

# ADAM'S RUB

## CHAPTER ONE

"Matilda?"

Tilly Arbuthnot sucked in her breath. Only two people in her entire life had ever called her Matilda – the grandmother after whom she was named and a man she hadn't seen in nearly twenty years. Her grandmother was dead, a fact which was quite irrelevant in identifying the caller. Intervening decades be damned. She would have known the deep, mellifluous voice on the other end of the phone anywhere.

She said nothing, letting the silence spread between them. Eventually he tried again. "Tilly?"

She sighed. "Adam." She didn't ask what he wanted after all these years, knowing he'd tell her, certain only that, whatever it was, she probably didn't want to know. She'd been a smoker when she knew him – twenty a day on a good day, forty on a bad day. She hadn't had a cigarette in several years, hadn't even wanted one for a few. Suddenly and quite desperately she wanted one now, before she heard whatever bad news he was about to impart.

"The most dreadful thing's happened," Adam Callaghan said. When Tilly failed to respond, he went on. "Laura's been shot. The police have just had me in to assist with their bloody enquiries. They think *I* did it."

Tilly thought for a moment. Even if she could find a pack of Camels tucked away and forgotten in the back of a drawer, they'd be seven years old and quite unsmokeable. She chewed on the end of a pen instead. Adam was obviously going to wait her out this time. "Did you?" she asked.

"No, of course not."

Tilly leaned back in her oak desk chair and shut her eyes. This is not happening she thought. But, when she opened her eyes she was still sitting at her desk, the phone was still in her hand and, she felt reasonably confident, Adam Callaghan was still on the other end of the line. She sighed again. "What happened?"

It took him a moment to respond. Marshalling his thoughts, she wondered, or making sure he'd memorised his lines?

"We'd just finished lunch," he began eventually. "I went out for a walk. I was, oh, I don't know, perhaps a quarter of a mile from the house when I heard shots. I ran all the way back. I could see a car driving away from the house, but it was too far to see anything other than the colour. The French doors were open. I ran into the drawingroom and there was Laura, lying on the floor."

"Dead?" asked Tilly.

"No, thank God." He really did sound grateful about that. "I thought she'd been shot in the chest, but it was her shoulder. Christ. There was blood everywhere. I rang for the police and an ambulance. She lost a lot of blood, but they're pretty sure she'll be okay."

“Still unconscious?” Tilly prompted.

“No, she came round quite a while ago.”

Tilly pulled one of the drawers of her desk open and began rooting around in the far corners. Even a seven year old cigarette would do. As she continued her search through the other drawers, she waited for Adam to volunteer the answer to her unasked question. He didn’t, forcing her to put the question to him. She slammed shut the bottom drawer of her desk.

“Adam, if Laura’s conscious, why do the police think you shot her?” She rolled her chair away from the desk and began to investigate the backs of the filing cabinet drawers.

This time he was the one who sighed. “It was an intruder. He was wearing a ski mask and goggles. She couldn’t see his face.”

Finally, at the back of the last of the four filing cabinet drawers, she found what she wanted – a half full pack of Camels. She extracted one of the cigarettes and rolled it around between her fingers. She could feel the aged tobacco flakes, brittle and dry as a bone. God, this is going to be awful, she thought, going back to her desk in search of matches or a lighter.

“Why,” she repeated, “do the police think *you* did it?” During another lengthy pause, her fingers closed around her old Zippo. She pulled it out of the drawer, placed the cigarette in her mouth, flicked the lighter open and spun the wheel. There was a spark, but no flame. The lighter, like the cigarette, was dry as a bone. She tossed the lighter across the desk and the cigarette across the room. He still hadn’t answered. “Why, Adam?”

At the other end of the line, he cleared his throat. “It was one of my guns. Mine were the only prints on it. According to Laura, the intruder was my height and was wearing a jacket like one I keep in the mud room. The police found the ski mask and goggles in there, stuffed into one of my old Wellies.”

“Careless of you.”

“Matilda!” he protested. “I didn’t put them there.”

“No,” for the first time since she’d lifted the telephone receiver to her ear, Tilly smiled, “I didn’t actually think you had. You’re many things, Adam, but you’re not that stupid.” Before he could say anything, she asked, “How far from Laura was this intruder standing when he tried to kill her?”

“I’m not sure. No more than fifteen feet. Why?”

She answered his question with one of her own. “It’s been a long time, Adam. Why are you ringing me about this?”

“Truth?”

“That would be nice.”

“I couldn’t think of a single other person to ring.”

No, thought Tilly, I bet you couldn’t. “Well,” she said, “I suppose you’d better come round.”

