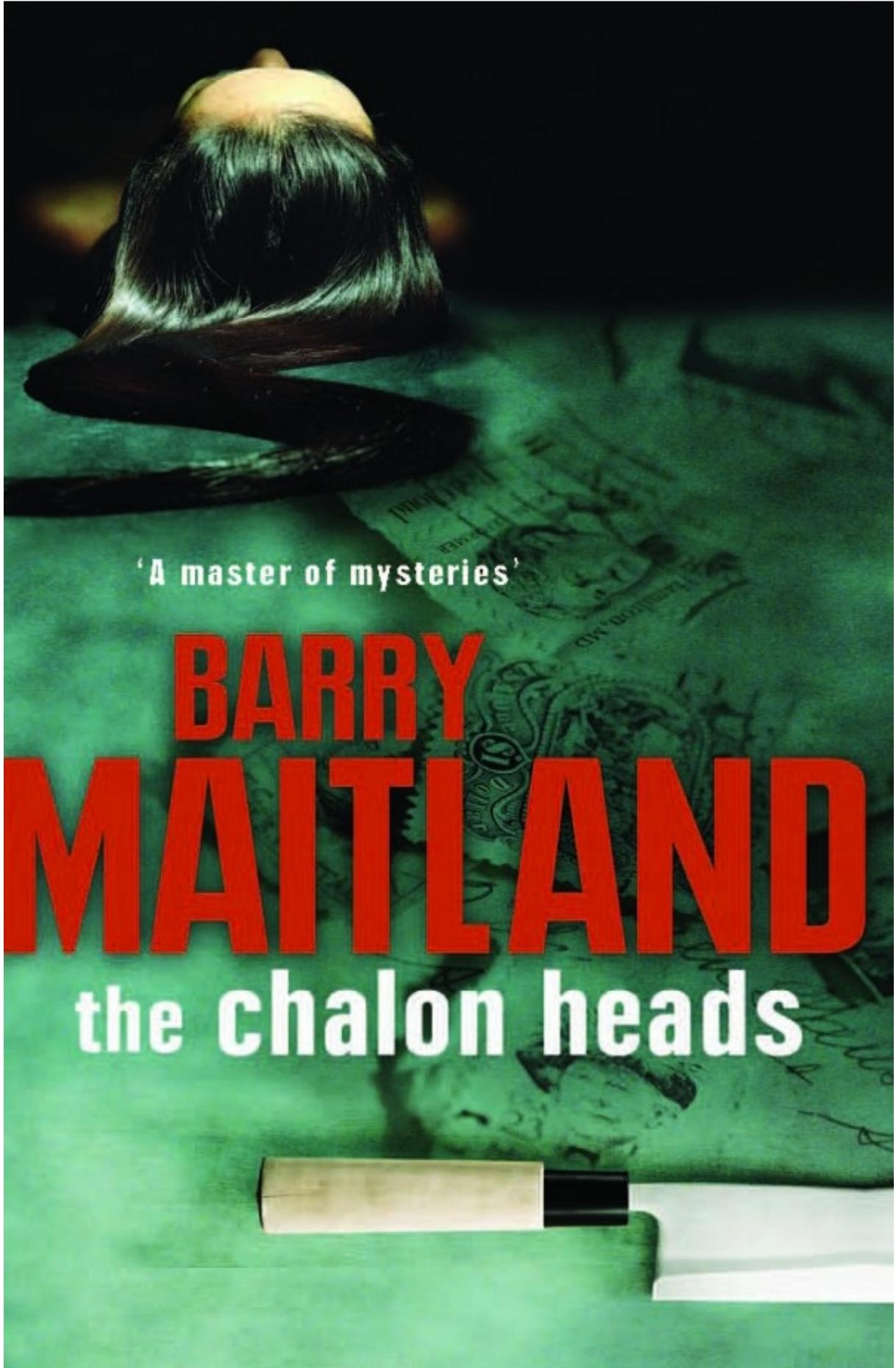
A photograph of a wig on a mannequin head, placed on a green tablecloth. The tablecloth has faint sketches of faces and text. A pen and a book are visible at the bottom of the frame.

'A master of mysteries'

**BARRY
MAITLAND**
the chalon heads



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the chalon heads

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Philately

The term was coined in 1864 by a Frenchman, Georges Herpin, who invented it from the Greek *philos*, 'love', and *ateleia*, 'that which is tax-free'.

