

# **FIVE TO ONE**



*Chris Chalmers*



Ninety metres beneath his feet the wake from a dredger unzipped the murky satin of the Thames.

The cockpit of the little red AS350 reverberated to the juddering rotor, visible through the skylight as a bowl of blur. With a gentle tilt on the cyclic control he checked downstream. Past the Power Station... Past the London Eye, stark as a pram wheel against the blue... To the winking obelisk of Canary Wharf and beyond.

*Money, money, greed and money. All the way to the Barrier!*

But the sights weren't on his schedule today. Today was strictly a two-hop stop, one hardly worth buckling up for, the other so long he'd need a refuel at Carlisle. Still, it made a change from ferrying the nobs to their crumpet-and-croquet weekends at Cliveden...

*Left hand up a bit.*

He gave the collective a gentle tug, turning tail on the river and the Chelsea Embankment, all laid out like a picnic. Took her to a safe height without going full pelt; Battersea Heliport to Clapham Common was all of seventy seconds. He hoped someone had clearance for this – it was highly irregular, flying over anything but the water...

A tap on the pedal, a twist on the tail and he was over those ugly new flats on Falcon Road.

*Afternoon, folks!*

He waved to Mr and Mrs City Slicker, partaking of a light lunch on their overpriced balcony. Could join them for pud if he wasn't in such a rush... Strawberries by the look. His favourite...

A double-pip in his headphones.

He flipped the switch.

“Can’t leave me alone, can you, Joyce?”

*“Got Ol’ Blue Eyes for you again, love. Urgent as ever...”*

“Get away. Patch him through.”

The trouble with flying charter was, you sometimes got clients like this one. Name of Sinatra, if you could believe it.

*“– Wotcha, mate!”*

“Afternoon, squire...” He eased the cans away from his lucky yellow helmet. A shouter too, this one, as he’d discovered taking him and his lady friend up to Scotland... Couldn’t grasp the intercom to save their lives.

*“Just fort I’d check we’re all systems go an’ that... ETA as is, yeah?”*

“Sorry, sir?”

*“Landing on the Common oh-twelve fifty-five hours?”*

“Five to one, sir. Yes.”

*“And you’ve got the package? For our mystery passenger?”*

The plastic wallet was in the pocket beside him.

“Ready and waiting, sir.”

*“Cool... Listen, where shall I say you’ll be?”*

“Probably best you tell him to keep an eye out, sir. Strictly speaking we’re not supposed to –”

*“– Understood, mate! Leave the legals to me, yeah? Right, I’ll see you in free hours...”*

*Roger Wilco over and –”*

Out. Tossler.

Far below through the glass the train lines of Clapham Junction bunched like sinews. He settled back and let her breeze, smooth as smooth. Beyond a certain point London blended to a uniform grey. Like someone emptied a Hoover bag over the horizon... Not quite Dubai, where he'd meant to end his career – sun, sand and healthy savings plan – but hey-ho.

*Not to be.*

And there was the Common. Dead ahead.

Wide open spaces and broccoli trees. Two hundred acres if memory served, as close to a triangle as you got with Victorian town planning... Now where the hell was he going to land?

*Nice one Mr Sinatra – but then you would have it your way...*

He hoped his passenger had his eyes peeled, before the Parks Police rolled up in their motorised wheelbarrow... Hoped he wasn't starving either; it was a long old haul to Inverness, even with a stop, and there was only a sandwich in the back.

*Mints too, somewhere...*

Café, bandstand, pond. Nothing else to avoid.

Hardly anyone about, even on a lovely day like this... Land Rover over to starboard, mowing the grass – some Jobsworth, no doubt. All the more reason to get down and get up again, sharpish...

*Oh look – that's where they keep 'em...* Oval bit, all fenced off, with two more Land Rovers and a couple of sheds. Nice open space beside it too. That'd do nicely...

He scanned the instruments. Quick three-sixty visual –

*Sun-kissed lady taking the rays... Couple of joggers... The usual likely lads, fishing for Jaws in that dirty old pond... No-one who looked like they'd got a kilt in an overnight bag.*

He brought her level and settled into descent... Could do with one of those mints now, as a matter of fact –

*Hang on – what the hell's that!*

Bloody tramp on the grass, lying right on his patch!

