



CHRISTOPHER  
FOWLER

# FULL DARK HOUSE

‘A bizarre dark comedy of an investigation...bawdy, unpredictable and at times hilarious, with a cast of wonderful grotesques’

GUARDIAN

## About the Book

### **BRYANT & MAY'S FIRST MYSTERY**

Arthur Bryant and John May of the Met's little-known Peculiar Crimes Unit are London's longest-serving detectives. When a bomb claims Bryant's life, it ends a partnership that has lasted for over half a century.

Desperately searching for clues to the killer's identity, May becomes convinced that the answer is to be found in their very first assignment together. It was in London, during the Blitz, and it all began when a beautiful dancer in a steamy new production of *Orpheus in the Underworld* was found without her feet . . .

And it was an investigation that would plunge the two young detectives into a bizarre gothic mystery – in pursuit of a faceless man who stalked the theatres of a nervous, beleaguered city already full of myth and rumour.

From the acclaimed author of *Roofworld* and *Spanky* comes a deliciously sinister drama in which two of British fiction's most enigmatic detective heroes – Bryant and May – take centre stage in this, their first great case.

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# FULL DARK HOUSE

Christopher Fowler

For Bill – scientist, firewatcher, father (1923-2003)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As far as I can tell, all factual details pertaining to Bryant and May's fateful week in the Blitz are accurate, and any minor errors are my own. Where newspaper reports proved skimpy, I relied on personal interviews and memories, including my father's experiences as a firewatcher. I'd like to thank archivist Graham Cruickshank for showing me the secret world of the Palace Theatre. A special warm thank you goes to my agent Mandy Little on this, our first book together. I'd also like to thank my editor Simon Taylor for his excellent suggestions, and everyone at Transworld for bringing Bryant and May to the public. Thank you, Richard, for tea and patience, and to Jim and Sally for sorting everything out. If you'd like to know more about Bryant and May, you can email me at [chris@cfowler.demon.co.uk](mailto:chris@cfowler.demon.co.uk) or see [www.christopherfowler.co.uk](http://www.christopherfowler.co.uk).

‘Ne regarde pas en arrière!  
A quinze pas fixe les yeux!  
Ami, pense à la terre.

Elle nous attend tous les deux.’

(‘*Don't look back! Fix your gaze five yards ahead!  
Friend, think of the earth that waits for both of us.*’)

**Orphée aux enfers - Jacques Offenbach**

Little drops of water, little grains of sand,  
Lots and lots of buckets, standing close at hand,  
Yards and yards of hosepipe ready in the hall –  
That's the stuff to give 'em when incendiaries fall!

**Children's book, 1940**

## OUT WITH A BANG

It really was a hell of a blast.

The explosion occurred at daybreak on the second Tuesday morning of September, its shock waves rippling through the beer-stained streets of Mornington Crescent. It detonated car alarms, hurled house bricks across the street, blew a chimney stack forty feet into the sky, ruptured the eardrums of several tramps, denuded over two dozen pigeons, catapulted a surprised ginger tom through the window of a kebab shop and fired several roofing tiles into the forehead of the Pope, who was featuring on a poster for condoms opposite the tube station.

As the dissonance pulsed the atmosphere it fractured the city's fragile caul of civilization, recalling another time of London bombs. Then, as now, dust and debris had speckled down through the clear cool air between the buildings, whitening the roads and drifting in the morning sunlight like dandelion seeds. For a split second, the past and the present melted together.

It was a miracle that no one was seriously injured.

Or so it seemed at first.

When Detective Sergeant Janice Longbright received the phone call, her first thought was that she had overslept and missed the start of her shift. Then she remembered that she had just celebrated her retirement from the police force. Years of being woken at odd hours had taught her to

focus her attention within three rings of the bedside telephone. Rubbing dreams from her head, she glanced at the clock and listened to the urgent voice in her ear. She rose from the side of her future husband, made her way quietly (as quietly as she could; she was heavy-footed and far from graceful) through the flat, dressed and drove to the offices above Mornington Crescent tube station.

Or rather, she drove to what was left of them, because the North London Peculiar Crimes Unit had, to all intents and purposes, been obliterated. The narrow maze of rooms that had existed in the old Edwardian house above the station was gone, and in its place wavered fragments of burning lath-and-plaster alcoves. The station below was untouched, but nothing remained of the department that had been Longbright's working home.

