The Willing Ghost

Chapter one

She opened the door of my office without knocking and came in. She stood in front of my desk and looked down at me. I was sitting in my chair with my feet on the desk and reading the sports pages of a newspaper.

'You're a private detective, I believe,' she said.

I took my feet off the desk and put down the newspaper. 'That's right.'

'Well, I have a job for you.'

'Good,' I said. 'I charge 250 pounds a day, plus expenses.'

'Money's no problem.'

'Even better,' I said. 'What's the problem?'

During these few seconds I was looking at her closely. She had beautiful, long red hair and enormous emerald-green eyes. She reminded me of a cat I had once - the eyes, not the hair. I also thought I recognised her, but I couldn't remember where from. She was about twenty-seven or twenty-eight, and very beautiful. She was wearing a tight green (the same shade as her eyes) sleeveless silk dress. Nothing on top; no coat, no cardigan: we were enjoying a very hot summer in London that year. She was also wearing expensive jewellery, very expensive; the kind many women are prepared to kill for. A gold watch, a ring with a huge emerald surrounded by diamonds on her left hand, a gold bracelet on her right wrist, and three loops of the best Australian pearls around her neck. I know quite a lot about jewellery. I know quite a lot about everything that costs a lot of money. It's a hobby of mine. For the same reason I was also receiving messages from the perfume she was using that day. It was something like the latest perfume. But not the one along with all the other 'latest' of the perfume manufacturers which flood the department stores around Christmas. This was a special made-to-order mix, the kind produced in small quantities for very rich VIPs. I know quite a lot about perfume, as well.

Definitely, she was the kind of client that I like to have, and also the kind of client that I needed at that moment.

'Well, the problem, Mr Boot, is that I have great difficulties in sleeping at the moment.'

'Shouldn't you see a doctor, not a detective?' I said.

'No. You see, there's a reason I can't sleep.'

'And what is it?' I asked.

'It's a ghost.'

'A ghost?'

'Yes. A ghost. A ghost in my house. And two or three nights a week about midnight or one o'clock, I hear strange noises in the house.'

Now, I don't believe in ghosts, but I do believe in rich beautiful clients. So I asked her to sit down. While she was doing this, I tried to think of intelligent questions that you can ask about ghosts. 'Well, first of all, when did this start?'

'About three months ago.'

'And where do the noises come from? From which part of the house, I mean. In your bedroom, or...?'

'No, not in my bedroom In fact, quite a long way from my bedroom. It's a very big house, you see. My bedroom is on the second floor. There are three floors altogether. All I can be sure of is that the noises come from below where I sleep, not above.'

'I see. And have you ever gone down to find out what's going on?'

'Yes. Two or three times. But each time the noise stops a moment or two later, while I'm going down the stairs. I've looked into every room on the first floor and the ground floor, and everything has been completely normal.'

'Curious,' I said. 'Tell me a little more about the house.'

'Well, it's about 350 years old. It's in Surrey, in the country, not far from Sutton. It was built in the second half of the 17th century. Its last owner was my father. He died about a year ago. He left the house to me. He left everything else to me, as well." 'He was very rich, I presume?'

'Yes, very. He was Sir Arthur Willing.'

'Good God! You're Sir Arthur Willing's daughter?'

'Yes. My name is Selena Willing.'

Sir Arthur Willing's daughter! I couldn't believe it. Her photograph was often in the newspapers. Without doubt, she was the kind of client that I needed at that moment.

Chapter two

Everybody in England knew who Sir Arthur Willing was. He was sixty-three when he died fourteen months before his beautiful daughter walked into my office. And for the last twenty or twenty-five years of his life, he was one of the ten richest people in the United Kingdom. I knew this because an English newspaper publishes a list once a year of the 1,000 richest people in that year. Sometimes Sir Arthur was number one in the list, sometimes number two or three, but always in the top 10. Surprisingly, Sir Arthur was born into a very poor family in a poor part of London. He left school when he was fifteen to sell fruit and vegetables in a local street market. But Sir Arthur was one of those rare people who have a gift for business. And also the ambition to get to the top. By the time he was eighteen, he owned most of the stalls in the market. Then he opened his own import-export business when he was twenty. From that time on he became richer and richer. He bought or founded many more companies, and extended his business interests into construction, furniture, insurance, and just about everything else.