Singing away to himself, waving it all about like a dying fly – *Go on, sling your hook!*

There was another Charlie down there, too – on his phone with his fingers in his ears... Gawd, they were all out today.

He put her into hover. The noise usually drove them off... That was another thing about Dubai; at least the Sheik kept his AK47 under the front seat...

Stubborn old sod wasn't shifting. *Un-be-bleeding-lievable!*

And the chaps at base wondered why he wanted to hang up his helmet... If someone got a camera out now he'd never hear the end from Health & Safety.

Nothing else for it...

He pulled up and swung her round, banking over Parky's lock-up. Decent sized spot by the pond... *Sorry lads, I'm going to scare your fish...*

As he did a tube of Extra Strong Mints rolled out from under the seat.

*There they are!*

Another visual... All clear, bar a traffic cone some smart Alec had plonked on the grass. Soon blow that away...

*Light on the throttle, bit of left pedal. Nice and square... Perfect.*

All he had to do now was keep the tail clear of those trees.

*'Course, it was different for the young lads... They still get a buzz from flying boys' toys, plus it did no harm with the ladies... He'd been the same at their age. But now all he wanted was to be near his daughter and little Ben... Finally get round to building him that–*

***Steady!***

Eye on the ball, old son... Don't want to end up like Nobby Curtis in the Forest of Dean!

He could kill for one of those mints.

He put her into settle, thirty metres and counting. If he leant over carefully he could just...about...reach.

*Now that was another Health & Safety no-no – loose items in the cockpit... Get something stuck under the pedal at the wrong moment and you were as good as –*

***BUGGER!***

He didn't feel the tail hit the branches.

Didn't hear the rotor shred them to a blizzard of splinters.

Didn't see the four upturned faces, open-mouthed, aghast as the fuselage slumped into a spiral.

As he braced for impact, the litany of safety drills tumbling through his head fell short of his hands. And his last thought was for all the ribbing he'd taken from the chaps at the base about his lucky yellow helmet.

*If he was going to see his grandson now, it'd better do its stuff...*



**FIVE**



*"I like your radishes. They are werry nice."*

Ian looked up from the compost. He hadn't heard the back door open. It was Agnes, the nanny to the child of the house, standing on the garden path.

He wiped his hands on his vest. Shading his eyes from the fading sunlight, his fingers framed her in an aura that seemed entirely appropriate. It reminded him of tales of shepherd boys on lonely hillsides, visited by visions of the Virgin Mary and/or a very bright light. Except the way this particular maiden was looking him over was rather less than virginal...

He'd seen her before, through the window preparing the child's tea, and hanging out the washing in that lacy tee shirt that exposed her belly button to the breeze. But this was the first time he'd ever heard her speak.

"Sparkler White-Tips," he said, breaking a foolish silence. "Top variety for the soil round here..."

Agnes nodded her mane of reddish curls and opened her hand. Inside were two healthy round roots, cleaned, trimmed and ready to eat. She rolled them deftly, one over the other, like a tennis pro getting ready to serve.

*"And they are werry good for childrens. They have a lot of w vitamins and also iron..."*

Her flat, Polish tones pronounced it *ir-on*, which to Ian's surprise he found spectacularly arousing. As if her natural cleavage and the hip bones peeping saucily over her jeans weren't enough. He leant on his spade to disguise a sudden awkwardness in his all-weather shorts.



Watched, as she cradled the pinky-red balls a moment longer... Popped one in her mouth... And crunched.

Ian Newton was forty-seven. He'd run his own gardening business for eleven years, since a long-forgotten drop in the FTSE lost him the City the job he hated. He preferred fresh air and being his own boss to watching screens and fielding calls from Tokyo. His friends joked about the temptations of bored, immaculate housewives, with nothing to do between school runs but sip espresso and wait for the gardener to get his shirt off... But the fact was, he'd never strayed. As a professional, a pessimist and a coward, he automatically assumed any husband would have hit-squad connections when he left a boot print on the stair carpet. So in all their years of marriage he had never seriously considered being unfaithful; even when Carla was at her most bloody-minded.

Until now.

On a late May afternoon in the Wallace's back garden, when Agnes Skirowska smiled and chewed a second radish in the sunlight.