She made her way between the fire engines, stepping across spit-sprays from snaked hosepipes, and tried to discern the extent of the damage. It was one of those closed-in mornings that would barely bother to grow light. Grey cloud fitted as tightly over the surrounding terraces as a saucepan lid, and the rain that dampened the churning smoke obscured her view. The steel-reinforced door at the entrance to the unit had been blown out. Firemen were picking their way back down the smouldering stairs as she approached. She recognized several of the officers who were taping off the pavement and road beyond, but there was no sign of the unit's most familiar faces.

An ominous coolness crept into the pit of her stomach as she watched the yellow-jacketed salvage team clearing a path through the debris. She dug into the pocket of her overcoat, withdrew her mobile and speed-dialled the first of the two numbers that headed her list. Eight rings, twelve rings, no answer.

Arthur Bryant had no voicemail system at home. Longbright had ceased encouraging him to record messages after his 'static surge' experiments had

magnetized the staff of a British Telecom call centre in Rugby. She tried the second number. After six rings, John May's voice told her to leave a message. She was about to reply when she heard him behind her.

'Janice, you're here.' May's black coat emphasized his wide shoulders and made him appear younger than his age (he was somewhere in his eighties - no one was quite sure where). His white hair was hidden under a grey woollen hat. Streaks of charcoal smeared his face and hands, as though he was preparing to commit an act of guerrilla warfare.

'John, I was just calling you.' Longbright was relieved to see someone she recognized. 'What on earth happened?'

The elderly detective looked shaken but uninjured, a thankfully late arrival at the blast scene. 'I have absolutely no idea. The City of London Anti-terrorist Unit has already discounted political groups. There were no call signs of any sort.' He looked back at the ruined building. 'I left the office at about ten last night. Arthur wanted to stay on. Arthur . . .' May widened his eyes at the blasted building as if seeing it for the first time. 'He always says he doesn't need to sleep.'

'You mean he's inside?' asked Longbright.

'I'm afraid so.'

'Are you sure he was still there when you left?'

'No question about it. I rang him when I got home. He told me he was going to work right through the night. Said he wasn't tired and wanted to clear the backlog. You know how he is after a big case, he opens a bottle of Courvoisier and keeps going until dawn. His way of celebrating. Mad at his age. There was something in his voice . . .'

'What do you mean?'

May shook his head. 'I don't know. As though he wanted to talk to me but changed his mind, that weird hesitation thing he does on the phone. Some officers in an ARV from the Holmes Road division saw him standing at the window

at around four thirty. They made fun of him, just as they always do. He opened the window and told them to bugger off, threw a paperweight at them. I should have stayed with him.'

'Then we would have lost both of you,' said Longbright. She looked up at the splintered plaster and collapsed brickwork. 'I mean, he can't still be alive.'

'I wouldn't hold out too much hope.'

A tall young man in a yellow nylon jacket came over. Liberty DuCaine was third-generation Caribbean, currently attached to the unit in a forensic team with two young Indian women, the brightest students from their year. Liberty hated his name, but his brother Fraternity, who was also in the force, hated his more. Longbright raised her hand.

'Hey, Liberty. Do they have any idea why—'

'An incendiary device of some kind, compact but very powerful. You can see from here how clean the blast pattern is. Very neat. It destroyed the offices but hasn't even singed the roof of the station.' The boy's impatience to explain his ideas resulted in a staccato manner of speech that May had trouble keeping up with. 'There are some journalists sniffing around, but they won't get anything. You OK?'

'Arthur couldn't have got out in time.'

'I know that. They'll find him, but we're waiting for a JCB to start moving some of the rafters. They haven't picked up anything on the sound detectors and I don't think they will, 'cos the place came down like a pack of cards. There's not a lot holding these old houses in one piece, see.' Liberty looked away, embarrassed to be causing further discomfort.

Longbright started walking towards the site, but May gently held her back. 'Let me take you home, Janice,' he offered.

She shrugged aside the proffered hand. 'I'm all right, I just didn't think it would end like this. It *is* the end, isn't it?' Longbright was already sure of the answer. Arthur Bryant and John May were men fashioned by routines and habits. They had closed a case and stayed on to analyse the results, catching up, enjoying each other's company. It was what they always did, their way of starting afresh. Everyone knew that. John had left the building first, abandoning his insomniac partner.

