

The Window – by Kevin Wignall

Spend Christmas in Vienna. He'd seen the adverts, just like the ones for Salzburg, Lapland and any number of other places that he supposed were associated in people's minds with the season at hand, with happiness, warmth, a Christmas magic that always seemed to elude them at home.

They were all around him now, the people who bought into it, wrapped up against the cold in clothes that weren't quite snug enough, convincing themselves that another glass of Gluhwein was all they really needed to thaw the frozen marrow in their bones. Or sitting in cafes, with hot chocolate, coffee, torte, strudel, soaking up every sweet-toothed cliché so they could go home and say to all their friends, 'We spent Christmas in Vienna, and it was so beautiful, you couldn't imagine.'

Bailey was having none of it. He didn't want to be in Vienna, and he'd long seen Christmas for what it really was, a package tour for the soul, nothing more. He wanted to be home, and was already wishing himself forward a day so that he could be there, to spend the holiday unmarked, alone in Bermuda.

It was all he ever wanted, and the only reason he did this too, for the luxury it afforded him of being alone, of being able to head out to sea on his boat, to lose himself in the urgent serenity of the ocean. He needed nothing else, just enough money for that, to continue being a nobody, an invisible speck on a blue that challenged the horizon.

But here he was, the cold somehow managing to poke a finger through his overcoat, soaking like water through the leather of his shoes, embedding itself in the bones of his feet. And here he was with the good-natured jangling in his ears and the smell, spice and fruit and fast food, and the light-strewn darkness of late afternoon.

Here he was on the 22nd of December, brought to Vienna to provide Franz Kaufman with an early Christmas present, the death of Carlos Luna. He wondered if that would find its way into their account of the Yuletide dream. 'We spent Christmas in Vienna, and a Venezuelan drug dealer got killed for selling cut-price cocaine, but apart from that it was so beautiful, you couldn't imagine.'

They could have been saved the upset too. Bailey had suggested killing him in Caracas but Kaufman had been insistent. It had to be in Vienna because it sent the right message, that it wasn't safe to come over here and work with the Russians. Kaufman didn't want a turf war either though, which was why he'd paid for Bailey, someone who'd disappear as quickly and leave no trail.

By this evening, Luna would be dead, Bailey flown, the status quo restored, and no one would be around who could possibly point the finger. Franz Kaufman would be free to enjoy his own dream Christmas, surrounded by his perfect family, attending Midnight Mass, his conscience no more troubled than a man who'd missed an occasional Sunday service.

Bailey reached Luna's hotel, a place for business rather than tourism, but even here, a Christmas tree took centre stage in the lobby and a Muzak rendition of "Silent Night" was omnipresent, like it was in the air, a sickly nerve agent designed to overcome the last possible stronghold of resistance.

The lobby was busy and Bailey passed through it without anyone appearing to notice him. He was in the lift before he realized how relieved he was to be out of the cold. He loosened his coat and took off his gloves, did a dummy run with his hand, reaching inside to the gun.

As he walked along the corridor to Luna's room he took the key card from his pocket, the one Kaufman's people had given him. It wasn't as if he'd needed it but Kaufman was one of those operators who wanted everything done his way or not at all.

So Bailey used the key card, opening the door, walking in on Luna as he was midway through undressing. He could hear the shower running and quickly checked that there was no one else in the bathroom. It was just the two of them though.

Luna was standing there in the middle of the room, baffled but unconcerned, a short chubby guy in his underwear, a neatly clipped moustache and such a mop of dark hair for a man of his age that Bailey had to wonder whether it was dyed or a wig.

He made to speak but stopped short as Bailey pulled the gun. Everything made sense now and Luna took a step back, looking desperately compliant as he lifted his hands. Bailey kept the gun on him but walked over to the window, a couple of swift glances to see how it opened, an operation he carried out blind then, keeping his eyes on Luna who was beginning to look confused again.