Britannica Online, 1997

Prologue

Raphael and The Beast

DC Martin was released from her prison on the dawn of the fifth day. She stepped through the wicket gate in the steel roller door, emptied her lungs of the stale, dead reek of the desolate building, and filled them again with crisp morning air laced with the tang of diesel fumes. Freedom. She stretched her legs, rolled her shoulders and took in the inconsequential sounds of the city stirring all around her. It had been her first real experience of solitary confinement, and she didn't ever want to try it again. Her ears were ringing, her eyes bleary with sleeplessness, her limbs aching. She felt exhausted, grimy and disoriented.

And pissed off. For four days and nights she had squatted in a cupboard in the dark, alone, waiting for a rendezvous that had never happened. It had been a salutary lesson in the effects of sensory deprivation. Her only conversation had been infrequent whispered monosyllabic reports into a radio, her view a dim panorama of cardboard boxes seen through a spyhole. The Hitachi crate had sat prominently in the middle of them, untouched, unapproached. Towards the end, unable to sleep or stay truly awake, she had begun to fixate on that Hitachi sign as an old lag might fixate on a blade of grass or a crack in the wall.

There had been another detective with her inside the building, but they had never met once their positions had been allocated. She knew of his presence only from the toilet, for which from time to time she was grudgingly allowed to leave her hiding place. They had been forbidden to flush that toilet for fear of alerting an intruder, an absurd directive since the evidence of her colleague's presence had become more and more palpable as the days had passed. By the third day the extent of his intestinal problem was becoming overpowering.

The thing had been prolonged far beyond any reasonable use of resources or expectation of a result, becoming in the end simply a monument to McLarren's stubbornness. Mary Martin looked up and down the service lane to see if he might still be lingering, unable to accept defeat, but there was no one, the outside teams called off an hour before. Now that she was in the open air, in the daylight, she could feel ashamed of the resentment she had developed for the outside teams, able to talk freely to each other in their unmarked cars, rotating home to a warm bed and a hot meal. And a bath, and a clean toilet. She had been placed inside because McLarren had developed a particular attachment to the idea that Raphael might be a woman. Mary had had plenty of time to mull over McLarren's attachment to bizarre ideas.

She looked back up at the windows of the second floor, where she had been incarcerated. The dawn sunlight, which was now raking across the rooftops, catching the chimneys and gables in a golden blaze, was visible through the third window from the end, glittering on the interior of the warehouse. Except that the sun was on the

other side of the building, and there was no way it could penetrate through the interior to this side.

DC Martin frowned. Perhaps her unseen companion of the toilet had switched on a light on his way out. A buzz of anger went through her. Unreasonably, she told herself. The poor bloke must have been suffering for days, praying for release. And because the thought made her penitent she didn't walk away, as she might have done, but braced herself and turned back towards the wicket gate. Soon she was inside the stairwell, and didn't see the glow in the upper-floor window go off.

At the top of the dark stairs she eased open the door to the second floor and, in the grey light that was filtering through the warehouse, she was astonished to see that the Hitachi box had moved half a dozen yards to the left. The other boxes around it had been disturbed too. She froze, listening for any sound from the cavernous space. But when she finally picked it up it came not from in front of her but from behind, a soft scuffling. She wheeled round and saw a huge dim form bearing down on her across the dark landing. She backed rapidly into the warehouse and it followed her through the doors, materialising into a giant of a man.

They both stopped, examining each other. He was breathing heavily, long black hair tied behind in a pigtail, a thick black beard, tattoos on his bare forearms, a ferocious-looking crowbar dangling from one enormous fist. Behind him was a second man, pale and scrawny, peering round the giant's bulging biceps, eyes widening at the sight of a woman wearing body armour and a police cap.

After a moment's silence, Mary said calmly, 'Police. Don't move. You're under arrest.'

The giant regarded her thoughtfully. The crowbar twitched in his mitt. 'How much you weigh?' he asked ponderously.

'120 pounds,' Mary replied, amazed at her own composure.

'Well, I'm 290. What do they tell you to do, then, in your training, like, when a 120-pound plonk faces up to a 290-pound villain?'

'Get help,' Mary replied.

'That makes sense.'

DC Martin reached a hand to her hip and brought up the Glock, pointing it at the centre of his huge chest. 'Armed police,' she said. 'Did I say that before?'

'No,' he said sadly. 'I don't fink you mentioned that.'

She fumbled with her other hand for the radio, keeping the gun trained on the big man. The other seemed like his frail shadow, moving only when he moved.