“It’ll take me about an hour to drive down.”

“Fine.”

Adam didn’t ask for directions and Tilly didn’t offer any. After all, he’d been with

her when she bought the flat. Although she certainly didn't want to think about it at the moment, he'd also been with her when she chose the brass bed which was still in her bedroom. In fact, he'd paid for it.

Tilly poured herself a shot of whiskey and downed it with one toss of her head. Adam Callaghan. Adam Bloody Callaghan. After all these bloody years.

She glanced back at her desk. The screen saver program was displaying kaleidoscopic patterns on her practically brand new laptop computer. It was a long overdue concession to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, purchased with the advance she'd received for the almost-finished book she and Roger Wilcox were writing about the foibles of VACO Industries and the recently deceased brothers who had run the business end of things.

Tilly had been given unlimited access to the company's records by Helen and Jamie Mortimer, the multinational corporation's new joint managing directors. Helen was the daughter of Arthur Ormond, the surviving brother, whose short-lived tenure as VACO's managing director had been abruptly terminated by a massive stroke.

Since the deaths of Victor and Charles Ormond, events at VACO had given an entirely new meaning to the term "corporate downsizing". Every conceivable phrase which could be construed to mean "barking mad" had been applied to Helen and Jamie as they divested VACO of its interests in plastics, pesticides and petrochemicals, returning the family-owned business to its origins and name: Ormond Pharmaceuticals. Simply getting rid of these other interests would not have caused a ripple in the City or in the pages of the *Financial Times*. What worried the hell out of business leaders – after all, if VACO Industries could do it, the public might want *them* to do it – was the fact that absolutely all the profit from the sales of factories and joint ventures was being channelled into a fund set up and overseen by Helen. Said fund was devoted to cleaning up the environmental and social problems the corporation had wrought in communities all over the planet.

According to a friend of Tilly's, who wrote for the business section of one of the dailies, Helen Mortimer née Ormond had been voted the managing director most likely to be taken out by a hit paid for by other chemical industry leaders.

Tilly wanted to get this book finished before the corporate backlash against the Mortimers convinced the public that the pair really were mad and were conducting an insane experiment in corporate accountability which could never be repeated.

She was close – perhaps no more than another three days to get her part of the book off to the publisher. The last thing she needed at the moment was a distraction, especially not a distraction of the magnitude of Adam Bloody Callaghan.

With her third sigh in the past fifteen minutes, Tilly shut down her computer. She was clearly not destined to get another word written today. Instead she reached for the telephone directory and looked up the number for Beauchamp Investigations, a private enquiry firm run by a former copper she knew. If anyone was likely to be able to find out quickly how closely Adam's story tallied with the police version of events, it was Ted Beauchamp, who still had good contacts in the

Met and beyond.

Ted, bless him, didn't even ask why she wanted to know, simply took down the information and said he'd ring back as soon as he could. While she waited for him to call, Tilly started to tidy up the newspapers scattered around the lounge, despairing, as she did so, of the dust which seemed to have coated everything in the room. She'd been focused on the book for months now and, as always when she was working on a major project, housework had been the first thing to go.

The small mews flat had been purchased with the proceeds from *Oh, What A Stupid War*, a surprisingly popular book she'd written about Central America. The down payment had wiped her out, so furnishing the place had taken a while. She'd started out with a desk and chair in the lounge and the old brass bed which took up most of the space in the tiny bedroom. Over the years she'd picked up pieces which caught her fancy and now the lounge was a blend of period pieces – an overstuffed, forties-era settee, a delicate Queen Anne chair, art nouveau lamps on a Victorian sideboard, along with mementoes of the many places Tilly's career as a foreign correspondent had taken her. It was unquestionably a hodge podge, but one which reflected the eclectic nature of its owner.

When she was still travelling for much of the year, the Hampstead flat had been a sanctuary in a world gone mad. She would return to London after covering some war or disaster, close the door of the flat behind her and feel safe. A number of years had now passed since Tilly's last war. Although her reputation as a journalist was still solid, her work, until the VACO book contract was signed, had consisted almost exclusively of freelance assignments from newspapers and magazines. It was a hand to mouth existence and, had she not purchased the flat when she did, she couldn't imagine how she would have been able to stay in London. These days, the flat which had given her so much pleasure over the years, also represented her only security. If things ever became truly dire, she could sell it for nearly ten times what she'd paid.

Distracted by a photo in a week-old copy of the *Guardian*, Tilly was startled when the phone rang. It sounded twice as loud as usual and, though she was not normally a fanciful person, she acknowledged this audio illusion with a sense of foreboding.

