

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'RS' with a long, sweeping flourish extending upwards and to the right.

22.7.21

CHAPTER ONE

His footsteps echo off stark brick, bouncing off walls that once penned in prisoners, blind to any guilt or lack thereof. No matter how softly he treads, the *tap-tap-tap* of his boots races down the corridor ahead of him. Might as well be a base drum, beating out his approach to any security guards. A shallow trickle winds its way down a back already slick with sweat. He hefts his rucksack squarely back onto his shoulder and steps through the doorway.

The room beyond looks just like the pictures he's seen online. Perfect. Seems so small a space to have seen such serious situations. A row of three chairs to his right where the magistrates used to sit, the central one high-backed, a throne compared to the two that flank it, surveying its wood-panelled kingdom. Twin strip lights dangle down from a glass dome in the centre, sunlight magnified through a thousand glass tiles,

lighting the room up like a stage. Apt. That's exactly what it's about to become. A platform to launch his next attack, and this one could be a killing blow.

No time to waste. The court closed down a couple of years back, but there's still a guard who checks up on the place. Not due for another hour, but why leave it to chance? His business here won't take long. He shrugs off his rucksack, sliding out a collapsible tripod, positioning it on the table in the centre of the room. His smartphone fits snugly into the grip at the top, tapping the screen to flip it round so it shows his face. He takes a few steps back, studying the screen. Slides the legs a few feet further, allowing the royal crest on the wall above into shot.

Dieu et mon droit

God and my right

Gold paint is peeling away from the lion and unicorn like sunburnt skin. Like the rest of the building, the crest has seen better days.

That and the rest of the country, he thinks with a shake of his head. What he does today should go some way to righting the ship. He may have started small, but every broadcast he does hits seven figures now. One more glance around, weighing up light and shadow. Can't be faffing about moving the camera once he goes live. Most of what he needs to say is committed to memory, but he mutters one last run-through nonetheless. He lays out his few props by the foot of the central chair. Feels right that he speaks from there. Today's broadcast isn't just getting up on his soapbox. No, he's promised to bring those bastards at the English Welfare Party down more times than he cares to count.

Today is more than delivering a judgement. Today he burns the whole fucking lot of them down to the ground.

He slides into the seat, hands dangling from the end of armrests, settling back like a monarch presiding over court. Closes his eyes. Deep breath. Hold for a three count. Out. Three more of the same. It's time.

He reaches into his pocket, clicking the small remote. A switch flicks somewhere in his head. Showtime.

'Evening all, this is Stormcloudz coming to you live and uncensored from right here in London. You folks best make yourself comfortable cos you're in for a treat today. I'll give you the tour later, but we've got quite a bit to get through today. These fools at the EWP have had their day.'

Even just the mention of the EWP makes him grimace. They're everything that's wrong with Britain. He's on a roll and just finished his intro when the man appears in the public gallery. Not there one minute, staring him out the next. Words stick in his throat like a clogged drain, registering not only the figure now but the balaclava hiding his face. Fear sears the moisture from his mouth, and he licks his lips, rising slowly to his feet.

The man doesn't move. Just stands there behind the glass panels. Slits for eyes, impossible to tell anything from them. He's wearing some kind of boiler suit, dark burgundy with a logo on the breast difficult to read from this distance.

'In case you're wondering,' he begins, hearing and hating the wobble in his voice, 'I'm not doing this one solo. Looks like we've got a visitor.'

He clicks his remote again, flipping the camera around to take in the room, viewing gallery and all.

'Say hello to the great British public, my friend.'

The figure is statue-still. Only sign they're even breathing is a slight rise and fall of shoulders.

His own breath is shallow, tongue darting out to lick lips like a nervous lizard. Whoever the fuck this is, he isn't here to sit and chew the fat, and he definitely isn't the bloody security guard. Come to rob the building perhaps? Can't be much of value left. Copper wiring maybe. He squints, trying to make out the logo, but the sunlight streaming in is bouncing off the glass, making an already hard task impossible.