Sir Arthur was knighted for services to British industry when he was thirty. He married when he was thirty-two, and in the following years the couple had three children. Selena was first, and then two brothers. A few years later Sir Arthur's wife died. Sir Arthur never remarried.

Sir Arthur's favourite child was Selena. She was like her father in many ways. She was a good student and a very hard worker. And she loved her father very much. She helped her father with all his business, too. She learnt everything that her father was able to teach her about companies, finances, the stock market, and so on.

On the other hand, Sir Arthur's relationship with his two sons was never very successful. They were not at all like their father. They were very bad students, very lazy and only interested in having fun. They escaped from the house as often as they could in the evenings. This was not difficult because their father usually worked late and didn't return home until eleven or twelve. The boys went to the cinema or to discotheques or to games parlours. Both went to good universities but failed almost all their examinations and left without taking a degree.

Finally, when the boys were nineteen and twenty, their father lost patience with them. He tore up his will which was made years before. In this will, all his money and possessions and business interests were left to his three children equally. Then he made a new will which left everything to Selena. Well, except for one little company in Bangkok, in Thailand, which exported hand-carved teak furniture to Britain and other countries. This company did not make a big profit, but enough for his two sons as owner-directors to earn a living.

Of course, when Sir Arthur died and his will became known, the sons reacted badly. They found a solicitor who agreed to defend their interests. A long court case followed. Every day there were articles about it in all the newspapers. Finally, Selena won the case and stayed in possession of all her inheritance. The boys angrily left the family house in Surrey, and went to share a tiny rented flat in a not very exclusive part

Chapter three

Before Selena left my office that day, I told her that I needed to see her house first. I wanted to look for clues. The next day I drove to the town of Sutton. I left the car parked, and got a taxi. I had directions with me written by Selena. However, I didn't need them; the taxi driver knew where the Willing mansion was. We left the town and drove into the country. After fifteen minutes we arrived at an enormous stone wall beside the road. We followed this wall for a few minutes until we came to a gate made of iron bars. It was closed, and behind it was a uniformed security guard. I paid the taxi driver and told the security guard that I had an appointment with Miss Willing. While he was telephoning the house, I looked through the bars of the gate. There was a road which led from the gate through some trees. Well, many trees; a wood, in fact. In the distance, I could just see the roof of a large house.

'Alright,' said the security guard. 'Walk up the drive until you reach the house. Oh, and be careful of the tigers.'

Be careful of the tigers? He saw the panic in my eyes.

'Ha, ha,' he laughed. 'Just my little joke. There are no tigers in the wood. Not at this time, anyway. They're all in their cages behind the house.'

Not at this time, anyway? In their cages behind the house? I was beginning to feel that I didn't want to visit this house. But the guard opened the gate and I went in and walked quickly, very quickly, up that driveway. About seventy-five yards from the house, the trees stopped. Then there was an open space, a forecourt, and then the house. Magnificent! A real English stately home. In the centre was a huge wooden front door, open, and Selena was standing in the doorway.

'Hello,' she said, brightly. 'How are you today, Mr Boot?'

I needed three or four seconds to catch my breath. 'Fine, thanks,' I said surprised. 'And you?'

We went into the house and she offered me some tea or coffee. I said that I wanted to inspect the house first. She took me on a guided tour, first of the ground floor: a living room at least twice as big as my flat, with a large ornamental marble fireplace in the centre of one wall; a dining room with a dark polished wooden table, about ten yards long, in the centre, with chairs around it; the kitchen and the pantry, a room that Selena used as an office; various other smaller rooms. Afterwards, we went upstairs to look at the bedrooms and bathrooms on the first floor. We didn't go higher because Selena was sure that the noises came from below where she slept, on the second floor.

We returned to the living room and Selena rang a bell. A pretty little maid about eighteen years old appeared, and Selena asked for coffee. It arrived almost immediately, and we sat down to talk.