Bailey wanted to tell him, that this wouldn't have been his method of choice, that he was merely following the orders of his client. The cold air slapped hard into his back though, reminding him that there was little point explaining anything to Luna, that it didn't matter.

He walked over, put the gun into the back of his head, the barrel nestling there in the thick matting of hair on the nape of his neck - it wasn't a wig, he could see that now, and one or two grey hairs too. Luna was shivering, either with fear or because the temperature in the room had just dived into an area of the mercury neither of them were used to.

Bailey grabbed him by the arm and thrust him toward the window, the pressure of the gun barrel probably providing more leverage than his own muscle. By the time Luna realized what was happening it was too late. He tried to dig his heels in like someone miming a tug-of-war but Bailey had too much momentum behind him.

Luna had been silent until now but as he reached the window he clawed at the frame with one hand, at one of the heavy blue curtains with the other, and he started to mutter a desperate rosary of pleas, in Spanish, German, Russian, a hopeless attempt to cover all the bases of the people who might want him dead.

Bailey kept the gun firmly against his head and used his free hand to prise Luna's fingers from the curtain. He gave him one more firm push and he was gone, screaming a message into the Vienna night and then nothing, back to silence. Bailey waited for a second for the obligatory shocked scream from the street below.

By the time he left the hotel a huddle of people had gathered around the body. The initial shock had ebbed away and they were discussing the object in front of them with astounded faces, expressing shock now rather than feeling it. They were looking from the body to the window high above, back again, clearly speculating on whether he'd fallen or jumped, or maybe been pushed.

Bailey glanced down at the splayed body as he passed. A raw corpse was rarely an attractive or dignified thing but he had to acknowledge to himself that Luna's unsightly and partly naked body was a less dignified sight than most. Kaufman would be pleased about that.

He didn't linger, hardly breaking his stride, but as he walked away a commotion broke out behind him. He guessed one of the people standing there had made a derogatory

comment about the man on the ground, voicing what many of them were probably thinking.

But a young woman started to remonstrate with them, in German at first, spilling into Australian-accented English as her anger overcame her. 'How dare you,' she said. Bailey stopped and turned. He couldn't see her properly but the small crowd looked startled in their body language, no less so than if another body had fallen amongst them.

'How dare you!' Some more German and tears, and then, 'This is a human being! This man probably has a family - have you thought about that? Kids. He probably has kids!' The crowd shifted uneasily at the outpouring of emotion, one or two people even walking away.

Bailey could see her now, a young woman in a ski jacket, jeans, a woollen hat, standing alone, defiant in her grief for the complete stranger who lay before her. Her cheeks were ruddy with the cold but tear-strewn too, and yet she looked fierce and strong somehow, standing her emotional ground, daring them to question the truth of what she felt.

A man standing nearby put a hand on her shoulder but she knocked it away and spoke harshly to him in German, an outburst that left Bailey thinking this was the person who'd

made the initial comment. She was crying again but nobody seemed sure what to do, afraid to comfort her but not wanting to leave.

Some of them started to look around, perhaps hoping for the approach of sirens, officials who would take the burden from them and free them to return to their Christmas preparations. When the sirens came they could begin to forget, reducing the death of Carlos Luna to a counterpoint, something to set against the wider happiness of their lives, something to make them thankful.

She wouldn't forget though, Bailey could see that. This would be woven into the fabric of her life, one more thread adding to the strength and richness of who she was. He didn't know any of this, she could just be a person in shock like the rest of them, but he sensed it to be true, and it made her compelling.

He knew what he should do right now. He knew that the time had come to walk on, to remove himself from the scene. It was only a short walk to his hotel, a taxi ride to the airport, a flight. By this time tomorrow he'd be home again, the heat working back through him, the salt air in his lungs.

He knew all of this like it had been programmed into him at birth, that it was time to go. Yet he stood, captivated, and when he moved it was back toward the group. For the last day and a half he'd wanted only to be out of Vienna but suddenly he was blind to that, blind to everything but the girl in front of him.

