
COMEBACK

DICK FRANCIS



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK



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COMEBACK

DICK FRANCIS



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*With heartfelt thanks
to
Jenny Hall
Veterinary Surgeon
and to
Peter Spicely
and
Philip Grice
British Consuls*

1

I'm Peter Darwin.

Everyone asks, so I may as well say at once that no, I'm not related to Charles.

I was in fact born Peter Perry, but John Darwin, marrying my widowed mother when I was twelve, gave me, among many other things, a new life, a new name and a new identity.

Twenty years rolled like mist over the memories of my distant childhood in Gloucestershire, and now I, Peter Darwin, was thirty-two, adopted son of a diplomat, in the diplomatic service myself.

As my stepfather's postings and later my own were all at the whim of the Foreign Office, I'd mostly lived those twenty years abroad in scattered three- or four-year segments, some blazing, some boring, from Caracas to Lima, from Moscow to Cairo to Madrid, housed in Foreign Office lodgings from one-bedroom concrete to gilt-decked mansions, counting nowhere home.

Friendships were transitory. Locals, left behind. Other diplomats and their children came and went. I was rootless and nomadic, well used to it and content.

"Look us up if you're ever in Florida," Fred Hutchings said casually, leaving Tokyo to be consul in Miami. "Stay for a day or so if you're passing through."

That "day or so," I thought wryly, was a pretty good indicator of the warmth of our feelings for each other: tepid to luke.

"Thanks," I said.

He nodded. We'd worked together for months without friction. He half-meant the invitation. He was trained in politeness, as we all were.

My own posting, when it came through nearly a year later, was surprisingly to England, to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Whitehall.

"*What?*" My stepfather in Mexico City chuckled with pleasure on the phone when I told him. "Private secretary! Well done! The pay's rotten. You'll have some leave first, though. Come and see us. Your mother misses you."

So I spent nearly a month with them and then set off to England via Miami, which was why, after a delayed flight and a missed connection, I found myself with twenty-four hours to kill and the echo of Fred Hutchings's invitation in my head. Why not, I thought, and on an impulse found his number from Enquiries, and phoned him.

His answering voice sounded genuinely welcoming and I pictured him on the other end of the line: forty, plump, freckled, eager, with a forehead that perspired under the slightest nervous pressure. The mildness of my liking for him flooded belatedly back; but it was too late to retreat.

"Great, great," he was saying heartily. "I'd ask you here for the night but the children aren't well. How about dinner, though? Get a taxi to The Diving Pelican on a

Hundred and Eighty-sixth Street, North Miami Beach. I'll meet you there about eight. How's that?"

"Splendid," I said.

"Good. Good. Great to see old friends." He told me the address of the restaurant again, carefully. "We eat there all the time. Come to think of it"—his voice brightened enthusiastically—"two of our friends there are going to England tomorrow too. You'll like them. Maybe you'll all be on the same plane. I'll introduce you."

"Thank you," I said faintly.

"A pleasure." I could feel him beaming with goodwill down the wire. "See you then."

With a sigh I replaced the receiver, booked myself and my bags into the airport hotel for the night and in due course taxied as instructed to the rendezvous.

The Diving Pelican, less striking than its name, glowed dimly at one end of a dark row of shops. There seemed to be few other signs of neighborhood life, but the twenty or so parking spaces in front were full. I pulled open the outwards-opening door, stepped into a small entrance hall and was greeted by a young woman with a bright smile who said, "And how are you today?" as if she'd known me for years.

"Fine," I said, and mentioned Fred.

The smile grew wider. Fred had arrived. Fred, it seemed, was good news.

He was sitting alone at a round table spread with a cream lace cloth over a pink underlay. Stainless steel flatware, pink napkins, unfussy wineglasses, little oil lamps, carnation in a bud vase, the trappings of halfway up the scale. Not very large overall, the place was pleasantly packed. Not a pelican in sight, diving or otherwise.

Fred rose to his feet to pump my hand and the smiling lady pulled out a chair for me, producing a shiny menu and showing her molars.

"Great, great," Fred was saying. "Sorry I'm alone but Meg didn't want to leave the children. They've got chicken pox."

I made sympathetic noises.