'Let me guess,' she said, pointing the muzzle at the skinny anaemic one for a moment. 'You're Raphael, right? The artist?' She returned her aim to the giant. 'And you're The Beast . . . Or is that too obvious? Could it be the other way around?'

The big man shook his head. 'I'm Titch. And this is Marlon.'

'Well,' Mary said. 'And I'll bet you've got the loveliest birth certificates to prove it.'

She had the radio to her mouth when the first blow sent it flying from her hand. Before she could turn, the second hit her, and she crumpled to the floor, all lights

extinguished now.

1

Cabot's

It began innocently enough, in the days before Kathy knew a cottonreel from a woodblock.

The long corridor of the Strand was booming with traffic, dust and petrol fumes hanging in the hot July afternoon air. Halfway along on the shady south side, not far from the setback entrance of the Savoy Hotel, Brock and Kathy found the shop-front surmounted by the name Cabot's, in ornate raised gold letters on a black background. Beneath, two small boys had their noses pressed to the glass, mesmerised by a display of old postage stamps.

Inside, in air-conditioned calm, they were confronted by a pyramid of devices, which looked to Kathy as if they belonged in the forensic lab—magnifying glasses both simple and illuminated, watermark detectors, colour indicators, packets of mounts, tweezers, tiny guillotines, short and long wave and ultraviolet lamps for identifying phosphor inks and coatings.

'Nothing stays simple, does it?' Brock said, pointing at the shelves of reference books and albums filling one wall. 'When I was a boy, the complete listing of all the stamps in the world was contained in one small fat volume. Now you need a library.'

He took a pair of half-lens glasses from his jacket pocket and leaned forward to examine a pocket microscope in the display, unconsciously imitating the posture of the small boys at the front window. He might have been their uncle, Kathy thought, or their schoolmaster, a big benign bear of a man in a slightly rumpled suit, grey beard and hair in need of a trim, as unlike the hard young men of Serious Crime as he could be, and therefore dangerous in a different way.

Kathy looked around at the other people in the room. A glass counter circled the space, stools in front, glass shelves and cabinets behind with concealed lighting. A number of customers, office workers in shirt-sleeves by the look of them, were browsing or crouching over the counter, some deep in conversation with studious looking sales assistants. They were all male, Kathy noticed, and indeed, despite the array of technology at the door, the place had something about it that made her think of an old-fashioned gentlemen's club—an air of ordered calm, of discreetly murmured conversations, of clocks ticking but time standing still.

'Is all this just about postage stamps?' she whispered.

'Mmm . . .' Brock's attention had shifted now to a cabinet of tiny paper fragments. 'Fascinating, isn't it? Another world. Did you ever collect stamps, Kathy?'

'No. I seem to remember collecting things from cornflakes packets, but I can't remember what they were.'

Brock's raised eyebrow told her that that was entirely different, but for the life of

her she couldn't see why.

Brock tore himself away from the cabinet and they made their way through a pair of glass doors into a lobby in which another kind of display was mounted, advertising a forthcoming auction. Expensive-looking catalogues were on sale, and posters featured some of the more important sale items. Again Brock delayed, studying a couple of the layouts. 'There's money in it,' he murmured.

Kathy wondered, looking at an old envelope in a glass case. The stamp was crude and scruffy, almost obliterated by a heavy postmark. How much would people pay for such things? Ten pounds? Fifty? A hundred? Surely not the price of a decent camera, or a washing-machine.

They went on past the display to a reception desk standing in front of lift doors.

'Detective Chief Inspector Brock and Detective Sergeant Kolla to see Mr James Melville,' Brock said. The receptionist considered his identification with interest and made a phone call, then indicated the lift.

A big cheerful man was waiting for them when the doors opened on the second floor, dressed like a banker but with an unruly mop of hair that refused to lie down. He introduced himself, shook their hands warmly and led them into his cramped office, offering them seats. His desk overflowed with papers, a tray of incoming mail threatening a pile of magazines and catalogues, a computer terminal jostling for space in the corner.

'Thank you so much for coming here, Chief Inspector. I do appreciate it. Can I offer you anything? Tea? Coffee?'

They declined. Brock said, 'I was glad to get the opportunity to visit, Mr Melville. I used to be an enthusiast, many years ago, but I never knew where you were.'

'Ah, yes. We and our rivals just along the street.' He indicated the name on the Stanley Gibbons catalogue lying on the desk. Kathy picked it up and began thumbing through it.

'What was your area, Chief Inspector?'