'Well, Mr Boot. Any clues? Any ideas?'

I confessed that there was nothing strange or suspicious that I could see. Then I asked her if I might sleep in the house for at least one night.

'Why not, Mr Boot? The servants will prepare a bedroom for you on the same floor as mine. Will you come tonight?'

I said yes, and at the same moment I remembered the tigers.

'Tell me,' I said. 'Was the security guard joking when he warned me about the tigers?'

'Well, yes and no,' said Selena. 'I do have five old tigers in cages just behind the trees at the back of the house. But we only let them out for exercise between two and three in the mornings.'

'You let them out?'

'Well, I don't, personally. But one of the gardeners worked in a circus for many years. He lets them out and then puts them back in every night.'

'How does he put them back in?' I wanted to know.

'Oh, they're well-trained, Mr Boot. They know that while they are exercising, the gardener puts their dinner in the cages. A half a cow for each one.'

'A half a cow?'

'Yes. Tigers eat a lot. They bring the cows down from one of my farms in Scotland.'

'But isn't it rather dangerous to let tigers roam around the grounds?'

'No, not really. We're all in bed, myself and all the servants, at that time. And if we aren't, we don't go outside. Anyway, as I said, they're quite old now, and well-fed, and probably quite harmless.'

'But why do you have these tigers?'

'They belonged to my father, Mr Boot, and were part of my inheritance. He loved the tigers and because of that, I've kept them. But when they die, I won't get any more.'

I was glad to hear that. 'But have they never given you any problems?'

'Well, not really, well, yes, from time to time when they were younger. About six years ago one of them ate one of the servants while he was smoking a cigarette on the forecourt. It was a shame. He was a nice man.'

'Good God!' I exclaimed. 'But is it legal to have tigers wandering about in a garden in England?'

'I have no idea, Mr Boot,' she said.

Chapter four

I went back to the house at ten o'clock that evening. I had a few more questions to ask Selena. This time another security guard opened the gate. Selena met me at the front door again. She was dressed for bed, in pyjamas and a dressing gown.

'I always go to bed at ten o'clock,' she explained. 'I have to control all my father's business interests, and I go to bed early and get up early.'

'That's not much of a life for a girl of your age,' I said. 'Anyway, Miss - or do you prefer Ms Willing...?'

'"Miss" is fine, but call me Selena,' she interrupted, with a smile.

'Fine, Selena,' I said. 'Call me Richard,' I added, with what I think is my most attractive and seductive smile. 'First, then, I have one or two questions I want to ask you.'

'Of course. Please come in.' I followed her into the living room and we sat down.

'Well, firstly, do you ever see your brothers these days? Do you have a good relationship with them?' I asked.

'No is the answer to both questions, I'm afraid. We've never had a good relationship, even when we were children. They were always against me. They used to call me 'daddy's little girl' because I loved my father and I wanted to help him - especially after my mother died. They left here after the problem of the inheritance was over. You know all about that, I suppose?'

I nodded.

'That was about a year ago,' she continued, 'and I've only seen them once since, by chance. I was walking past a cafe near Knightsbridge and I saw them through the window. They were talking to two or three other men. Foreign men, I think. Darkhaired and fairly dark skins. From some part of Asia, perhaps.'

'I see,' I said. 'But another question. Do they have keys to the gate and to the house?'

Selena looked surprised. 'Do you suspect them of something?' she asked.

'Let's say I'm trying to eliminate possibilities.'

'Well, yes, I suppose they still have keys to the house. But not to the gate. No one has a key to the gate except the security men. There are five of them and they work shifts. Two work nights and the others during the day. At least one of them is on duty twenty-four hours a day.'

'And another question. Does anyone else live in the house?'

'No, not even the servants. There were some old stables which we converted into apartments some years ago. Close to the house, on one side. All the servants live there.'

'So,' I said, 'after eleven or twelve at night, there's no one in the house except you?'

'That's right,' she answered.

'Alright. Just one more question before you go to bed. There isn't a basement or cellar below this house, is there?'