He edged around the body, the half dozen or so people making way for him, and then he was standing before her and she was looking at him with a mixture of hostility and puzzlement. She didn't know what he wanted and nor did he, but he held out his hand, palm upturned.

'There's nothing you can do. Please.' A couple of the others spoke under their breath, one obviously asking the other what he'd said. The girl looked down at the body again, and at the hand that waited on hers. Like a drunk thinking slowly she finally lifted her own gloved hand and put it in his and allowed him to lead her away.

Bailey was walking down the street with her, their hands still clasped through a double layer of gloves. He didn't know what he was doing, where he was taking her, just that he wanted to take her away from there.

'You've had a shock,' he said. 'Let me take you to a cafe, get you something to drink.'

She didn't respond at first but then she pulled her hand from his, stopping as she said, 'Why are you doing this?' She wasn't aggressive now, just unsure why a stranger should care.

'I don't know,' said Bailey. What reason could he give her? That he felt responsible, that he'd been drawn to her in a moment of weakness. He could imagine that for years

to come he'd dwell on the reasons for what he'd just done, and that even if he never saw this girl again after tonight, he'd dwell on the memory of her too, the what ifs, the maybes.

His answer seemed to satisfy her anyway. She smiled and started to walk again, leading the way to a cafe a hundred yards away. It was busy, full of coffee warmth and smoke, but most of the customers appeared to be Viennese, the tourists probably all back in their hotels now, preparing for the evening ahead.

She took her gloves off inside the door and then pulled her hat off. Her hair was mousy, tousled from the hat, her eyes green, skin fair, still blushed red on the cheeks from the cold. Bailey stared at her face for too long, transfixed by it, as if he hadn't noticed how attractive she was until she'd performed the conjuror's trick of removing the hat.

She looked bemused by his attention, not troubled, and said, 'Wanna sit down?' He nodded and they found a small table against a wood-panelled wall, taking off their coats.

Bailey noticed her looking at his suit, the shirt and tie. She was wearing a patterned sweater, red and white, and he wanted to tell her that this wasn't what he usually wore, that he was more casual than this. He couldn't though. Of course he couldn't.

'What's your name?'

'Bailey. Scott.'

'Scott Bailey?'

'No, Bailey Scott. It causes a lot of confusion.'

'So your name's Bailey?' He nodded and she said, 'I'm Sarah. Thanks for what you did back there, Bailey. I was so upset, I didn't know what to do.'

He felt embarrassed, queasy too, being thanked like that when she really didn't know exactly what he'd done. An awkward moment crept between them, the moment when he was meant to say it was nothing or that he could understand how upset she'd been, things he couldn't say because he didn't want to lie to her.

Then the waitress arrived at their table, any possible tension shed as they ordered, a hurried look at the menu, a brief consultation like they'd done this a hundred times before, both deciding on hot chocolate. The waitress smiled, taking them for a couple perhaps, certainly never coming to close to imagining the truth, that their sitting together here was linked to the siren hovering uncertainly in the distance.

Sarah heard it, a sound that seemed to drag her thoughts back over there, weighing her down as she said, 'What do you think happened?'

He shrugged but, feeling he needed to offer up at least some response, he said, 'Someone died. It's happening all the time. I suppose it's just not very often you have to see it like that.'

She nodded sadly, then rallied and said, 'Do you live here?' Her tone was hopeful and he wondered if she was lonely.

'No, just here on business. You?'

'I'm teaching English here, for a year.' He smiled but didn't know what to say next and felt awkward. She seemed oblivious though, and said, 'So I guess you live somewhere hot?'

'Bermuda. How so?'

'The tan. And you don't look very comfortable in that collar and tie, so I'm figuring you're not used to wearing a suit.'