'Who's conducting the search? They'll have to verify—'

'The fire department's first priority is to make sure it's safe,' said Liberty. 'Of course they'll report their findings as quickly as possible. Anything I hear, you'll know. John's right, you should go home, there's nothing you can do.'

May stared up at the building, suddenly unsure of himself.

Longbright watched the column of rusty smoke rising fast in the still grey air. She felt disconnected from the events surrounding her. It was the termination of a special partnership; their names had been inextricably linked, Bryant, May, Longbright. Now she had left and Bryant was gone, leaving May alone. She had spent so much time in their company that the detectives were more familiar than her closest relatives, like friendly monochrome faces in old films. They had been, and would always be, her family.

Longbright realized she was crying even before she registered the shout, as though time had folded back on itself. A fireman was calling from the blackened apex of the building. She couldn't hear what he was saying, would not allow herself to hear it. As she ran towards the ruins with the fire officers at her heels, the familiar codes started passing through the rescue group.

A single body, an elderly white male, had been located in the wreckage. For Arthur Bryant and John May, an unorthodox alliance had come to a violent end. They were

her colleagues, her mentors, her closest friends. She would not allow herself to believe that Bryant was dead.

An immolation had joined the end to the beginning, past and present blown together. John May had always sensed that routine demise would not be enough for his partner. They had just closed a sad, cruel case, their last together. There were no more outstanding enemies. Bryant had finally started thinking about retirement as the unit headed for a period of radical change, sanctioned by new Home Office policies. He and May had been discussing them only the Friday before, during their customary evening walk to the river. May thought back to their conversation, trying to recall whether they had spoken of anything unusual. They had strolled to Waterloo Bridge at sunset, arguing, joking, at ease in each other's company.

John and Arthur, inseparable, locked together by proximity to death, improbable friends for life.

## CRIMINAL PAST

'You mean to tell me that amateurs are being invited to solve murders?' asked Arthur Bryant with some surprise. 'Have a pear drop.'

'Is that all you've got?' May rattled the paper bag disappointedly. 'They kill my mouth. A study published by the Scarman Centre had apparently found that trained investigators are no better than non-professionals at telling whether a suspected criminal is lying.' The centre was a leading crime-research institute based at Leicester University. Politicians took its findings very seriously.

'Surely the Home Office and the Association of Chief Police Officers won't endorse the scheme?' Bryant squinted into the bag. 'I thought there was some Winter Mixture left.'

'I don't know where you get those sweets. I'm sure they don't make them any more. HO's already endorsed the plan. They reckon any respected person with common sense and an analytical mind can be recruited. Civilians are going to be given unlimited access to evidence and records. I thought you'd be pleased. You suggested the same thing years ago.'

'Well, the general public have a distinct advantage over us.' Plastic carrier bags floated around the traffic lights at the end of the Strand like predatory jellyfish. The hum of traffic around them was like the drone of bombers. The air was acrid with exhausts. Bryant leaned on his walking stick

to catch his breath. The stick was a sore point; May had bought it for his partner's birthday the previous year, but Bryant had been horrified by the suggestion that he was facing mobility difficulties. It had remained in his conservatory for several months, where it had supported a diseased nasturtium, but now the elderly detective found himself discreetly using it. 'Civilians aren't limited by knowledge of the law. I've been employing members of the public ever since the unit opened in nineteen thirty-nine.'

'Looks like HO has finally come around to your way of thinking,' May remarked. 'They've got a new police liaison officer there, Sam Biddle.'

'No relation?'

'His grandson, I believe.'

'How odd. I was thinking about old Sidney Biddle only the other day. So sensible, solid and efficient. I wonder why we all hated him? Do you remember, I once tricked him into shaving his head by telling him that German bomber pilots could spot ginger people in the blackout. I was terrible in those days.'

'The grandson is forwarding candidates to us. We could do with more recruits like DuCaine. It'll be a fresh start for the unit. I rang you last night to discuss the matter, but your mobile was switched off.'