"Covered in spots, poor little buggers," Fred said. "Like some wine?"

We ate our salads first, in the American way, and drank some reasonable red. Fred, at my prompting, told me about life in his consulate, mostly a matter, he said, of British tourists complaining of lost documents, stolen money and decamping boyfriends.

"They'll con you rigid," Fred said. "Sob stories by the dozen." With a sly gleam of amusement he looked at me sideways. "People like you, smooth two-a-penny first secretaries used to embassy life, you'd fall for the wet-handkerchief routine like a knockover. All half of them want is a free ticket home."

"You've grown cynical, Fred."

"Experienced," he said.

Always expect a lie, my stepfather had said right back at the beginning of my enlightenment into what his job entailed. Politicians and diplomats, he'd said, are liars until proved different. "You too?" I asked, dismayed, and he'd smiled his civilized smile and educated me. "I don't lie to you or your mother. You will not lie to us. If you hear me tell an untruth in public you will remain calm and keep your mouth shut and work out why I said it."

We got on fine from the start. I couldn't remember my natural father, who had died

when I was a baby, and I had no hangups about anyone taking his place. I'd longed to have a father like other boys, and then suddenly there was this big stranger, full of jokes, who'd swept like a gale into our single-parent-only-child existence and carried us off to the equator before we could gasp. It was only gradually, afterwards, that I realized how irrevocably he'd changed me, and how fortunate I had been.

Fred said, "Where have they posted you, after your leave?"

"Nowhere. I mean, England. Private secretary."

"Lucky old you!" There was a jealous edge to his voice at my promotion, all of a piece, I thought, with his gibe about two-a-penny gullible young men in embassies: and he'd been one himself in the past.

"Perhaps I'll get Ulan Bator after that," I said. Ulan Bator was the pits with everyone. It was heavily rumored that instead of a car there the ambassador got issued an official yak. "No one gets plums in a row."

Fred flicked me a rueful smile, acknowledging that I'd seen his envy, and welcomed our seafood fettucini with yum-yum noises and a vigorous appetite. Fred had recommended the house speciality. I'd been persuaded, and in fact it was good.

Midway through, there was a small burst of clapping, and Fred, pausing with fork in the air, exuded pleasure.

"Ah," he said proprietorially. "Vicky Larch and Greg Wayfield. They're the friends I told you about, who are going to the U.K. tomorrow. They live just round the corner."

Vicky Larch and Greg Wayfield were more than friends; they were singers. They had come into the restaurant without fanfare through curtains at the far end, she dressed in a white sequined tunic, he in a Madras-checked tailored jacket, both in light-colored trousers. The only thing really surprising about them was their age. They were mature, one might perhaps say, and no longer slim.

I thought reprehensibly that I could have done without the embarrassment of having to applaud earnest elderly amateurs all the way back to England. They fiddled around with amplifying equipment and tapped microphones to make sure they were working. Fred nodded encouragingly to them and to me and happily returned to his pasta.

They got the equipment going and ran a tape: soft sweet music from old stage shows, well known, undemanding, a background to food. Greg Wayfield hummed a few bars after a while and then began to sing the words, and I looked up from my fettucini in surprise because this was no geriatric disaster but a good true voice, gentle, virile and full of timbre.

Fred glanced at my expression and smiled with satisfaction. The song ended, the diners applauded and there was more tape. Then, again without announcement or fuss, the woman smoothed into a love song, the words a touch sad, moody, expressed with the catchy syncopated timing of long experience. Dear heavens, I thought with relief, they're pros. Good old pros, having a ball.

They sang six songs alternately and finished with a duet, and then to enthusiastic clapping they threaded a way round the tables and sat down with Fred and me.

Fred made introductions. Half-standing, I shook the singers' hands across the lace cloth and said with perfect honesty how much I'd enjoyed their performance.

"They'll sing again," Fred promised, pouring wine for them as if from long habit. "This is just a break."

At close quarters they looked as wholesome and old-fashioned as their act, he still handsome, she with the air of a young chanteuse trapped in a grandmotherly body.

“Did you sing in nightclubs?” I asked her as she sat beside me.

Her blue eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“Something about your phrasing. Intimate. Designed for shadowy late-night spaces. Something about the way you move your head.”