'You should be a detective.' He loosened his tie and undid his top button. 'I can't wait to get back. I don't do the cold very well, and I really don't go in for this whole Christmas thing.'

'You're kidding!' She looked mockingly outraged. 'Bailey, it's the best thing about being here. Back home, Christmas is a barbie on the beach; I've never seen anything like this. It's amazing.'

The drinks arrived and then Bailey invited her to convince him, listening as she talked about the Christkindlmarkt, hot chestnuts, Gluhwein, the magic of it all. She was in love with everything that left him cold about it, but it sounded different coming from her, true, possessed of an honest enthusiasm.

And he liked to listen to her talk, a warmth and familiarity in her voice that made him feel too as though they'd known each other a long time. He'd managed to take her mind off the event that had brought them together but in the process he'd also let it slip from his own thoughts.

It came back to him only when she interrupted herself to say, 'When are you leaving?'

The question hung there for a second, Sarah waiting expectantly. When was he leaving? Now was the answer. He had to leave now, to fly out this evening, that was

the deal. Once Luna was dead he was meant to get out of Vienna. And there was no sound reason for that not to be the answer.

He'd met a girl under the worst possible circumstances for both of them, he liked her, found her attractive. He'd liked other girls though, and he couldn't put his finger on any particular reason why this one seemed different, why it was worth taking the risk of upsetting Kaufman and staying an extra day.

It was crazy anyway, because nothing could come of this. He'd stay an extra day perhaps, they'd get to know each other better, the attraction growing stronger, but he could never tell her the truth. It was wrong, he knew it instinctively, it was wrong to stay, for every reason imaginable, but he wanted to, even with the cold, and this Christmas theme park of a city, and the risk of angering Kaufman. He wanted to stay.

'My business is done. I was thinking of flying out tonight.'

She picked up on the ambiguity and smiled as she said, 'You mean, you might stay longer if you had a reason to?'

'Maybe,' he said, smiling too.

'I have to go to dinner tonight, with the principal and his wife. It'll be a real bore but I can't get out of it. I'm free all day tomorrow though. Don't know if it's enough of a reason

to stay, but if you're willing to give it a go, reckon I can win you over to the whole Christmas thing.'

'Okay.'

'No way!' She looked amazed by the speed of his response, like she'd never believed he'd agree to it and, checking herself, she said, 'Don't you have anyone to get home to?' He shook his head. 'I mean, like family. Don't you go home to your family for Christmas?'

'No, it's just me.' He could see she wanted him to explain but he didn't want to because he knew how the bare facts of his upbringing sounded, like a case for sympathy, and it hadn't been that bad. He'd known his mother, which was more than some people did, and his uncle had looked out for him. He'd been lucky enough, had landed on his feet - no one needed to feel sorry for him about that.

'So there's no rush,' was all she said. As if reminded by the words though, she checked her watch and said, 'But I need to get going. Where shall we meet?'

'How about here at eleven.'

'I'll be here.' He stood up with her as she put her coat back on, but didn't put his own on yet.

She thanked him again as she was leaving but he got the feeling the tragedy she'd witnessed was already being overwhelmed in her thoughts by the excitement of meeting someone new. He hoped so anyway, because that was how he felt, and for all the insanity of it, he wanted his reason for staying here to be a good one.

He strolled back to his hotel after another twenty minutes. Like she'd said, there was no rush, but in the back of his head a timer was counting down the minutes to the departure time of his flight. When it reached zero, he knew another timer would start, one that with every passing minute would add to the tension and paranoia of Franz Kaufman.

He played cautious by eating in his room, thinking of this girl he hardly knew who was sitting at the same time having dinner with her boss and his wife, perhaps thinking of him in turn. He thought of her when he woke too, his eagerness to get on with the day causing him to let his guard slip by going down for breakfast.