'I think it broke when I dropped it. Now it keeps picking up old radio programmes. Is that possible? Anyway, there's no point in having it turned on when I'm playing at the Freemason's Arms.' They stepped through the scuffed gloom of the buildings hemming Waterloo Bridge. 'I once took a call while I was going through the Gates of Hell, hit one of the pit-stickers and nearly broke his leg. The cheeses weigh about twelve pounds.'

'Am I supposed to have any idea what you're talking about?' May asked.

'Skittles,' the detective explained. 'I'm on the team. We play in the basement of a pub in Hampstead. The discus is

called a cheese.'

'Playing children's games with a bunch of horrible old drunks isn't my idea of fun.' He tended to forget that he was only three years younger than his partner.

'There aren't many players left,' Bryant complained.

'I'm not surprised,' replied May. 'Can't you do something more productive with your evenings? I thought you were going to tackle your memoirs.'

'Oh, I've made a healthy start on the book.' Bryant paused at the centre of the bridge to regain his wind. The pale stone balustrades were dusted with orange shadows in the dying sunlight. Even here the air was musty with vans. There was a time when the stale damp of the river permeated one's clothes. Now the smell only persisted at the shoreline and beneath the bridges. 'They say there are fish in the river again. I heard another human torso was washed up by Blackfriars Bridge, but there was nothing about salmon. I'm looking up old contacts. It's rather fun, you should try it. Go round and see that granddaughter of yours, get her out of the house.'

'April had a breakdown. She can't bear crowds, can't relax. The city gets her down.'

'You have to make the best of things, fight back, that's what Londoners are supposed to be good at. You really should go and see her, encourage her to develop some outside interests.' Bryant looked for his pipe but only managed to find the stem. 'I wonder what I've done with the rest of this,' he muttered. 'I've just finished writing up our first case. Did I tell you I went back to the Palace to look over the files? They were still where I'd left them in the archive room, under tons of old photographs. The place is exactly as I remember it.'

'Surely not,' exclaimed May, amazed.

'Oh, theatres don't change as fast as other buildings.'

'I thought some of the finest halls were destroyed in the sixties.'

‘Indeed they were, music halls mostly, but the remaining sites are listed. I watched as they put a wrecking ball through the Deptford Hippodrome.’

‘How many other files have you got tucked away?’

‘You’d be surprised. That business with the tontine and the Bengal tiger, all documented. The runic curses that brought London to a standstill. The corpse covered in butterflies. I’ve got all our best cases, and a register of every useful fringe group in the capital.’

‘You should upgrade your database. You’ve still got members of the Camden Town Coven listed as reliable contacts. And do I need to mention the Leicester Square Vampire?’

‘Anyone can make a mistake,’ said Bryant. ‘Look at that, a touch of old Shanghai in London.’ He pointed as a fleet of bright yellow tricycles pedalled past, dragging bored-looking tourists around the sights. ‘Do you want to buy me a cup of tea at Somerset House?’

‘It’s your turn to pay.’

‘I didn’t think you’d remember.’ Bryant squinted at the fading sun that was slipping behind the roof of the Savoy, as pale as a supermarket egg. ‘Not only were the files on the Palace Phantom still in the archives, but I discovered something interesting about our murderer. I’ve often thought of him over the years, poor old bugger.’ Ahead, the Embankment was picked out in neon, fierce reds and blues, part of a Thamesside festival. It looked like a child’s drawing of the river finished in crayons.

‘What did you find out?’

‘I was thinking of paying a visit to the Wetherby tomorrow morning,’ Bryant announced, not quite answering the question. The Wetherby was a sister clinic to the Maudsley on Southwark’s Denmark Hill, and housed a number of patients suffering from senile dementia.

‘Are you finally going to have yourself checked over? I’d love to join you, but I’m having lunch with an attractive

lady, and nothing you say will persuade me to do otherwise.'

Bryant made a face. 'Please don't tell me that you're entertaining the notion of *relations*.'

'I have every hope.'

'I must say I find it rather grotesque that you still have a sex drive at your age. Can't you just use internet porn? How old is this one? She must be younger because you don't fancy women as old as you, which makes her, let me guess, late fifties, a post-war child with a name like Daphne, Wendy or Susan, a divorcee or a widow, a brunette if your track record is anything to go by. She probably considers you the older child she never had, in which case she'll be mooning over you, wanting to cook you meals and so on, and won't mind waiting a little longer for the pleasure of finding one of your vulgar off-the-peg suits hanging in the other side of her wardrobe.'