Brock smiled, remembering. 'I had an aunt in Canada so I had plenty of Canadian stamps, as I recall. She used to make a point of sending me first-day covers.'

'Ah, well, they may be worth something now, you never know. We have a particularly outstanding Canadian cover in our coming auction that you'd be interested in. Let me give you both a catalogue . . .' He stooped into the narrow space behind his desk with some difficulty and emerged with copies, which he handed across to them. As he did this he took the opportunity to examine Kathy's hands. No rings, no nail polish, and traces of something—photocopy toner? He nodded approvingly.

'What about you, Sergeant?' Melville asked. 'Were you ever a collector?' He didn't imagine for one moment that she had been, but he wanted to hear her voice. He approved of young women like this, competent and unpretentious, with low heels and little makeup.

'I'm afraid not, sir. I know absolutely nothing about it.'

An intelligent voice, class-neutral, and cautious, like her eyes. He did like her eyes, and the way her fair hair, cut short, was tucked behind her ears.

‘Well, perhaps we’ll have the opportunity to show you something of it . . . if you have time.’

What it was that resonated with him about young women like this, James Melville couldn’t precisely say, except perhaps that they didn’t frighten him the way the others, all legs and lipstick, did. On the other hand, his last attempt to help just such a sensible young woman advance her career in Cabot’s had ended in near disaster. He took a deep breath to calm himself and turned to Brock. ‘I do hope you won’t feel I’ve wasted your time, Chief Inspector.’

‘Not at all,’ Brock replied. ‘You knew my name, Mr Melville. Have we met?’

‘No, I don’t believe so, but I know you by reputation from the newspapers.’

‘You said you had a problem. Is it to do with the auction? We saw the display downstairs. Looks fascinating.’

‘Ah, yes, a major event. But no, that wasn’t the reason for my call, Chief Inspector. Rather, it was to do with one of our clients, someone we’ve known for a number of years, who appears to be in some dreadful trouble. He told me about it only this morning, and I suggested—no, I insisted—that he contact the police.’

‘I see,’ said Brock slowly. ‘But how did you get my name, Mr Melville?’

‘It was our client who suggested that if I was to call anyone it should be you. He holds you in very high regard, Chief Inspector.’

‘Is that right?’

‘Look,’ Melville said hurriedly, ‘why don’t I get him in here and have him explain it all to you himself? He’s in the other office at the moment.’

‘Sounds like a good idea.’

Kathy watched Melville’s departure with interest. He seemed quite anxious, and she wondered who would have chosen to approach Brock in such an indirect way, and have him meet him on ground like this. Royalty, perhaps? The Queen collected stamps, didn’t she? Or someone in government, a pop star . . .

The door opened, and Melville ushered in a man almost a foot shorter than himself, sturdily built, as formally dressed in dark pinstripe suit, and with a remarkably round, creamy face with Oriental features, jet-black hair swept back from his high forehead. The man was smiling so intently that his eyes were merely horizontal creases in his face.

‘Mr Brock!’ he cried. ‘How are you?’ exposing brilliant white teeth, and Kathy was surprised, having quickly adjusted to the idea that this might be a businessman from Hong Kong or Singapore, to hear a cockney accent mildly gentrified to the outer suburbs.

‘Good God,’ Brock said, sounding astonished and not at all enthusiastic. ‘Sammy Starling.’

Undeterred by the coolness in Brock’s voice, the man advanced on him, hand outstretched, beaming from ear to ear.

Melville hurriedly drew up another chair. ‘I was saying, Mr Starling, that it would be best if you explained the matter yourself.’

The man nodded energetically. ‘Yes, yes. But it’s good to see you again, Mr Brock!’

You don't look a day older.'

'Nor you, Sammy,' Brock replied, his good humour evaporated. Kathy could see that Melville was aware of it and was embarrassed. 'What's this all about?' Brock asked.

Starling's face abruptly lost all expression. He hesitated for a moment, then spoke in a low voice, devoid of all the animation it had had before. 'It's my wife, Mr Brock. She's missing.'

'Well, now,' Brock murmured, watching him carefully.

Starling cleared his throat. 'She came up to town at the end of last week. I haven't heard from her since.'

Kathy was trying to fix his age. His smooth face was deceptive, she decided. There was a hoarseness in the voice and creases in the neck and behind the ears that made him much older than he had first appeared. Fifty plus, she guessed. She noticed a pale scar crossing the back of his left hand, slicing across all four fingers above the knuckles. Defence wound, she thought automatically. Starling's appearance, like his accent, had also undergone a process of gentrification, she decided, tailored suits and old scars.