“Well yes, I did clubs for years.” She was amused, aware of me physically despite her age. Once a woman, always a woman, I thought.

Her hair was white, a fluffy well-cut helmet. She had good skin lightly made up and her only real concession to theatricality lay in the silky dark up-curling false lashes, second nature to her eyes.

“But I retired ages ago,” she said, lowering the lids and raising them in harmless coquetry. “Had a bunch of babies and got too fat. Too old. We sing here just for fun.”

Her speaking voice was English, without regional accent, her diction trained and precise. Under the mild banter she seemed serene, secure and sensible, and I revised my gloomiest views of the next night’s journey. Flight attendants could be chatted-up another time, I supposed.

Greg said, “My wife would flirt with a chair leg,” and they both looked at me indulgently and laughed.

“Don’t trust Peter,” Fred cautioned them ironically. “He’s the best liar I know, and I’ve met a few, believe me.”

“How unkind,” Vicky said disbelievingly. “He’s a lamb.”

Fred made a laughing cough and checked that we all were in fact booked on the same flight. No doubt about it. British Airways’ jumbo to Heathrow. Club class, all of us.

“Great. Great,” Fred said.

Greg, I thought, was American, though it was hard to tell. A mid-Atlantic man: halfway accent, American clothes, English facial bones. Part of the local scenery in Miami, he had presence but not his wife’s natural stage charisma. He hadn’t been a soloist, I thought.

He said, “Are you a consul too, Peter?”

“Not at the moment.”

He looked perplexed, so I explained. “In the British foreign service you take the title of your present job. You don’t take your rank with you. You can be a second or first secretary or a consul or counselor or a consul-general or a minister or a high commissioner or an ambassador in one place, but you’ll very likely be something different in the next. The rank stays with the job. You take the rank of whatever job you’re sent to.”

Fred was nodding. “In the States, once an ambassador always an ambassador. ‘Mr. Ambassador’ forever. Even if you’ve only been an ambassador to some tiny country for a couple of years and are back to being a dogsbody, you keep the title. The British don’t.”

“Too bad,” Greg said.

“No,” I disagreed, “it’s better. There’s no absolutely clear-cut hierarchy, so there’s less bitching and less despair.”

They looked at me in astonishment.

“Mind you,” Fred said to them with mock confidentiality, “Peter’s father’s an ambassador at the moment. Between the two of them they’ve held every rank in the book.”

“Mine are all lower,” I said, smiling.

Vicky said comfortingly, “I’m sure you’ll do well in the end.”

Fred laughed.

Greg pushed away his half-drunk wine and said they’d better get back to work, a popular move with the clientele, always quick to applaud them. They sang another three songs each, Greg finishing quietly with a crooning version of “The Last Farewell,” the lament of a sailor leaving his South Seas love to go back to storms and war at sea round Britain. Shut your eyes, I thought, listening, and Greg could be the doomed young man. It was a masterly performance; extraordinary. A woman at the next table brought out a handkerchief and wiped away surreptitious tears.

The diners, sitting transfixed over long-cooled cups of coffee, gave Greg the accolade of a second’s silence before showing their pleasure. Sentimental it might all be, I thought, but one could have too much of stark unsugared realism.

The singers returned to our table, accepting plaudits on the way, and this time drank their wine without restraint. They were pumped up with the post-performance high-level adrenaline surge of all successful appearances of any sort, and it would take them a while to come down. Meanwhile they talked with animation, scattering information about themselves and further proving, if it were necessary, that they were solidly good, well-intentioned people.

I’d always found goodness more interesting than evil, though I was aware this wasn’t the most general view. To my mind, it took more work and more courage to be good, an opinion continually reinforced by my own shortcomings.

He had trained originally for opera, Greg said, but there weren’t enough roles for the available voices.

“It helps to be Italian,” he said ruefully. “And so few of any generation really make it. I sang chorus. I would have starved then rather than sing ‘The Last Farewell.’ I was arrogant, musically, when I was young.” He smiled with forgiveness for his youth. “So I went into a banking house as a junior in the trust department and eventually began to be able to afford opera tickets.”