Half an hour later with Jasper at his heels Ian knocked the earth from his spade and tossed it in the van. Followed by one welly, then the other, swapping them for the moccasins he wore for driving. Another of Carla's little rules – though why he was sticking to it now...

"In-you-go fella!"

The little Scottie made a mountain of climbing in the passenger door, settling for base camp in the foot well rather than striking out for the summit. By the end of an afternoon the dog was more tired than he was. Even the earthworms that once whipped him into a snuffling frenzy had lost their allure.

*Not many summers left for the old team now*, thought Ian, driving with one eye on the furry bundle. Jasper was highly impractical for a gardener's dog. His white fur showed every sticky bud and bloodied raspberry that clung beyond the radar. On one occasion, they narrowly avoided a collision when Ian caught sight of that noble muzzle accessorised by a jaunty feather.

But on this day he looked without seeing. His fingers quivered and his armpits gave off an aroma a little like fear. They were signs of anticipation, of a man about to break new ground without working through the consequences. As they pulled out of Luther Road, Ian ran through his imminent schedule:

*Feed dog – shower – get changed – set Sky Plus.*

And with every glance at Jasper, his eyes trailed back via the dashboard clock.

Nine minutes to seven.

*Sixty-nine minutes to go...*

They opened a fraction wider.



Glory spotted the road works as soon as she stepped off the bus.

Laying new electric cable evidently took a dozen men and an awful lot of machinery. Not to mention closing the road until August, according to the notice on the lamp post... It also meant her bus stopped short of the Hall, so from now on she'd be finishing her journey on foot.

Mechanical diggers were no substitute for the dawn chorus, she thought, as she crossed on the zebra by the estate agents. But it pleased her that some people had to work

even earlier than she did. And there were worse ways to start the day than with a stroll across Clapham Common...

As she reached the other side, the changing note of her footsteps – from pavement to grass to gravel – reminded her of walking to the Pentecostal Service as a little girl. Of making Ma drag her along, all for the fun of feeling the ground change under the soles of her tee-bar sandals – *black with proper heels!* How Glory coveted those shoes, till her first pair appeared on her sixth birthday, making her feel as grown up as her sister and all her sister's friends...

She slid through the gap in the car park fence no-one ever mended. Sodden troughs had formed in the gravel overnight where the rain collected. Glory wiped her feet on the edge of the grass; she wasn't about to let Mrs Molyneux say she trod dirt about the place.

Why give her the pleasure?

Across the road the gates of Cedars Hall were already open. The lounge curtains had been drawn but the room was empty, as it would be till after breakfast. She let herself in through the first door, punching the security code into the second. That was meant to change every month; but no-one ever did that either.

"Morning, Glory!" pealed an insolent voice behind her.

Lord! if she had a pound for every time she'd heard that one!

It was that foolish caretaker's boy, too big for his boots and too skinny for his jeans, and not even worth a look back through the frosted glass...

Dennis was awake. Dennis woke at 6.30 every morning, with a regularity that sent Glory scurrying upstairs the one and only time his high pitched cry had been wanting... She had caught her breath – composed herself before she opened the door of his room – to find Dennis propped up on the pillows, bedspread to his chin and mouthing furiously.

*Laryngitis!*

But this morning his moan was there as usual, to be repeated at thirty second intervals throughout the day. It reached every floor, like the cloying smell of disinfectant that acted as a distraction from the Hall's other, less floral odours.

Down in the basement Glory changed into her uniform. She was stowing her things in the locker when Poll came off the night shift.

"How was it?" she asked, patting down the Velcro fastenings of her tabard.

"Nothing to report," said Poll. She yanked off the rubber band that held her ginger bob in a bunch. "'Cept for Pearl... She's been battling the Vietnamese again. Single handed, right up to breakfast... No wonder she's got such an appetite."

Glory shook her head and laughed. Pearl was one of her favourites. She tried to treat all the residents equally, but she was only human. Some of them touched your heart more than others.

Poll sniffed her blue work shirt and stuffed it in her bag. She shut the locker with a jingle of keys. "Off till Thursday now, I am. See you later."

"Doin' anything nice?" asked Glory.

"With my lot? You must be joking... My eldest's on daily report, and if I don't watch the other two they're sagging off down Borough Market. Skived football last week. Came home with two pineapples and a mini DVD player..."