'No, nothing. Somewhere there are some old plans of the house. I've seen them and there's nothing but the three floors.'

'Alright,' I said. 'No more questions for today. Oh, except where do I sleep?'

'One of the servants will show you to your room when you're ready to go to bed. If you want something to eat or drink, you just have to ring this little bell.'

'Thank you, but I don't want anything. I'll go to bed soon, too. I've brought a book to read in bed,' I added. I took out of my pocket the book I was reading at the moment, a paperback copy of Henry Esmond, a well-known 19th-century English novel by William Thackeray.

'You like good books, Richard,' said Selena. 'So do I, when I have time to read. I've read that one, and everything else by Thackeray, I think. It's very good.'

I was beginning to like Selena. Young, very good-looking, and with good taste in literature. Just my kind of girl!

Chapter five

Nothing happened that first night. No noises, nothing. I saw Selena at breakfast and I asked to stay another night. She said that I could stay as long as I wanted to.

There were noises the second night. As I was getting up, I realised they were not inside the house, but outside, in the grounds. And they were not human noises, but animal noises. I looked at my watch. It was twenty-five past two. I supposed the tigers were looking for another servant to eat. I went back to bed.

The third night, yes, noises. This time inside the house. I thought I heard footsteps. And perhaps a door opened and shut. I got up immediately, put on my dressing gown and went out of the bedroom. Selena was coming out of her room at the same time.

'Do you hear it?' she asked.

'I can hear it. I'm going down to see what it is.'

I went into every room on the first floor, and then on the ground floor. Nothing! Nothing unusual, nothing suspicious. And Selena was right; the moment I left the bedroom, the noises stopped. I went back to the second floor. Selena was still waiting at her bedroom door.

'Well?' she said.

'Well, nothing,' I answered. 'Your ghost is very elusive.'

The next morning, I sat down at my desk in my office. I left the newspaper on the desk without opening it. I needed to think. It was the fourth day on this case and I didn't have even one clue. Thoughts, possibilities, came into my head and went out again. Nothing seemed to make any sense. I knew what I had to do - go home and drink two or three cups of my special coffee brew. This idea I got from the 19th-century French novelist, Honore de Balzac. This enormously productive writer (he wrote and published about ninety novels) wrote mainly at night and usually for fourteen or fifteen hours without stopping. Then he went to bed for a few hours and tried to sleep. Not very successfully, I imagine, because to keep himself awake and, more importantly, to keep his imagination working on all cylinders, he drank many cups of coffee while he was working. Not just any coffee, but his own special mixture of coffees, in exact proportions, bought from various coffee merchants in Paris. While he was writing his first books, he experimented until he had a coffee mixture as strong as coffee can be. Then, from time to time, he visited his coffee dealers in Paris to renew his supply.

Now, I don't write novels, but I do sometimes have cases which are very difficult to work out and which call for some really imaginative thinking. And as Balzac's recipe for his special mixture has not survived, as far as I know, several years ago I decided to experiment with creating one for myself. I went every few days to a coffee dealer who has a little shop in Soho and who sells only coffee, coffee from everywhere. I don't remember how I started, but it was something like this: 'Put two ounces of Colombian, then mix in one ounce of Indonesian, now three ounces of Brazilian...,' and so on. By changing the proportions, and sometimes the source countries, each time for about a year, I achieved my own special, very strong blend, one that could help me to think of possibilities that I couldn't reach without help. Now, just as Balzac did, I go to my coffee dealer every two or three months. He knows me well. 'Two pounds of your special, Mr Boot?' he asks, with a smile.