“But you went on singing,” I protested. “No one could sing as you do without constant practice.”

He nodded. “In choirs. Sometimes in cathedrals and so on. Anywhere I could. And in the bathroom, of course.”

Vicky raised the eyelashes to heaven.

“Now they both sing here two or three times a week,” Fred told me. “This place would die without them.”

“Hush,” Vicky said, looking round for outraged proprietorial feelings but fortunately not seeing any. “We enjoy it.”

Greg said they were going to England for a month. One of Vicky’s daughters was getting married.

Vicky’s daughter?

Yes, she said, the children were all hers. Two boys, two girls. She’d divorced their father long ago. She and Greg were new together: eighteen months married, still on

honeymoon.

“Belinda—she’s my youngest—she’s marrying a veterinary surgeon,” Vicky said. “She was always mad about animals.”

I laughed.

“Well, yes,” she said, “I hope she’s mad about him, too. She’s worked for him for ages, but this came on suddenly a few weeks ago. So, anyway, we’re off to horse country. He deals mostly with horses. He acts as a vet at Cheltenham races.”

I made a small explosive noise in my throat and they looked at me inquiringly.

I said, “My father and mother met at Cheltenham races.”

They exclaimed over it, of course, and it seemed a bit late to say that my mother and *stepfather* met at Cheltenham races, so I let it pass. My real father, I thought, was anyway John Darwin: the only father I could remember.

Fred, reflecting, said, “Didn’t your father spend his entire youth at the races? Didn’t you say so in Tokyo, that time you went to the Japan Cup?”

“I expect I said it,” I agreed, “though it was a bit of an exaggeration. But he still does go when he gets the chance.”

“Do ambassadors usually go to the races?” Vicky asked doubtfully.

“This particular ambassador sees racecourses as the perfect place for diplomacy,” I said with ironic affection. “He invites the local Jockey Club bigwigs to an embassy party and they in turn invite him to the races. He says he learns more about a country faster at the races than in a month of diplomatic handshaking. He’s right, too. Did you know they have bicycle parks at Tokyo racecourse?”

Greg said, “Er ... uh ... I don’t follow.”

“Not just car parks,” I said. “Motorcycle parks and bicycle parks. Rows and rows of them. They tell you a lot about the Japanese.”

“What, for instance?” Vicky asked.

“That they’ll get where they want to go one way or another.”

“Are you being serious?”

“Of course,” I said with mock gravity. “And they have a baby park at the races too. You leave your infant to play in a huge bouncing Donald Duck while you bet your money away in a carefree fashion.”

“And what does this tell you?” Vicky teased.

“That the baby park draws in more than enough revenue to fund it.”

“Don’t worry about Peter,” Fred told them reassuringly. “He’s got this awful quirky mind, but you can rely on him in a crisis.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly.

Greg asked a few things about our time in Japan. Had we enjoyed it, for instance. Very much, we both said. And did we speak the language? Yes, we did. Fred had been a first secretary in the commercial department, spending his time oiling the wheels of trade. My own job had been to learn what was likely to happen on the political scene.

“Peter went to the lunches and cocktail parties,” Fred said, “drinking sake out of little wooden boxes instead of glasses.”

The customs and cadences of Japan still flowed strongly in my head, barely overlaid by the month in Mexico City. It was always an odd feeling of deprivation, leaving behind a culture one had striven intensely to understand. Not exactly postpartum blues, but departing-from-post blues, definitely.

The diners in the restaurant had gradually drifted away, leaving the four of us as the last to leave. Vicky and Greg went off to pack up their equipment and as a matter of course Fred and I divided the bill between us to the last cent.

“Do you want it in yen?” I asked.

“For God’s sake,” Fred said. “Didn’t you change some at the airport?”

I had. A habit. Fred took the notes and handed me some coins in return, which I pocketed. The Foreign Office was permanently strapped for cash and our basic pay came nowhere near the level of status and responsibility given us. I wasn’t complaining. No one ever entered the diplomatic service to get mega-rich. Fred said he would run me back to the airport to save me having to pay for another taxi, which was good of him.