'You one of Winter's boys, then? You don't frighten me, mate. You're streaming live on Facebook as well—' He breaks off, leaning forwards to look at his screen. 'One point three million people and rising. You see, my friends,' he says, taking a half-step forward with new-found confidence. 'This is how they work, Mr Winter and his jack-boot boys at the EWP. They intimidate. They try and silence anyone who disagrees, and not with logic or argument. With force. They're—'

He stops mid sentence. The man has taken a step forward of his own, almost touching the glass now. Raises a clenched gloved fist to his own throat, drawing it across his neck with thumb pointing inwards like a blade. The same hand drops to his breast, tapping the logo, while the other reaches inside the boiler suit. The blade appears like a magic trick, impossibly long, a matt black curve of steel, punctuated by a row of tiny holes.

'Holy shit . . .' It comes out more of a whisper the first time. The figure taps the logo one more time. 'Holy shit!' Halfway to a shout now. He has walked the full building twice, plotting out

escape routes in case the guard came early. For the man to reach him, he will have to smash the barriers, or run back out and around. Either way, time enough to grab his phone and make a hasty exit the way he came.

'We'd best finish this up later, folks,' he says, faking a smile to the camera, darting forwards to retrieve it. As he does, the angle of glare against the glass changes, and he sees the logo. The effect is instant. His eyes widen like saucers in recognition, any hint of the smile giving way to abject terror. Not one of Winter's men. He'd happily take a kicking from half a dozen of Winter's men than be here, now, with him.

'Hate to cut and run like this, but something tells me he's not just here for a cuppa.' He's an octave higher now, giving lie to his bluff of confidence. A quick glance over his shoulder as he heads for the door, waiting for the man to make a move that never comes. That's what seals his fate, attention fixed on the immediate threat, his own voice masking the slightest of creaks from the other side of the open doorway that he should have heard.

He sees a hand jabbing towards him, holding some kind of device, but it's too late. Staccato clicks like ball bearings raining on a tabletop. The pain is a thousand lances of shrapnel as the lights go out. He knows he's falling, but any sense of where to winks out before he gets there.

CHAPTER TWO

Detective Inspector Jake Porter had forgotten to breathe for a full five seconds.

They matched the prints we found. Whoever he is, he was also in the car that killed Holly.

Superintendent Roger Milburn's words echoed in his mind on repeat. The worst kind of earworm. A double tap on the window snapped his head back around. Nick Styles looked out at him like a parent trying to figure out what their naughty kid was up to. He must have seen enough on Porter's face though, hint of a smile giving way to concern. Porter looked past his DS, deeper into the house. Styles's wife, Emma, cradling their newborn baby, as Porter's girlfriend, Evie Simmons, pretended to try and extricate her finger from the little Hannah's stubby fist, knuckles blanched white despite having just fallen asleep.

Holly Porter had been killed in a hit-and-run a few years

back. They found the car a few miles from the scene. Nothing to indicate who drove, but a decent set of prints on the passenger dashboard. Trouble was, whoever owned them had never popped up for air. Until now.

He felt light on his feet, unsteady. He turned away towards the road, taking a deep breath. Tried to wrap his head round a moment he'd hungered for, but now it was here, it felt surreal. A glance back at the house. Evie's face peered out from half-shadow, smiling but concerned. He flashed one of his own back that felt far from convincing and made his way back inside.

'Everything all right?' she asked, squeezing his arm as he came and stood beside her.

'Yeah, uhm, I ah . . .' Thoughts swirled around his mind, like Milburn's words had pulled a plug and the life he'd rebuilt was circling the drain.

'What did Milburn want? We got a new case?' Styles asked.

'Something like that, but he's not going to let me anywhere near it.'

Three sets of eyes looked at him, waiting for an explanation.

'The prints from Holly's case,' he said, hearing the strain in his own voice. 'They've found him. The passenger from the car.'

The words settled heavy over the room, a wet blanket smothering the domestic bliss, snuffing out the sense of new beginnings. Nobody spoke for the longest of times as Porter looked at each of them. It wasn't until he locked eyes with his partner that the silence was broken.