At home, I made a pot of my mixture. Then I poured the first cupful and while I was sipping it, I did some housework. As I live alone, this is a necessity from time to time, although I'm not very good at it. So, still sipping, I made the bed for the first time that week and washed and dried some plates and cups and saucers which were waiting in the sink for me for the same length of time. Then I swept the kitchen floor, and I couldn't remember the last time I did that. After this, I sat down in my armchair and started drinking another cup. I began to concentrate on the case. But, after the second cup, I still didn't have any good ideas. So I poured another cupful. Halfway through that cup I decided that my special mixture wasn't working that day. The best thing to do was to take the rest of the day off and relax. I decided to make some lunch and then return to my armchair and finish reading Henry Esmond. Henry Esmond? Suddenly, yes, an idea came! The events in Thackeray's novel take place in the last years of the 17th century and the first years of the 18th. The 17th century was a very violent time in English history; civil wars, the execution of a king, and bloody battles all around England between royalists and parliamentarians. And I remembered that once I read that during this period, secret rooms or cupboards were installed in some big country houses. Rooms or cupboards big enough to hide people during the wars. There is one secret cupboard, 'big enough for a man', in Henry Esmond. Of course, these secret places don't show on any plans that still exist of the houses.

The more I thought of the possibility of a secret room in Selena's 17th-century house, the more I liked it. Both Selena and I were sure that the noise came from inside the house. I decided that the next thing to do was to search for a secret room.

Chapter six

I didn't finish the third cup of coffee. I telephoned Selena immediately and asked her if I could go back to her house that day. I told her that I had an idea and that I needed to look at the house again. She said I could go whenever I wanted to. She also said that she had meetings to attend in two or three of her companies in the city. The security guards and the servants were already instructed to let me in any time I went there.

I thought for a moment before I left home. I decided to take a torch with me. It might be useful.

I arrived at Selena's house at about two o'clock. I was let in and, firstly, I went through all the rooms on the first floor. I couldn't find any secret cupboards or any possible space for a secret room. I went down to the ground floor and did the same, with the same result. I sat down in an armchair to think. I tried to recall my conversations with Selena. Perhaps there was a clue in them. Suddenly, I remembered that she told me that there was no basement or cellar. She also told me that she once saw the plans of the house, and no basement was shown. But secret spaces don't appear in the plans of houses. I decided to look for a way into a possible secret room below the ground floor.

I went into all the rooms on the ground floor again, nothing. I had to start thinking again. Then I remembered that in films, secret hiding places are usually opened and closed by levers. I went through all the rooms on the ground floor again. I was looking for a lever, or somewhere to conceal a lever. Again, nothing. I sat back down in the armchair. I was feeling frustrated. My eyes were still moving around the living room, hopefully. They went back to the fireplace. Of course! What better place to hide a lever! I put my hand inside and began to grope from the bottom to the top of the left-hand side. Nothing but cold marble. I tried the right-hand side. The same. Then I moved my hand along inside the top part. Halfway along my hand touched a piece of metal. A lever?

I was feeling excited now. I tried to move the piece of metal to the right and to the left. But it didn't move. I tried going up. Nothing. I placed my hand above the metal and began to push down. The piece of metal moved easily, three or four inches downwards. At the same time, a large panel on the wall next to the fireplace slid behind the panel on its other side to leave a space about the size of a doorway. It was pitch-black inside. I took my torch from one of the arms of the armchair and shone it into this new space. I saw three or four steps. I went down them. Then, there was a turn to the right, and three or four steps more. When I arrived at the bottom of these, I saw that I was in a small room. I shone the torch all around that room. In the centre was a long table. On top of this table there were three oil lamps. In one corner of the room there was a pile of large colorful cushions, the kind you see around the living room on chairs and sofas. Beside these, there was a smaller pile of the same cushions, but with the top surfaces cut open. I went to look at them. I put my hand inside one of the cuts. Nothing but feathers. Suddenly, I saw in another corner six or seven brown paper bags, with the tops folded. I unfolded one of them. It contained what looked at first sight to be a lot of little pieces of dirty coloured glass. I reached in and took out a handful. When I looked again, I knew immediately what I was looking at. Not pieces of glass but precious stones, dirty, uncut, unpolished and straight from the mines. Rubies and sapphires mainly, but some pearls as well.

It was now obvious what was happening. Gems were being smuggled into the country inside the cushions. These then somehow made their way to this little basement. Then the cushions were cut open and the stones were extracted, ready to be sold, I supposed, to dealers who didn't ask questions about where the stones came from. They would then be cut and polished and used in the making of rings, necklaces, earrings, bracelets and so on.