Vicky and Greg returned, she carrying a large white handbag aglitter with multicolored stones outlined in thin white cord and he following with a large squashy holdall slung boyishly from one shoulder. We all four left the restaurant and stood for a while outside the door saying goodnights, Vicky and Greg making plans to find me the following day.

On the wall beside the door a glassed frame held a sample menu flanked by two eight-by-ten black-and-white photographs of the singers, both taken, it was clear, a long time previously.

Vicky saw the direction of my eyes and made a small sad moue, philosophical with an effort. Her likeness, a striking theater-type glossy with her head and shoulders at a tilt, bright light shining on the forehead, stars in the eyes, tactful shadows over the beginnings of a double chin, must have been from twenty years earlier at least. Greg’s no-nonsense straight-ahead smile had few photographic tricks and was very slightly out of focus as if enlarged from a none-too-clear print. It too was an earlier Greg, thinner, positively masculine, strongly handsome, with a dark, now-vanished moustache.

Impossible to guess at Vicky’s character from that sort of picture, but one could make a stab at Greg’s. Enough intelligence, the complacency of success, a desire to please, an optimistic nature. Not the sort to lie about people behind their backs.

Final goodnights. Vicky lifted her cheek to me for a kiss. Easy to deliver.

“Our car’s down there,” she said, pointing to the distance.

“Mine’s over there,” Fred said, pointing the other way.

We all nodded and moved apart, the evening over.

“They’re nice people,” Fred said contentedly.

“Yes,” I agreed.

We climbed into his car and dutifully fastened the seat belts. He started the engine, switched on the lights, backed out of the parking space and turned the car to the general direction of the airport.

“Stop!” I yelled abruptly, struggling to undo the hampering seat-belt buckle so easily done up.

“*What?*” Fred said, jamming foot on brake but not understanding. “What the hell’s wrong?”

I didn’t answer him. I got the wretched belt undone at last, swung open the car door and scrambled out, running almost before I had both feet on the ground.

In the passing beam of Fred’s headlights as he’d turned the car I’d seen the distant

sparkle of Vicky's sequined tunic and seen also that she was struggling, falling, with a dark figure crowding her, cutting half of her from my sight, a figure of unmistakable ill-will ... attacking.

I sprinted, hearing her cry out shrilly.

I myself yelled "Vicky, Vicky" in an attempt to frighten off the mugger, but he seemed glued to her like a leech, she on the ground and kicking, he close on her, hunched and intent.

No sign of Greg.

I reached the man over Vicky, cannoning into him to knock him away. He was heavier than I'd thought and not easily deterred, and far from running from me he seemed to view me as merely another mug to be robbed. He jabbed a strong fist at my face, a blow I ducked from nothing but instinct, and I tried catching him by the clothes and flinging him against a parked car.

No success. He connected with a fist to my chest that left me breathless and feeling as if he'd squashed my heart against my backbone. The face above the fists was a matter of darkness and narrow eyes: he was shorter than I and thicker.

I was losing the fight, which made me angry but not much more effective. It was hostility I was up against, I thought, not just greed. Behind the robbery, hatred.

Vicky, who had crawled away moaning, suddenly rose to her feet as if galvanized and came up behind our assailant. I saw her eyes momentarily over his shoulder, stretched wide with fear and full of determination. She took aim and kicked at him hard. He hissed fiercely with pain and turned towards her and I in turn kicked him, targeting nowhere special but hitting the back of his knee.

Vicky had her long scarlet nails up, her fingers bent like a witch. There was bright red blood in splashes down her tunic. Her mouth was stretched open in what looked in that dim light like the snarl of a wolf, and out of it came a shriek that began in the low register and rose to a fortissimo scream somewhere above high G.

It raised the hairs on my own neck and it broke the nerve of the thief. He took a stumbling step to go round her and then another, and belatedly departed at a shambling run.

Vicky fell weakly into my arms, the fighting fury turning fast to shakes and tears, her triumphant voice roughened and near incoherence.

"God. Oh God ... There were two of them ... Greg ..."

Headlights blazed at us, fast advancing. Vicky and I clutched each other like dazzled rabbits and I was bunching muscles to hurl us both out of the way when tires squealed to a stop and the black figure emerging like a silhouette through the bright beam resolved itself into the solid familiarity of Fred. The consul to the rescue. Good old Fred. I felt a bit light-headed, and stupid because of it.