He'd have been found in his room anyway, but he kicked himself as he saw Kaufman's sidekick walking towards him across the breakfast room. It was the guy he'd dealt with from the start, blonde and pale enough to frighten children. He'd never told Bailey his name, referring to himself only as 'Herr Kaufman's associate'.

He usually had a couple of guys with him but he was alone this morning and looked like he meant business. As he sat down opposite Bailey he said abruptly, 'Why are you still here?'

'It's Christmas. I thought I'd do some shopping.'

'Funny,' said the sidekick, like he'd read the word at random from a set of cue cards. 'You leave today. Herr Kaufman will not tolerate deviation. The order was to leave directly.'

'Herr Kaufman worries too much.' The sidekick looked furious and Bailey was pleased now that he'd come down for breakfast; if he'd been in his room he supposed he would have just earned himself a smack in the mouth.

'Time's short,' was all he said, putting his anger to one side. 'The police were given a description. They're looking at security footage from the hotel.' Bailey was about to state the obvious, that the description could only be vague, that the lobby had been swarming with identikit businessmen, but the sidekick added, 'There is a plane at 1300 hours. Be on it.' He got up and walked away, his unnatural paleness drawing glances from a couple of the other guests.

Bailey had no reason to fear the police, he was certain of that, but if he stayed around much more than a day he could have serious problems with Kaufman and his people.

He'd move to a different hotel, get some casual clothes, buy himself the time to see what there was between him and Sarah, or what there might have been had they met in a different way, in different lives.

When he got to the cafe she was already there, smiling broadly as he approached the same table and saying, 'I got here early. I didn't wanna miss you or...' He looked questioningly. 'I didn't want you to change your mind and leave.'

'Why would I do that?'

'I don't know.' She looked into his eyes, just for a moment but searching. 'Why would you stay? You don't even know me.'

He shrugged, shaking his head as he said, 'I saw you standing there shouting at those people and I just wanted to talk you, find out who you were. Of course, it helps that you're beautiful.'

She laughed a little, embarrassed perhaps, but grew serious then and said, 'It was on the news. He was a drug dealer.'

Bailey nodded and said, 'It doesn't change any of the things you said about him.'

'Guess not.' She didn't look certain. She pointed at his sweater then and said, 'Is that new? It looks like you've just bought it.'

He laughed in admission, saying, 'I didn't really have many casual clothes with me.'

'What do you do?'

'I'm a financial consultant. Offshore banking. It isn't interesting, believe me.'

'I do.'

They had coffee and she asked him about Bermuda, then about his boat. Her family had a boat too and for a while their conversation turned to their mutual love of the sea and they lost sight of the Christmas conversation that had been his excuse for staying.

There was time for that. For now they were wrapped up in getting to know each other, as much as they could anyway. She seemed to know instinctively that there was little point asking about his family background and, as if to compensate, she covered her own family in a cursory fashion, her father a TV producer, mother a lady who lunched, sister a lawyer.

They concentrated instead on the things they could share, the sea, books, films, life in general, their conversation finally turning back to the city around them, to her love for it, and her determination to open his eyes to what it offered, Christmas and all.

They stayed in the cafe for lunch, time running away from them, and when they stepped out into the early afternoon the blue sky above already had the first hint of darkness threaded through it. This extra day had seemed like a big risk and already it was feeling too short a time, the clock moving too quickly.

She led him to the Rathauspark, throwing him right into the festive deep of the Christmas market, a determined fairy-tale atmosphere that was like drowning in syrup. It didn't trouble him today though, because he was seeing it through her, entering into the spirit of it without thinking too much about what it all meant or how fake or ephemeral its sentiments were.

They drank Gluhwein, and sat on a bench to eat hot chestnuts, keeping the cold at bay. It was already growing dark, the lights in the trees creating a strange sense of insularity and warmth, when they came to a small area where people were waltzing to music that was tinny at the edges.

They both laughed but then Sarah said, 'Let's dance.'

'I don't know how to waltz.' He didn't even really know how to dance, but he wanted to be able to.