Irritated by the accuracy of his partner's predictions, May dug out his lighter and lit a cigarette, which he wasn't supposed to have. 'What I do in my free time is no concern of yours. I'm not getting any younger. My cholesterol's through the roof. This might be my last chance to have sex.'

'Don't be revolting,' snapped Bryant. 'You should pack it in, a man of your age, you're liable to pull something in the pelvic region. You're better off taking up something productive like wood carving. Women cost a fortune, running up restaurant bills and trawling shops for a particularly elusive style of sandal.'

'They still find me attractive. They might even consider you if you smartened up your act a bit.'

'I stopped buying shirts after they went over six quid. Besides, I like the trousers they sell at Laurence Corner, very racy, some of them.'

'They sell ex-military wear, Arthur. That's the lower half of a demob suit you're wearing. Look at those turn-ups. You could park a bike in them.'

'It's all right for you, you've always been able to impress women,' Bryant complained. 'You don't have the demeanour of a bad-tempered tortoise.'

May's modern appearance matched the freshness of his outlook. Despite his advanced age, there were still women who found his attentiveness appealing. His technoliteracy and his keen awareness of the modern world complemented Bryant's strange psychological take on the human race, and their symbiotic teamwork dealt them an advantage over less experienced officers. But it still didn't stop them from arguing like an old married couple. Their partnership had just commenced its seventh decade.

Those who didn't know him well considered Arthur Bryant to have outlived his usefulness. It didn't help that he was incapable of politeness, frowning through his wrinkles and forever buried beneath scarves and cardigans, always cold, always complaining, living only for his work. He was the oldest active member of the London police force. But May saw the other side of him, the restless soul, the gleam of frustrated intellect in his rheumy eye, the hidden capacity for compassion and empathy.

'Fine,' said Bryant. 'You go off with your bit of fluff, and I'll go to the clinic by myself. There's something I want to clear up before I close my first volume. But don't blame me if I get into trouble.'

'What sort of trouble could you possibly get into?' asked May, dreading to think. 'Just make sure you wear something that distinguishes you from the patients, otherwise they might keep you in. I'll see you on Sunday, how's that?'

'No, I'll be in the office on Sunday.'

'You could take some time off. I'll even come and watch you play skittles.'

'Now you're being patronizing. But you can come to the unit and help me close the reports. That's if you can tear yourself away from . . . let's see, Daphne, isn't it?'

‘It is, as it happens,’ admitted May, much annoyed.

‘Hm. I thought it would be. Well, don’t overdo things.’ Bryant stumped off across the bridge, waving a brisk farewell with his stick.

That had been on Friday evening. May had no idea that Sunday would be their last day together in Mornington Crescent.

## FULL CIRCLE

Five days later, Longbright stood in a private, neglected section of Highgate Cemetery, watching as a simple service placed a public seal on Arthur Bryant's life. Behind them, journalists and Japanese tourists took photographs through the railings. Arthur had no surviving relatives. His landlady Alma was the only non-official in attendance. She had threatened to talk to the press if she wasn't allowed at the graveside. Alma was privy to most of the unit's secrets, via her indiscreet tenant.

Longbright remained beside the wet rose plot containing her colleague's urn as members of the unit trooped by, awkwardly pausing to offer their condolences. Liberty DuCaine led the new generation of unit employees. It felt like the passing of an era.

Longbright was strong. She preferred to stand alone, and refused to cry. Her fiancé offered to drive her home, but she told him to wait in the car. The cemetery grounds were still waterlogged from the recent torrential rain. Briars and nettles drooped over fungus-stained stone, nature anxious to hide all signs of earthly disturbance. Arthur Bryant had arranged to be buried here sixty years earlier, after the death of his greatest love. The retired detective sergeant found it hard to appreciate that a man of such peculiar energy could be so totally obliterated: the forensic lab had identified his body by the melted set of

false teeth Bryant had been fitted with during the year Margaret Thatcher came to power.

Some kind of songbird was making a fuss in the tree behind her. Longbright turned towards it, and found May standing silently in her shadow. 'I guess that should be a symbol of hope,' she said, 'but I wish I had a gun.'