"Is she all right?" Fred was asking me anxiously. "Where's Greg?"

Vicky and I declutched and the three of us in unison looked for Greg.

He wasn't hard to find. He was lying in a tumbled unconscious heap near the rear wheel on the far side of what turned out to be his and Vicky's dark blue BMW.

There was a stunned moment of disbelief and horror. Then, crying out, Vicky fell on her knees beside him and I squatted down and felt round his neck, searching for the pulse under his jaw.

"He's alive," I said, relieved, straightening.

Vicky sniffed in her tears, still crying with distress. Fred, ever practical, said, "We'd better get an ambulance."

I agreed with him, but before we could do anything a police car wailed with its siren down the road and drew up beside us, red, white and blue lights flashing in a bar across the car's roof.

A big man in midnight blue trousers and shirt with insignia stepped out, bringing his notebook to the ready and telling us someone had just reported a woman screaming and what was it all about. Fast, I thought. Response time, spectacular. He had been cruising nearby, he said.

Greg began moaning before anyone could answer and struggled to sit up, appearing dazed and disoriented and startlingly old.

Vicky supported him round the shoulders. Looking at her with pathos and pain and gratitude, he saw the blood on her tunic and said he was sorry.

"Sorry!" Vicky exclaimed blankly. "What for?"

He didn't answer, but one could see what he meant: sorry that he hadn't been able to defend her. It was encouraging, I thought, that he seemed to know where he was and what had happened.

The policeman unclipped a hand-held radio from his belt and called for the ambulance and then, with notable kindness, asked Vicky just what had occurred. She looked up at him and tried to answer, but the phrases came out unconnectedly and on jagged half-hysterical breaths, as if from splintered thoughts.

"Greg's wallet . . . well, they banged his head on the car . . . shadows . . . didn't see them . . . he was trying . . . you know, he was trying to take my *rings* . . . the plane tickets . . . it's my daughter's wedding . . . I'd've killed him . . ." She stopped talking as if aware it was gibberish and looked lost.

"Take your time, ma'am," the policeman said. "When you're ready."

She took a visibly deep breath and tried again. "They were waiting . . . behind the car . . . I could kill them . . . They jumped on Greg when he went round . . . I hate them . . . I hope they die . . ."

There were high-colored patches of extreme stress over her cheekbones and more strong flush marks on her jaw and down her neck. Blood on her neck, also; quite a lot of it.

"You're doing good," the policeman said.

He was about my age, I thought, with a natural kindness not yet knocked out of him by the system.

"My ear hurts," Vicky said violently. "I could kill him."

I supposed we'd all noticed but not done much about the source of the blood on her tunic. One of her lobes was jaggedly cut and steadily oozing. She turned her head slightly, and the other ear shimmered suddenly in the car's lights, revealing a large aquamarine ringed by diamonds.

"Your earring," Fred exclaimed, fishing his pockets for a handkerchief and not finding one. "You need a bandage."

Vicky put a finger tentatively to her torn ear and winced heavily.

"The *bastard*," she said, her voice shaking. "The bloody bastard. He tugged . . . he just *ripped* . . . he's torn right through my ear."

"Shouldn't earrings come off more easily than that?" the policeman asked

uncritically.

Vicky's voice, high with rage and shock, said, "We bought them in Brazil."

"Er . . ." the policeman said, lost.

"Vicky," Fred said soothingly, "what does it matter if they came from Brazil?"

She gave him a bewildered look as if she couldn't understand his not understanding.

"They don't have butterfly clips on the back," she told him jerkily. "They have butterfly screws. Like a nut and bolt. So they don't fall off and get lost. And so people can't steal them ..." Her voice died away into a sob, a noise it seemed suddenly that she herself disapproved of, and she sniffed again determinedly and straightened her shoulders.

Hanging on to her courage, I thought. Seesawing towards disintegration, hauling herself back. Agitation almost beyond her control, but not quite.

"And another thing," she wailed, misery and anger fighting again for supremacy. "They stole my handbag. It's got my passport . . . and, oh *hell*, my green card . . . and our tickets . . ." A couple of tears squeezed past her best resolutions. "What are we going to *do*?"