'Nor do I. So who's gonna report us?' It was in the tone of her voice, asking him what they had to lose. They'd make fools of themselves but no one was watching. He glanced around quickly, confirming just that to himself, that no one was watching.

They danced in their own fashion, and through all the padding of their winter clothes he felt drunk just being able to hold her. They received smiles too from their older fellow dancers, smiles like the waitress had given them, the good will that people who'd run the race felt toward a couple they perceived as just starting out.

It made him feel good, and at the same time he felt like he was bleeding internally, a steady dripping away of his life force. He could fall in love with this girl, he knew it, was perhaps already falling. Maybe she could even feel the same way, but it could go nowhere. It was an uncharted area of the heart for him, and for good reason, because he was a murderer, because he didn't deserve it.

Kaufman's sidekick was right, time was short, and his orders had been to leave. He should never have gone against those orders but he was here now and he was hooked and it was hopeless. He could see no way of this leading to a happy outcome but he was happy nevertheless, and wanted to hold onto it for as long as he could.

As the evening set in they left the park and found a traditional beer cellar where they drank and ate, sitting in a corner booth and looking out as the quiet bar filled with people

and noise and slowly emptied again. It was like they were detached from the world, moving inside a personal time and space.

When they left he said, 'I'll walk you home.'

'Bailey, honestly, it's too far out of your way. I'll be fine.'

'Where do you live?'

'Near the Prater. It's a great apartment. I share it with another teacher but she's gone home to England for Christmas.'

'I could use the walk, and I'd feel happier.'

'Bailey, it's a safe city.'

'I know,' he said, but they were already walking and she'd linked her arm into his.

The city centre was busy, a seasonal sense of euphoria swelling over the crowd but their course took them almost immediately onto quieter streets down to the river. They stood on the bridge for a while looking at the darkly illuminated water below and she explained that it wasn't a river, just the Danube Canal.

Finally they reached her building and she stopped and said, 'Wanna come in?' He did, but he didn't want her to think that was why he'd walked her home.

'Not tonight. Do you have any plans for tomorrow?' She shook her head. 'Same time, same place?'

She laughed incredulously and said, 'You're staying?'

'If you don't mind.'

She shook her head, looking into his eyes for a second or two, before she said, 'I've had a really great time today, Bailey.'

'Me too.' He leaned in and kissed her, the warmth and the taste intoxicating, the taste of the evening they'd shared, and something of her, something good.

Walking away afterwards he felt stupid with happiness, like the lyrics of one of those old songs, foolishly romantic, blind to the reality of the world, the cars passing, other people. It was a feeling that lasted till he reached the bridge and then it crashed spectacularly.

Coming in the opposite direction was one of the guys who'd tagged along behind Kaufman's sidekick, an ape, rented muscle. Bailey kept his cool, face forward, hoping

the guy wouldn't recognize him, but he cursed his bad fortune. It was a small city, not easy to hide in, but it was still unlucky to run into one of them.

At first the ape seemed preoccupied, maybe a little drunk, but in the final seconds as they crossed, Bailey spotted a twitch of recognition. It would take him another few seconds, another few steps to place him, but he'd do it and then Bailey would be in trouble.

He turned, catching a backward glance from the ape who looked panicked at having been spotted himself. Bailey walked after him, trying to look inconspicuous but aiming for one thing in particular, to catch up with him by the time he reached the steps that led down to the side of the canal.

Another backward glance and the ape started to run without much conviction that he was up to it, a man out of shape. Bailey broke into a run too, figuring the drivers of the passing cars would be paying little attention.

He saw the opening in the bridge wall where the steps were situated and picked up more speed, cutting out wide before swinging back in and giving the ape a hard body blow to the side, knocking him through the gap and down the steps, running down after him.

The ape had fallen down a dozen steps or more but recovered himself quickly and half scrambled, half fell down the rest. He reached the bottom but was disorientated and lost in the deeper darkness down there. Bailey jumped the last steps towards him and hit him hard, knocking him down.