'I know how you feel,' admitted May. 'I don't know what to do without him, how to begin going on. What's the point? It's as though someone tore up the world.'

'Oh, John, I'm so sorry.' She took his hands in hers. She felt angry, not sorry. She wanted to accuse someone and blame them for the loss of their friend. She had seen more of life's unfairness than most people, but it did not stop her from wanting revenge. Alma Sorrowbridge came over and stood quietly with them. The West Indian landlady wore a large silver cross on her black-lace bosom. She was very old now, and shrinking fast.

'John, I wanted to speak to you earlier, but they' - she pointed back at the journalists - 'they were watching me. I have something for you.' She pulled a newspaper-covered oblong from beneath her coat. 'I found this in Mr Bryant's flat. It's addressed to you. Not that I've been touching his things, you understand.'

May accepted the slim folder and tore off the wrapping. His breath condensed around the cream linen cover as he studied it. 'This is Arthur's handwriting,' he said, tracing an ink indentation with his finger. 'Has anyone else looked at it?'

'I showed it to Detective Sergeant Longbright earlier.'

'I took a section of the binding for forensic testing,' Longbright explained. 'Just to make sure it was his.'

May examined the gilt edge of the paper. 'I've certainly never seen it before. Might be the first chapter of his book.'

'It was stuck down the back of the wardrobe,' said Alma. 'I moved it to hoover. He told me he was going to write his

memoirs, and wanted to borrow my old fountain pen because it had a broad italic nib.'

'Why would he want to write with that?'

'You know how he had these funny ideas. Never let me clean under his bed in sixty years. He had things growing.'

'I'm not surprised.'

'No, in round glass pots.'

'Ah, Petri dishes, yes, he did that sort of thing all the time. Thank you for this, Alma.'

Bryant's landlady made her painful way out of the cemetery. May wondered how long she would cope without her tenant. He watched her go before returning his attention to the book. His numb fingers carefully parted the pages. Inside was a single loose sheet covered in dense scrawl. 'He never kept case notes like this,' he told Longbright. 'Arthur wasn't organized enough. He couldn't even find his dry-cleaning tickets.' Despite Bryant's lack of proficiency with laundry collection, it appeared that he had indeed written something in the last weeks of his life. Unfortunately, it wasn't readable.

'It's in shorthand,' explained Oswald Finch when May talked to him later. The unit's staff had been temporarily rehoused in storage rooms on the top floor of Kentish Town police station. Finch was, strictly speaking, a retired forensic pathologist but knew a thing or two about indecipherable writing, as anyone who had seen his own handwriting could testify. 'Definitely shorthand. Not the most recent kind either, an older version. This is tachygraphy of the type that Samuel Pepys used in his diaries. Before the nineteenth century it was popular among lawyers and naval officers. Hopelessly arcane now, of course. Be interesting to see how he copes with modern vocabulary. Analogous nouns and phonetic spelling, probably. That's why he wanted the broad nib, to place emphases.'

'But can you transcribe it?' May asked impatiently.

'Good heavens, no. But I might be able to download a program that can. Could you leave it with me for a few days?'

'I'd rather read it myself. Can you forward the program to me?'

Finch had almost forgotten that May had once trained as a codebreaker. 'I don't see why not. It won't be very user-friendly, though.'

'How typical of him not to write it in plain English. I'll call you with a new email address and security reference. I'm going to be on leave for a while. I have to get out of London.'

Finch understood. Arthur Bryant was virtually a symbol of the city. There were memories of the man and his cases almost everywhere you looked.

A few days later John May drove down into the Sussex countryside, and it was there, on the rich green downs above Brighton, seated in the attic room he had rented above an unpropitious pub called the Seventh Engineer, that he downloaded the translation program and set to work.

At the start of the document was a note from Finch:

*John - I've tried to give you a head start by programming substitutions for the most frequently used words, but some of it's still a bit wonky. Bryant appears to have used a very peculiar writing style. It's rather rambling and all very indiscreet, the only good thing being that many of the people in his account are presumably dead and therefore unavailable to pursue lawsuits. I hope it throws some light on what has happened. Perhaps DS Longbright can help you fill in the gaps. From the way Arthur hid it, he seems to have anticipated that something disastrous might occur. If you think this has any*

*bearing on the blast, we'd better put together a report for RL.*

RL was Raymond Land, the unit's impatient and unforgiving new acting head. May's eye was drawn to the postscript: *'By the way, you might be interested to know that Longbright's mother features in the case. I'd forgotten she once worked at the unit. I think Arthur had a crush on her.'*

May set about copying the pages of the notebook into his laptop. After typing in a few hundred words, impatience got the better of him, and he ran the translation program. His fingers idled against the keyboard as he tried to make sense of what he read.