Brock frowned as if trying to recall. 'Mrs Starling . . . Brenda?'

'Eva,' Starling said, with quiet force, as if trying to jog his memory. 'Brenda died in 'eighty-seven.'

He drew his wallet from his jacket pocket and took out a photograph, which he passed to Brock, who looked at it for a moment then passed it on to Kathy. It was night, the couple caught in camera flash, he beaming in white tuxedo, she in a short black cocktail dress, hem swinging with her step. No older than thirty, Kathy thought, trying not to appear surprised. More like twenty-five. Black hair swept back from a smiling, vivacious face, long slender neck. Dark, beautiful, Mediterranean looks. Simple but expensive jewellery and dress. You must be rich, Mr Starling, she thought.

'Where was this taken?' she asked.

'Cannes, last year,' Starling said, pleased at the question. 'Film festival.'

'Is she an actress?'

'No,' he said. 'She's my wife.' He blinked at the look Kathy gave him. 'I mean, no, she doesn't work.'

'And you've been married how long now?' Brock asked.

'Three years and seven months,' he said. 'On Saturday.'

'I remember. They called her a princess in the gossip columns, didn't they?'

Starling's mouth gave a hint of a smile and he nodded.

'You said that she came up to town, so you don't live in London?' Kathy asked.

'Our home's in Surrey,' Starling said. 'Near Farnham. And we've got a flat in town, in Canonbury. But she's not there. I've looked everywhere.'

Brock eyed him closely, waiting for more. When none came he said, 'Why this, Sammy?' He gestured at the room. 'What's this all about?'

The other lowered his head and said, 'She's been kidnapped, Mr Brock.'

‘Kidnapped?’

Starling sighed. ‘I need your help.’

Melville, unable to contain himself further, said, ‘Mr Starling came to see me this morning, Chief Inspector, and under the circumstances I couldn’t just ignore—’

‘Why was that?’ Brock asked, keeping his eyes on Starling. ‘Why did he come here?’

‘Why, on account of the stamps,’ Melville said. ‘Why don’t you show him, Mr Starling?’

Starling reached again into the inside pocket of his suit and brought out two envelopes. Checking the date of the postmarks, he handed one to Brock, who took it from him and carefully drew out a single folded sheet of paper. He read it, then spread it out on the table. A handwritten message had been printed in the centre of the page:

WHERE IS SHE, SAMMY?
IT’LL COST YOU PLENTY
TO FIND OUT.

Above these words was pasted a small faded scarlet rectangle, a tiny picture of a woman’s head, surrounded by a decorative frame. It was only when she looked closely at it that Kathy saw that the frame contained lettering, ‘Van Diemen’s Land’, and ‘Postage, One Penny’.

‘A stamp?’ she asked.

Melville nodded.

‘It looks old. There’s no perforations around the edge.’

‘1855,’ he said. ‘It’s a Chalon Head.’

‘A what?’

‘It’s the name of a type of stamp.’

‘Is it rare?’

‘Quite rare. The catalogue gives this one a value of about one thousand pounds.’

Kathy blinked in astonishment at the grubby little scrap of paper.

‘That’s an odd way to demand a ransom, isn’t it?’ Brock said, looking at Starling. ‘I thought the general idea was for the kidnapper to get money from the victim, rather than the other way round.’

Starling leaned forward and pointed at the stamp. ‘They’ve glued it to the page with some kind of adhesive, like epoxy or something.’ He gazed at Brock with an expression of incomprehension. ‘The stamp’s worthless now. They’ve destroyed it. Isn’t that right, Mr Melville?’

‘That’s correct.’

Starling shook his head in disgust, and it struck Kathy that he seemed more upset about this than about the reference to his wife in the message.

Brock examined the envelope. ‘Postmark central London, EC1. Address written in hand-printed capitals. Like the note.’

Kathy looked more closely at the tiny portrait. It was of a young woman,

presumably the young Queen Victoria, head and naked shoulders, wearing a crown, earrings, a necklace, hair swept back and up. As she examined it, she felt an odd sense of foreboding. She asked Starling if she could have another look at the photograph of his wife, which he had returned to his wallet. He caught her expression and gave it to her without a word. She laid it alongside the stamp. 'It's her, isn't it?' she said to him.

Melville said, 'Sorry?' and she passed them both to him. He too stared in astonishment. 'Good heavens! It is very like her. I had no idea. I've never met Mrs Starling.'