'What we waiting for then, boss?' Styles asked. 'Let's go and have a chat. Sergeant Rose on the custody desk owes me a favour. Milburn doesn't need to know.'

'If he was in any fit state to talk, I wouldn't give a shit if Milburn

knew or not,' said Porter. 'He's in a coma. Burglary gone wrong. Guy whose flat he was trying to rob cracked him one with a baseball bat.'

'Have they got an ID on him?' Evie asked.

Porter nodded. 'Young kid by the name of Henry Kamau. Runs with the Triple H gang apparently.'

'I know them,' Evie said. 'Run by a guy called Jackson Tyler. Nasty piece of work.'

'Well, they don't tend to recruit for their people skills,' said Porter, a little too harshly. 'Sorry, didn't mean to snap like that. It's just . . .'

She stood up, hand resting on the back of his neck, fingers rubbing a gentle circle. 'It's OK, Jake.'

'We should go,' he said abruptly.

'Don't be daft,' Emma said. 'That's some fairly big news you've just had there. Let me top up everyone's cuppas, and you just sit yourself down.'

Porter wasn't great at sitting still at the best of times, least of all now. He felt like he'd been sucker-punched and needed to walk it off.

'Honestly, I'm all good, thanks, Em. We'll leave you to it. You need to take your rest when she takes hers,' he said, nodding at the sleeping Hannah. He started towards the door before she or Styles could reply. Evie followed, looking somewhat stunned, not sure what to do or say.

'If you're sure,' Emma called after him, sounding as convinced as if he'd just told her he was off to play chicken with the traffic outside.

He waited while Evie and Emma gave each other a brief hug. Heard Emma half whispering something about keeping an eye on him. Styles and Emma stood back, framed in the doorway. Well on their way to the two point four children and

white picket fence. Family life. The kind he could have had with Holly by now. Should have had. That one gave him a twinge of guilt, thinking what the parallel universe version of he and Holly would be like now, while climbing into a car with Evie.

The journey back to his was predictably quiet. Evie tried to tiptoe around it. Told him it was fine to feel whatever he felt. He wasn't even sure how to describe it to himself, let alone open up to her. They had been an item for around nine months now. Evie had made the first move. She was a copper too, working on the Drugs Squad, but it had taken Porter a while to open up to the idea of being with anyone post-Holly. Even now, as happy as he was, there were moments, only occasional, where he felt like he was living someone else's life.

That initial spike of adrenaline that had come with Milburn's news had sparked off a heat inside his chest, one that prickled all the way up the back of his neck, like goosebumps. Hearing that the guy was in a coma, that he might not regain consciousness, scratched away at that veneer of hope. What if he never woke up? Porter needed to look him in the whites of his eyes. A name. That's all he wanted. The kid could skate on the burglary charge for all he cared. Porter just wanted the name of the driver.

That first flush had faded now, simmering back to an impatience. One he was used to, never one to let a case stagnate. The only direction is forwards. A mantra to live your life by. Did Milburn honestly think he could just stand on the sidelines and watch, as somebody else got to arrest a man complicit in his wife's death? To hell with that – his wife's *murder*? The boss told him not to meddle. Such a subjective term.

'What are you going to do?' she asked finally, as they pulled into a space outside his flat.

'Do?' he asked, 'I'm going to go for a jog. Need some fresh air.'

'Who's got the case?'

'Pittman.'

'Could be worse.'

'Could be better.'

'And I suppose you're the man to make it so, are you, Jake? Come on, you know Milburn will have you trussed up like a turkey if you so much as breathe on that case.'

'Who says I'm going to do anything?'

Evie fixed him with a withering look, shaking her head as they went inside.

'Your poker face needs work.'

'I'm not stupid, Evie. I'm not going to do anything that would jeopardise the case.'

'But you are going to do something?' she pressed him.

'What do you want me to say?' he snapped, skidding his keys across a narrow wooden table in the hallway, striding through into the kitchen. 'That I'll stay at home like a good little soldier while someone else gets justice for Holly?'