Glory tutted consolingly.

"I don't ask," said Poll. "What's the point?"

Tony was still muzzy with jetlag, which probably explained the randomness of the thought. It was a bit bloody bizarre, he knew – to walk into a beauty parlour and immediately think of *Star Wars*.

It wasn't like he was about to blow away on the breeze himself, but the girl on reception had to be a hundred and twenty kilos if she was a day. And something about that tiny head on a pyramidal body...

*Got it! Jabba the Hutt!*

*...Or was that Return of the Jedi?*

He couldn't help thinking that Pippa (her badge spelt it *\*PIPPA\**) was a strange choice to work in a place like this. Though fair do's, she had good skin if the tiny proportion on display was anything to go by...

*"Can I help you?"*

Her voice was high and aching nasal, like polystyrene on a wet window.

*"Yeah. I've got a two o'clock appointment. With Latasha?"*

*"Name?"*

*"Tony Torrence."*

Pippa ran a sausage down the desk ledger. Her finger nails were so immaculate, she could have been a hand model. *For those high-cal energy bars they sold to mountaineers...*

*"Back Facial is it today, Tony?"*

*...Or bath lifts*

*"Erm, yeah – if that's what you call it over here."*

Pippa applied a tick to his name with a cocktail stick of a pen. "Take a seat," she squeaked. "Latasha will be with you in five..."

He wondered if she did the treatments too. Maybe some women preferred being primped by a girl who didn't look like a Chanel model... One thing for sure, she didn't lack confidence. She ran her fingers through her well-groomed hair as she rummaged in a drawer; pushed a hank behind each ear while she filled the stapler, drawing attention to the golden hoops that swung from her lobes like a budgie toys... But any further south and you were in very different terrain: the zipper on that shiny white coverall deserved an award for endeavour, and as she swivelled to replace the staples her upholstered back made him yearn for a toboggan...

*And he used to worry how he'd get a boyfriend!*

A buzzer curtailed the thought.

"Go through, Tony" said Pippa. "Suite Three. Door's a bit dicky so give it a shove..."

He had no idea what she was talking about but it sounded intriguing. As he slid past the sun creams that were half the price back home, his elbow jogged a display of pygmy superglue.

"Mind out!" squealed Pippa.

Crystalline tubes cascaded to the floor.

She didn't move from the counter as Tony crouched to retrieve them.

"Oops-ie," she shrugged gelatinously.

He slotted the tubes of Youth Release Signature Eye Dew back in their stand.

"Corridor's a bit tight there, isn't it?" sympathised Pippa.

*Or was that empathised?*

Tony shot her a look.

Now he thought of it, Jabba the Hutt was in *The Empire Strikes Back*...



Mari knew Adam was hiding something in the pocket of his shorts. She was avoiding asking what for fear of one of his favourite, unoriginal jokes.

He was still fiddling as he slipped the other arm round her shoulders. She ignored it and followed his eyes to the beach.

“We had an animal encyclopaedia when I was a kid,” said Adam. “With this picture in it I’ve never forgotten...”

She wondered if he was about to whip the page out now, six thousand miles and twenty years from the bedroom he shared with his brother in Altrincham.

“...It was a beach like this. Sea lions and iguanas, basking in the sun. And a blue-footed booby puking up fish for its chicks, just like that one!”

Mari looked away. She waved a fly from her sunglasses and smiled as a baby sea lion twitched a flipper in much the same way. Like the finches and the little green lizards, it was only metres from her toes.

“...I always thought it was a trick photo – cos how could they get everything in one shot? But it wasn’t...” His voice ebbed away on a wave. “It was here.”

*“Punta Espinosa, auf der Insel von Fernandina!”*

The voice behind them was Heike-with-the-eyebrows, speaking into the mic of her camcorder. She was standing on a boulder, scoping the bay in a sweep.

“Magic, innit?” he whispered.

Fernandina was their fourth island in as many days but even Mari had to agree. There wasn’t another beach in the world where you could see all these animals side by side. It was like Noah pressed the fire alarm on the Ark.

She watched as a white bird sailed overhead, tail plumes trailing.

And when she looked down again, Adam's hand was out of his pocket.

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