The distress-filled plea was answered pragmatically by Fred, who said he wasn't consul for nothing and he'd get her to her daughter's wedding willy-nilly.

"Now, ma'am," the policeman said, uninterested in travel arrangements, "can you give a description of these two men?"

"It was dark." She seemed angry with him suddenly. Angry with everything. She said furiously, "They were dark."

"Black?"

"No." She was uncertain, besides angry.

"What then, ma'am?"

"Dark-skinned. I can't think. My ear hurts."

"Clothes, ma'am?"

"Black ... What does it matter? I mean ... they were so quick ... He was trying to pull my rings off . . ."

She extended her fingers. If the stones were real they were worth stealing.

"My engagement ring," she explained. "Bastard didn't get it, thanks to Peter."

The urgent whipping siren of a dazzlingly lit ambulance split the night and paramedics spilled out purposefully, taking charge with professional heartiness and treating Vicky and Greg like children. The policeman told Vicky he would be following them to the hospital and would take a proper statement once her ear and Greg's head were fixed, but she didn't seem to take it in.

Two more police cars arrived fast with flashing lights and wailing sirens, disgorging enough blue-clad figures to arrest half the neighborhood, and Fred and I found ourselves with our hands on the car roof being frisked while explaining insistently that we were not in fact the muggers but instead the British consul, friends and witnesses.

The kindly original cop looked back fleetingly and said something I couldn't hear in the bustle, but at least it seemed to blunt the sharpest of suspicions. Fred loudly reiterated his identity as British consul, a statement he was this time asked in a bullish fashion to substantiate. He was allowed to fetch out an oversized credit card, which announced—with photograph—his diplomatic status, thereby inducing a reluctant change of attitude.

Greg was on his feet. I took a step towards him and was stopped by a midnight blue arm.

“Ask him for his car keys,” I said. “If his car stays out here all night it will be stolen.”

Grudgingly the midnight blue presence yelled over his shoulder, and presently the information percolated back that Greg had dropped the keys by the car when he was attacked. Midnight-blue went to look, found the keys and, after consultation, gave them to Fred.

The uniforms seemed to be doing things at great speed, which no doubt came from much practice and was a regular pace for such an occasion. Vicky and Greg were helped into the ambulance, which at once departed, followed immediately by the first policeman. Other policemen fanned out into the surrounding area to search for the muggers should they still be around and hiding. Fat chance, I thought.

One of the new bunch wrote down my name under Fred’s and paused over the address I gave him: the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Whitehall, London, England.

“Diplomatic immunity, like him?” He jerked his head in Fred’s direction.

“I’ll help if I can,” I said.

He sucked his teeth a bit and asked what I’d observed.

I told him, in fair detail.

Had I seen this mugger at close quarters?

Well yes, I said, since he’d hit me.

Description?

“Dark-skinned.”

“Black?”

I found the same difficulty as Vicky over the skin color.

“Not West Indian or African,” I said. “Maybe Central American. Maybe Hispanic. He didn’t speak. I can’t tell you any better.”

“Clothes?”

“Black.” I thought back, remembering how I tried to throw him, refeeling the cloth that I’d clutched. “I’d say black jeans, black cotton sweatshirt, black sneakers. When he ran off he wasn’t easy to see.”

I made my guesses at his age, height, weight and so on but I couldn’t remember his face well enough to be sure I’d recognize him in other clothes, in daylight.

Midnight-blue shut his notebook and produced two cards with his name on them, one for Fred, the other for me. He would be grateful, he indicated, if we would present ourselves at his police station the following morning at ten A.M., and he gave us the impression that had it not been for the sheltering umbrella of the Foreign Office, the request would have been an order.

The scattered searchers returned without a mugger but with, surprisingly, Vicky’s torn-out earring, which they’d found on the ground. Bagged and labeled, it was solemnly retained in police custody. There was no sign, it seemed, of a capacious white bejeweled handbag or Greg’s wallet or his shoulder-slung holdall.

As fast as they’d arrived, the midnight-blues departed, leaving a sudden deafening silence in which Fred and I stood and looked at each other a touch dazedly, deciding what to do next.