I went upstairs, back to the living room. As I was leaving through the 'doorway', I saw another small lever at the top of the stairs. I took a risk and turned it upwards. The panel shut behind me. I didn't like the feeling of being locked inside that secret basement with only my torch for company. I quickly pushed the level downwards. The panel sprang open again. Thank God, I thought. I went to the fireplace and pushed the lever upwards. The panel closed. How clever, I thought. A secret room with a lever outside to open and close it, and one inside as well.

Chapter seven

I knew what I had to do first. Back in my office, I telephoned Chief Inspector Snout at Scotland Yard. Ronald Snout was the head of a department which dealt with contraband goods. I knew him well because he was a great friend of my father's. Also, Snout and I once collaborated on another case of mine which involved the smuggling of human organs for transplants.

Snout himself answered the telephone. 'Richard! How nice to hear from you.'

We chatted for a while and then I told him that I had something for him. I asked if we could meet later that day at 'Dirty Dick's' cafe, only a few yards from Scotland Yard. 'Dirty Dick's' is open twenty-four hours a day and is well-known for its enormous English breakfasts - eggs, bacon, sausages, tomatoes, and anything else you ask for - which they will serve you at any moment of the day or night. It is much used by policemen who are going on or off duty around the clock. We agreed to meet there at six.

Then I lay on the sofa in my office to go over things in my mind. Some people are good lateral thinkers. I, personally, am a horizontal thinker. At least, when I'm not drinking my special coffee mixture, I think better when I'm lying down.

I wanted to put things together because I wanted to tell Snout as much as possible. I started to revise everything I knew. From the newspaper reports about the inheritance case a year before, to my conversations with Selena and my visits to her house. The boys' inheritance: a furniture company in Bangkok. And a lot of the precious stones which are smuggled into Europe come from Asia and Africa. The boys were talking to foreign men in a pub. Possibly Asians, Selena said. The boys probably still had keys to the house. The fact that they didn't have keys to the front gate worried me a little. Were the security men members of the gang?

I arrived at 'Dirty Dick's' a little early. I sat down at a table and ordered a pot of tea. Ten minutes later, Ronald Snout arrived. He looked just the same as he always did. In his late fifties, but tall and slim, with an athletic build, a luxuriant but well-trimmed moustache, and very well-dressed. He looked more like a company director than a policeman.

We greeted each other and he ordered tea and two scones. Once he was seated, and after chatting for a couple of minutes, I told him the whole story. I started from the moment that Selena came into my office. He listened without comment. A good policeman must be a good listener.

Ronald was very interested, of course, in what I had to say. He knew all about the Willing family, but he had no idea what the boys were doing. We talked about the best way to deal with this case. One possibility was to arrest the brothers immediately and interrogate them. But we agreed that this wasn't the way to do it. They might not say who their accomplices were. And, anyway, these might leave the country the moment they found out that the boys were in the hands of the police. Finally, we decided to try to catch them, the boys and their accomplices, in flagrante delicto; that is, when they were in the basement cutting open the cushions. We decided that I should stay at Selena's house again that night, and for more nights if necessary. Ronald asked me if I thought the gang were armed. I said I had no idea. In case they were, Ronald decided to have a group of armed policemen near the house during the night, prepared to force the security man to open the gate. If I heard noises, I had to telephone Ronald immediately on my mobile telephone. His men intended to move quickly up to the house. By that time, I had to be downstairs with the front door open and my hand on the lever in the fireplace.

We said goodbye outside the cafe and I went back to my office. I telephoned Selena to tell her I wanted to stay at least another night in her house. Then I told her that something might happen that night, and that I wanted her to stay in her bedroom until I went to call her. She agreed. As a precaution, I asked her to instruct the gardener not to let the tigers out that night, but to give them each their half a cow and leave them in their cages. She agreed to that as well. She wanted to know what was going on, of course, but I told her I would tell her later.

Chapter eight

I arrived at Selena's house at about eleven. The security guard let me in without any questions. From one or two jokey comments he made, I understood that he thought that I was Selena's boyfriend. The pretty little maid let me into the house.