He got on his back then and twisted his head firmly. The ape yelled out, but his neck didn't break, more muscle in there than Bailey had given credit for. He dug deeper, tightening his grip, straining with effort, more yelling and then the sickening crack he'd been aiming for.

He stood up off him, catching his breath, and looked around quickly before rolling him into the canal, the body forming an indistinct shadow on the waters before disappearing. Bailey couldn't move for a while, just stood there engulfed by the noise of the water and the more distant traffic, disgusted with himself because this had been his fault.

Yet even now, he knew that he wouldn't turn back. He was like a junkie, addicted after one hit, knowing that he'd do anything, risk anything to spend one more day with her. And he was determined to focus on the moment but couldn't shake the truth that nothing more could come of this, that there was nowhere else for them to go.

It left him divided the next morning, happy to see her but pained that she looked as happy to see him. Every touch, from the kiss with which she greeted him to her hand on his as they sat at their table, made him feel like he was betraying her further. Maybe

it showed too, because more than once she asked him if he was okay, and he'd lied, telling her only that he hadn't slept well.

When they'd finished lunch she said, 'Come on, I wanna take you to the most amazing place in Vienna, and it has nothing to do with Christmas.' The temperature had fallen further and they walked quickly, taking only ten minutes to reach an irregular cobbled square, the space dominated by a large pale concrete block in the centre.

'Is this it?'

She laughed at his response to it and said, 'It's the holocaust memorial.'

'A concrete block?'

'A concrete block. You need to move closer.' They walked towards it and he saw now what it was, a concrete cast of a library, a subtle truth brutally declared, daring anyone to question its message.

'It's beautiful,' he said, and it reminded him of her, of the way she'd been the other day over the body of Carlos Luna.

'Isn't it! The way we're locked out of it forever.' He nodded, saddened, but before he could dwell on it she said, 'The Christkindlmarkt closes at five today. We should get a move on.' He nodded again, and they walked on.

They wandered through the Rathauspark the way they had the previous afternoon and he was desperate to recapture the fuller sense of escape or denial he'd felt then, but the place had a sinister edge now, the smiles of strangers harder to read, the clock ticking louder.

They danced again, more comfortable in their lack of accomplishment, but his eyes were still drawn to the people standing about, a constant sense that somewhere among them was someone who recognized him, someone who'd report back to Kaufman that he was still here in Vienna.

He felt like he'd trapped himself, lured into danger by an impulse that was self-destructive anyway. For a few hours, a day or so, she'd made him feel like he was someone good and decent, but he wasn't, and now he felt hemmed in on all sides by the masquerade.

As the night progressed the city turned giddy around him, like they were on a merry-go-round, with Sarah the only thing clearly visible, her face and her words, her warmth, the taste of her when they kissed. Everything else was descending into a confusion of light and noise, of threatening faces emerging one after the other from the darkness.

Even in the ultimate feel-good theatre of Midnight Mass, he felt like he was being watched. For all he knew, Kaufman himself was at the same service with his wife and children, untroubled by his own hypocrisy. Bailey couldn't feel like that. He wanted to be away from there and was relieved to be back out in the cold again at the end of the service, back in the empty streets that led to her apartment.

She asked him inside when they got there and this time he went, following her up the stairs, standing in silence as she opened the door and ushered him in. She showed him into a large lounge, lit by two small lamps, the walls lined with bookshelves.

'Make yourself comfortable.' He took his coat off, dropping it on the edge of the sofa, sitting down then. 'How about a drink? We've got some great schnapps, it's like cough mixture but it's fantastic.'

He laughed and said, 'Okay,' and she walked into the kitchen as she took her gloves off, coming back a minute later with two small glasses.

She handed him the drink as she sat next to him and said, 'Merry Christmas, Bailey.'