'I just meant—'

'It's Pittman's case, but I can't just do nothing,' he said, reaching into the fridge, twisting the top off a bottle of Corona. 'For nearly four years I've not been able to put any kind of face to what happened.'

'He was the passenger, Jake, not the driver.'

'You don't know that for sure. And even if he was, he'll know who was sat two feet to his right.'

Even without seeing Henry Kamau, without knowing what he looked like, anger towards the man coursed through

Porter, heat spreading across his cheeks, jaw tightening. Two deep breaths punctuated by a long swig from the bottle.

'Thought you were going for a run?' she said, but her attempt to change the subject and talk him down had the opposite effect.

The confines of the kitchen felt stifling. The call from Milburn had popped the lid off a jar of dark memories he'd not long managed to contain. He gave his best shot at a reassuring smile, hoping it didn't look as forced as it felt.

'Maybe later. Could do with some fresh air though,' he said, clinking the half-empty bottle on the counter.

'Want some company?'

'I do, and don't take this the wrong way, but would you mind if I just had a little wander myself first though? My head's just . . .' He made a swirling gesture by his temple with a finger.

She nodded, lips pressed into a thin line, stepping back to let him past. Porter leant in, kissed her softly, felt her relax into him.

'I know it's all kinds of weird. That was then, me before you. This . . .' he said, waving a finger between the two of them, 'is where I am now, but I can't ignore what's happened today. Just bear with me. Can you do that?'

She looked up at him, smiling, nodding, any tension around the eyes gone now.

'Go on, get yourself away. I'll finish that off for you,' she said, gesturing towards his beer, 'and we can do something when you get back.'

He angled past her, pulling the kitchen door closed behind him as he headed out, taking care when scooping up his keys so as not to jangle. He hadn't lied about wanting fresh air, just hadn't shared where he planned to sample it.

CHAPTER THREE

Nick Styles lay back against his sofa, legs tucked up and pressed together, making the angled platform on which Hannah Styles currently lay. Already, only seven days into fatherhood, anything that predated her arrival had a hazy hue to it, a part of his life he could never revisit, nor would he want to.

He'd been smitten the moment he first held her and, barring a trip to the shops and picking up a takeaway, he'd been happily wrapped up in the bubble of his new family life. Emma sat at the other end of the sofa, head against the armrest at an angle that made him wince, mouth half open. The snore that came out alternated between hibernating hamster and wildebeest. Hannah didn't so much as twitch, even when her mum hit base notes loud enough to measure on the Richter scale.

He split his time between watching a muted recording of *Match of the Day* and glancing at his two ladies. Life felt pretty

good right now. Could do with a few more hours sleep, but with Emma wanting to breastfeed, up God knows how many times during the night while he slept, he could hardly complain.

He had just started to consider a stealthy retreat into the kitchen to snaffle a sly cheese toastie when his phone began to flash. Work. Not a name, just the main station number. Sod that for a game of soldiers. He was due back on duty the next day. Nothing that couldn't wait until then. Styles started the painfully slow process of Operation Toastie. One hand slid behind Hannah's head, the other reaching under, palm against her back, unfolding his legs at a glacial pace, careful movements that a bomb disposal technician would be proud of.

As he edged towards the Moses basket, one tiny fist jerked out like she wanted to bump knuckles, but the eyes remained firmly closed. Lowering her in, he felt like a backwards version of Indiana Jones, returning the treasure to its pedestal.

He made it two steps into the kitchen before his phone flashed again. Milburn this time. Styles toyed with ignoring it. Easy enough to say he'd been busy changing the baby and hadn't seen it until later. On second thoughts, having seen Milburn dish out grief for far less, he tapped the screen to answer.

'Is Porter still with you?'

So much for any preamble, enquiring after the mum and baby, or anything else that might suggest the super even vaguely took an interest in his people's personal lives.

'No, he left about an hour ago. Everything OK, boss? He told me the news about Holly's case. Anything I can help with?' Styles asked, reasoning that if he could get a foot in the door, Porter might trust him to see things were done properly, rather than getting any