Selena was already in bed. I was hungry and I asked the maid to bring me a sandwich and a coke. I sat in the living room and looked at the fireplace. I was looking forward to a little action. At about 11:30, I went upstairs to bed. Before I went to sleep, I telephoned Snout to make sure that everything was ready. He told me not to worry. He and his men were ready and waiting, hidden in a side road only 200 yards from the house.

I fell asleep immediately without taking my clothes off, just my shoes. At one o'clock I was woken up by the same noises as the night before. I put my shoes back on and telephoned Snout. Then I left the bedroom, and the noises stopped. I went downstairs and opened the front door. I waited in the living room. After a few minutes, I heard cars on the drive. A few seconds later, Snout and six policemen armed with pistols and torches came into the living room. Snout looked at me and nodded. I pushed the lever in the fireplace downwards. The six policemen rushed into the opened doorway and down the stairs. Snout and I followed. Before I reached the bottom stair, I heard two shots. When I arrived in the room, it was brightly lit by the oil lamps. I saw that one of the policemen was wounded in the arm. One of the five other men in the room, one of the Asians, was lying on the floor with a bullet in his leg and a pistol beside him. The two brothers were there, unarmed, astonished and very frightened. The two other men, both obviously Asians also, had pistols in their hands. But with five armed policemen with their weapons pointed at them, they didn't seem very sure what to do with them. 'Drop the guns!' ordered Snout. The pistols fell to the floor.

All that was left to do was to handcuff the members of the gang and take them to the cars which were waiting on the forecourt and then to take possession of the gems. The uncut cushions were also carried to the cars and loaded into the boots. Two ambulances were called for the wounded men. Snout and I spoke for a minute or two before they all left. He told me that they would interrogate the men some time later. He promised to telephone me after that.

I went upstairs and knocked on Selena's door. She was awake, of course, and I told her everything. 'No ghost,' I said. 'Just some villains making a dishonest living.' She seemed relieved, but a bit disappointed. I think she quite liked having a ghost in the house. I told her I would ring her later, after I talked to Snout.

Chapter nine

Snout telephoned me about two o'clock that afternoon. He told me that during their interrogation the brothers confessed everything. Snout said that they were like two frightened little boys. They were first offenders, so they had no experience of being questioned by police authorities. The Asians were more difficult, obviously hardened criminals. But they were caught red-handed, and the police had all the evidence they needed to prosecute them. Snout also told me that the two night security men were also in custody. They were paid by the rest of the gang to open the gate and help to carry the cushions up the driveway to the house. The other three security men were clean; they knew nothing about it.

Then, because there were some things I didn't have clear, I asked Snout some questions. For example, how did the boys know about the secret room?

'They found it when they were only kids, while they were playing in the living room. They decided to keep it a secret; their private place that no one else knew about. One night, a few months ago, while Miss Willing was in the United States on business, they carried the table down there. They needed a surface to cut open the cushions.'

'And how did this operation start?' I wanted to know.

'Well,' said Snout, 'two or three months after they received their inheritance, the brothers went to Bangkok. They wanted to see the factory. They were there about two weeks. Somehow they got involved with a group of local people. You have met three of them. One is Burmese, by the way, and the other two Thais. These people are, in fact, experienced jewel smugglers, but the brothers didn't know that at the time. And the idea for this operation came from them, not from the brothers. Now, the brothers are pretty simple-minded, frankly. They were taken out to dinner several times to good restaurants by these 'nice' people. Always invited, always paid for. After that, I think that it was easy to persuade them to take part in the scheme. Now, the company makes furniture from teak, and the accompanying cushions. So the plan was that the brothers return to London with the three Asians, which they did. After that, a small group of local people, in the pay of the smugglers, began to enter the factory late at night, two or three nights a week. Their job was to make the cushions. And into every third one, before they lined it, they put a bag of precious stones. They marked these cushions with a tiny 'x' on the bottom surface. Then, together with other furniture which the company made, they were exported to England to be stored in the company warehouse in West Kensington. So, when each consignment arrived, the brothers and the three other men visited the warehouse at night and filled a van with all the cushions marked with an 'x'. They then drove to Miss Willing's house in Surrey. They arrived between eleven and twelve. It was the brothers' idea to store the stones in their secret room.'