"You're good," said Ted, when she answered the phone, "and bloody lucky I have a mate on the force in Cambridgeshire who was only slightly bent out of shape by me ringing him about something that hasn't even been released yet. Want to tell me how you knew about this actor shooting his wife?"

Tilly didn't like the sound of this foregone conclusion. "No," she said.

"No? Now, why did I think you were going to say that? Lucky for you I don't reveal my sources either or you'd have the Cambridgeshire lads on your doorstep pretty sharpish."

She realised it probably had been quite difficult for Ted to keep her name out of things. "Thanks, Ted. I appreciate it. Really. Would you mind telling me what they said?"

"Pretty much what you told me. Just after lunch someone walked in and shot Laura Callaghan from a distance of about fifteen feet. She says her husband did it.

He says it was an intruder who drove away in a blue car.”

Tilly’s heart sank. Although she already knew the answer from the tone of Ted’s voice, she asked the question anyway. “Which one of them do the police believe?”

“Her. Absolutely. No doubt in anyone’s mind.”

“Why did they let him go, then?”

“How do you know they have?” he countered. Tilly didn’t answer and Ted didn’t press. “They’ve got to at least go through the motions of checking up on this fictitious blue car.”

Tilly reached for the Camel packet still sitting on top of her desk, extracted another cigarette and held it up to her nose, breathing in what was left of the tobacco smell. She hoped she wouldn’t set her hair on fire lighting the damn thing off the cooker. “What will it take to convince them he didn’t shoot his wife?”

Ted’s response was immediate. “A miracle.”

Oh, dear, thought Tilly, that would be me and I’m feeling fresh out of miracles.

“So, why the interest in – ” Ted began, breaking off suddenly. There was a noise at the other end of the line which could easily have been Ted smacking himself on the head. “Wait a minute. I’ve just remembered. Bloody hell. About twenty-five years ago, you and Adam Callaghan. It was all over the papers.”

“Yes, “ Tilly agreed. She could still remember the pictures of them which had appeared on front pages everywhere. It had all been quite bizarre – being, rather than writing, the news. And she had an awful feeling it was going to happen again. Why the hell had she told Adam to come here? “Thanks, Ted. I’ve got to go.”

She rang off before he could say anything else, then stood up with the aged cigarette still in her hand and strode through to the minute kitchen, where she ignited one of the burners on the cooker. Pulling her hair away from her face, she placed the cigarette in her mouth and bent over to the flame. A moment later she was hacking her lungs out.

“Jesus,” she said, extinguishing the cigarette under the tap and tossing it into the bin. It had been just such a frantic search for a tucked away cigarette, in the middle of the night on a tight deadline, which had prompted her to quit smoking seven years earlier. She’d been disgusted by her desperate need for a cigarette then, but nowhere near as disgusted with herself as she was right now.

Back in the lounge, she glanced at the carriage clock on the mantle. As she did so, she caught sight of herself in the blue glass mirror hanging above it on the wall. She wasn’t sure whether she was more dismayed by her reflection or the sudden recollection that Adam had been the one who found and bought the mirror from a stall at Camden market.

She stared at herself critically. Never anyone’s idea – certainly not hers – of a beauty, she had, in her now long past day, been a striking presence. Five foot ten when she was still thirteen and slim with it, the mini-skirted 1970s had won her legs a lot of admiring looks. Her shoulder-length frizzy brown hair, now streaked with grey, had always been the bane of her existence, but, on a good day, she had been comfortable with her face. Her features were strong and no-nonsense: a wide, big-toothed mouth, firm bordering on jutting jaw line, well-defined cheekbones, a

broad, intelligent forehead and, of course, the cornflower blue eyes which had stared down many a despot. Even in the blue glass she could see the fine lines which had affixed themselves to the corners of her eyes and the shadowy skin underneath, once easily banished by a couple of decent nights' sleep, but now a permanent and visible testament to the fact that she was no longer in her twenties.

Should she, she wondered, dig out some makeup and do something about those shadows? Would some lipstick help or hinder her appearance? Did she have time to wash and attempt to tame her hair? She gave herself a mental shake and poked her tongue out at her reflection. She knew perfectly well why Adam was coming here and it wasn't to see how well her skin was holding up after twenty years.

Tilly poured herself another whiskey and sat down to await his arrival. A lot of memories flooded into her mind. Some were good memories, some not so good. One was bloody awful.

And that one, the bloody awful one, was, of course, the reason Adam Callaghan had decided to ring her, of all people. Because, unlike anyone else of his wide acquaintance, Tilly knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that if Adam Callaghan had decided to kill his wife by shooting her from a distance of fifteen feet, his wife would certainly not be alive to tell the tale.