He was looking at an account of their first case, the start of a memoir. Through the fractured text he began to hear Bryant's voice. Pouring himself a gin, he began typing again. He transcribed the single loose sheet and ran the translation program, watching as the letters unscrambled themselves.

An uncomfortable sensation began to take hold of him. The loose page was a fresh addendum, a confidence not intended for publication. Its final line acknowledged a failing: *'I know I will go back, because I cannot leave the past alone . . .'* May was suddenly sure that Bryant had done something to cause his own death. You didn't work with a man for sixty years without gaining an insight into his behaviour. Arthur had disturbed the past, and somehow it had killed him. The idea was preposterous, but stuck fast.

He stared at the words on the screen and thought back to their first meeting in the Blitz. That strange, exhilarating time had also ended with a consignment to flames. It was as though events had somehow come full circle. Bryant had known that his actions could place him at risk. Why else would he encode the memoir and hide it?

The elliptical translation wasn't enough to provide an explanation. May knew he would have to rely on his own elusive memories in order to appreciate what had happened. As the sun slipped below the trees and the shadows became scented with damp earth, he closed his eyes and allowed his thoughts to drift across over half a century, to a time when London's character was put to a test few other cities could have hoped to survive.

He tried to remember how the seeds of their future had been sown. It was 1940. It was November. A nation was at war, and the world had blundered into darkness.

## SKY ON FIRE

Viewed from the far perspective of world terrorism, the wartime bombing of London now seems unimaginably distant. But the blossoming white dust clouds, debris bursting through them like the stamens of poisoned flowers, contained the same moment of horror common to all such events.

The conflict had been so long anticipated that in some perverse way its arrival was a relief. The people of Britain had methodically prepared their defences. This time the island did not wait to recruit its forces. Conscription created armies, and attacks were launched by sea and sky. For those who remained behind, daily life took strange new forms. Children carried their gas masks to school. Public information leaflets explained the rules of the blackout. Rationing made the nation healthier. An aura of orderly common sense settled across the city of London.

As the fittest men were conscripted, the streets grew quieter, and an air of becalmed expectancy prevailed. It felt as though a great change was drawing near. More civilians found a purpose in war than in peace. Nothing could be taken for granted, not even an extra day of life. For those who were as old as the century, it was the second time to fight.

In 1939, London was the largest city in the world. The riches of the British empire still poured through its financial institutions. Memories of the depression had

faded. Good times, boom times, had arrived. Despite the false celebration of 'peace in our time', rearmament paved the way to prosperity. One still saw reminders of the Great War on the streets: one-armed liftmen, blinded match-sellers, men who stuttered and shook when you spoke to them. During that earlier conflict, German airships had bombed the city but managed to kill only 670 people. Surely, everyone said, it would not happen again.

Even so, the Committee of Imperial Defence had begun a study into air-raid precautions as early as 1924. They calculated how many bombs could be dropped by Germany should hostilities recommence, and how many people they would kill. Every ton of explosive would cause fifty casualties, a third of them fatal. Three thousand five hundred bombs would fall on London in the first twenty-four hours. It would be essential to maintain public order, to prevent the city from descending into a living hell. For the first time in a war, the reinforcement of morale at home became a priority.

The first bomb to explode in London was not dropped by the Germans but planted by the IRA, and aimed at the most prosaic of targets - Whiteley's emporium in Bayswater. German bombers could not reach their target, and the city had become an impregnable citadel. The country's prime minister had seen active military service, and was experienced in the way of warfare. The King remained in Buckingham Palace. The government, the monarchy, the people were seen to be moving in one direction. The shops remained open. The deckchairs were set out in Hyde Park, and the band played on.

But by November 1940, the uneasy anticlimax of the Twilight War had been over for six months, and the Blitz had become a way of life. After the fall of France, the nation was braced for imminent invasion, and Londoners were so used to living under the constant threat of air