'And then? When they got to Selena's house?'

'Well,' said Snout, 'they couldn't drive the van up the drive - too much noise. So, the guard on duty opened the gate and the six men carried the cushions up the drive to the front door. Then, before they opened the door, the guard returned to the gate. One of the brothers then opened the front door and went quickly and quietly to open the secret door. A second later, the other men went into the house as quickly and as quietly as possible with the cushions, and they all disappeared through the doorway beside the fireplace. They closed the door using the lever inside. The whole operation, from opening the front door to closing the door of the secret room, took only a few seconds. You and Miss Willing probably heard noises when the men were going in with the cushions. But by the time you got up and started to go down the stairs, everything was all over. The boys said that it is impossible to hear any noise from inside the secret room in any other part of the house. And they stayed there until about one in the morning, while they were taking the stones out of the cushions. Then they left quietly.'

'All very impressive,' I said. 'But why didn't Selena and I hear the men when they were going up the drive?'

'Well, firstly, because they were trying to be as quiet as possible. And, secondly, because Miss Willing's bedroom is at the back of the house. It overlooks the back of the garden. Where did you sleep, Richard?'

'The same, yes. My bedroom overlooked the back, too. I didn't think of that. But, just one more question, Ronald. Where did the stones come from?'

'Well, from Burma, actually. There are several gemstone mines in Burma. And they don't seem to be very well controlled. They mine various precious stones, but rubies and sapphires are the most valuable. Now, Burma and Thailand are separated by a natural border, the Moei river. Along this river, on the Burmese side, are little border towns. And a great number of the stones which are mined are stolen and smuggled to these towns. The two best-known border towns are Mae Sot and Mae Sai. Then the stones are rowed across the river - sometimes people swim across the river carrying bags of stones - into Thailand and the eager hands of international smugglers. The smugglers pay the Burmese relatively little, compared to what they earn by selling the stones in Europe.

Oh, and yes, the Burmese also have a pearl-farming industry at Mergui in the archipelago of the Gulf of Martaban, to the south of the Burmese mainland. Many of the pearls from there also end up in the border towns.'

Chapter ten

I telephoned Selena next. I said I wanted to see her. She told me to go to the house when I wanted to that day, as she was working at home. I arrived a couple of hours later, about four o'clock. We sat in the living room and had tea. I told her all I knew after talking to Snout. She seemed a little sad.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'Well,' she began, 'I'm a bit sorry for my brothers. I know we don't get on well, but...'

I told her that there was nothing I could do about that. But I cheered her up a little by saying that her brothers might learn a lesson by having to spend a little time in prison. And, anyway, their sentences were sure to be much smaller than those of the three Asiar ringleaders. Her brothers didn't have police records, and I told her that it was clear to the police that they were used and manipulated by the other gang members.

'I suppose I should pay you, Richard,' she then said.

'That's a good idea,' I replied.

She went to a chest of drawers, opened a drawer, and took out a cheque book.

'Is a cheque alright?' she asked.

'Fine,' I said.

But I didn't go to Selena's house just to tell her what Snout told me. Nor to be paid. I had something else on my mind.

'Selena... I was wondering... well, I mean... the fact is, when I finish a case, I like to go out and celebrate. There's a little French restaurant in Soho... very good food, excellent fish... and, well, I was wondering if you would like to have dinner there with me tonight?' Finally, I said it.

Her eyes brightened and she gave me a beautiful smile. 'I'd love to, Richard.'

So we made the arrangements and I left the house. I wanted to dance down the driveway. The case was solved. I had some money in my pocket. And I had a beautiful girl to take out to dinner that night. Life was treating me well. The last line of one of everyone's favourite old films came to my mind. As I tried to sound like Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca, I repeated it to myself. 'Yes,' I said, 'this could be the start of a beautiful friendship.'

- THE END -