'Merry Christmas.' They touched glasses and drank, the taste hitting him with a shudder that made them both laugh. It was good though, medicinal but good. 'I bought you a present,' he said, and reached into his coat pocket, handing her the small packet.

'Me too.' She got up and crossed the room, coming back with a parcel. 'You first.'

He opened it and smiled, saying, 'A Christmas Carol. Are you trying to tell me something?' Her mouth dropped open, on the verge of laughing but shocked too.

'Bailey, I swear to God that didn't cross my mind. No kidding, I got you it because it's one of my favourite books.'

'I know. It's great.' She smiled and opened the package he'd given her, taking out the pendant inside. She stared at it for a short while and he felt uneasy, that she didn't like it, or that it was too extravagant a gift from someone she'd known only two days.

But she looked up then and said, 'It's beautiful,' and leaned over and held him. They kissed, their mouths still hot with the medicine taste of the schnapps. They kissed for a long time and when she finally broke away it was to say, 'You wanna go through into the bedroom?'

It wasn't even a question, because they both knew it was what they wanted but he hesitated and she saw it, a look of confusion taking over her face. He wanted to but he knew he couldn't, that he'd already stored up enough hurt for her, and that it was time to end the lie.

'I can't,' he said, his voice regretful, quiet.

'Bailey, you're not married?' He shook his head but pulled further away from her, taking a deep breath, knowing that it was over, that this window was closing.

'You don't know me.'

'I know enough.' He shook his head again.

'That man the other day, his name was Carlos Luna, a drug dealer from Venezuela. He was selling cheap cocaine to a Russian gang. A local crime lord wanted him killed.'

'What does that have to do with anything?' It didn't take her long to answer her own question though, and she backed away from him, recoiling as if the truth had been torn away, revealing him for what he was. 'You've gotta be kidding me!'

'Everything else I told you was true, except about my job. I'm a contract killer.'

She made a noise like she'd been winded, tried to speak but couldn't, three of four aborted attempts crumbling away between them. She started to shake her head, crying now, and he wanted to comfort her but he knew it was impossible, that she wouldn't allow him to touch her again or speak, even to say sorry.

And he was sorry, more than he'd ever been for anything, but relieved too that he'd surrendered the truth. It was his bad luck, that was all, to have seen a glimpse of the person he might have been; there were no magical transformations though, no new beginnings.

She got up and walked to the door, opening it, standing there in silence without looking at him. He nodded, picked up his coat and walked out, and as the door closed behind him he still couldn't help but think of her on the other side of it, weeping perhaps, full of hatred, feeling violated.

He fastened his coat as he walked down the stairs, put his gloves on as he emerged into the street and started walking. He didn't feel cold, the numbness he felt inside leaving him immune to it. And he was only half aware of the deserted street, the breeze laced with ice, the car approaching quietly from behind.

The car approaching from behind. He heard one of its doors open. His instincts kicked in but he smothered them and continued to walk until he heard the cough of the silencer, the punch in his back, the damp warmth of blood soaking into his shirt. His step faltered, and he was only half aware of the car sliding up alongside him, its boot open.

He was suddenly weak and started to fall but someone caught him under the arms, pulling him towards the open boot of the car. He couldn't see anyone, neither the man

dragging him nor the driver, and then he realized that he couldn't see anything, only a blank, and for a moment he thought he could hear the sea.

The car had gone when Sarah came running out of the street door, and no one was there to see her shivering as she looked up the street, puzzled perhaps that he could have disappeared so quickly. No one was there to speculate on what she might be thinking, on what had brought her after him.

Even now, faced with the dark emptiness of a Christmas morning she seemed unwilling to go back. She walked a few paces in the direction he would have taken, on her toes, protecting her stocking feet from the worst of the cold paving, and no one could tell that if she kept walking she would find a few isolated spots of his blood on that same cold stone, and no one could tell her of the heart from which that blood had fallen.