While Brock also made the comparison, Kathy watched Starling. He showed no surprise at her observation, and appeared almost disappointed, as if he had been well aware of this but had been intending to keep it to himself.

'Do you think it significant?' Melville asked, but no one offered a reply. 'I merely assumed that the Chalon Head referred to Mr Starling's area of interest. He has made quite a specialisation out of Chalons, haven't you, Mr Starling?'

Starling nodded. His face was exceedingly difficult to read, its creamy circle creased by his features in what might have been an expression of discreet pleasure, or embarrassment, or pain.

'There were two envelopes? What about the other one?'

Brock said.

'That one came in the post yesterday, this one this morning.' Starling handed over the second envelope, posted a day later from the same central London postal district. The format of the message was the same. It read,

DO EXACTLY WHAT YOU'RE TOLD, SAMMY,
IF YOU WANT HER BACK IN ONE PIECE.

There was another, similar stamp pasted above the lines of lettering, this one green, with the value twopence. But this time the stamp was sliced diagonally in two, through the neck of the young queen.

Brock stared at it impassively for a while, then said heavily, without lifting his head, 'You didn't really think that I could conduct some kind of private investigation for you, did you, Sammy?'

Starling tilted his impassive face. 'I'm in your hands, Mr Brock. You know how things stand.'

'Yes.' Brock took a deep breath, as if about to take up a great burden, reluctantly. 'And is there anything else I should know, Sammy?'

Starling lowered his eyes. 'Three months ago . . . they released Keller.'

'Did they, now? I didn't hear that. Well, then, you'd better come back with us and give us a full statement.'

'Ah . . .' Starling looked distinctly anxious now. 'I don't think I should do that, Mr Brock. They may be watching me. That's why I thought we should meet here. And, you know. I could never come to Scotland Yard . . .'

Brock handed him a card. 'Go to this address. Don't worry, no one will know you there.'

He made to get to his feet, but Melville broke in, 'Chief Inspector, the reason why I felt this matter to be so urgent . . .'

Yes, Mr Melville?'

'I believe it likely that there will be three messages, and three only.'

'Why is that?'

'These Van Diemen's Land stamps, there are just three in that set—the penny red, the twopenny green, and the fourpence blue.'

Brock nodded. 'Yesterday, today, and tomorrow.'

'Quite.'

2 Queen Anne's Gate

They made their way separately to Queen Anne's Gate, Brock and Kathy by taxi, Starling by bus to St James's Park and then on foot by a circuitous route until he had satisfied himself that he wasn't being followed.

As their taxi made its way slowly through the hot afternoon streets, Brock became increasingly preoccupied and sombre. Eventually he rubbed fiercely at the beard on the side of his jaw and said, 'Well, well, and I thought that was going to be a pleasant digression from the usual run of things.'

'You've had dealings with Mr Starling before,' Kathy prompted.

'Very much so,' Brock said heavily. 'Must be eight or nine years ago, the last time I saw him. And I did very much hope it would be the last time, too. Who would have expected Sammy Starling to show his face again, after so long?'

'A villain?'

'He has been. He has a flair for business. Made quite a bit of money for himself.' He stared grimly out of the cab window at the tourists snapping the sentries outside the Horse Guards, broiling inside their breastplates and helmets.

'And who is Keller?'

Brock seemed about to answer her, then changed his mind. 'No, you don't want to know, Kathy. None of us needs this. This is not a case for us. The first thing is to get it properly assigned. When Sammy arrives at Queen Anne's Gate, we'll hand him over, wash our hands, and get on with our lives.'

He took the photograph of Starling and his wife at Cannes from his pocket. 'Who the hell does he think he is? Aristotle Onassis?' He turned back to the window, brooding.

The offices used by Brock's section of Department SO1, Serious Crime Branch, occupied a row of terraces on the south side of Queen Anne's Gate, several blocks away from the main building of New Scotland Yard, and one of a number of annexes that had overspilled into the surrounding district. For Brock and his team, the independence and relative isolation of the old building from the modern slab office block of the Yard were an asset, illustrated now by the anonymity with which Starling was able to come to them.

The building also had another characteristic, which appealed to its occupants, though not to the asset managers of the Central Property Branch. Originally a row of separate eighteenth-century townhouses, it had long ago been converted to offices, with openings formed through the original party walls to link the staircases and corridors of the former houses into a maze of interconnected passageways serving an eccentric mixture of rooms, whose odd sizes bore no relationship to the standard space