

From the author of *Isaac and the Egg*

BOBBY PALMER

SMALL HOURS



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Also by Bobby Palmer

Isaac and the Egg

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Bobby Palmer



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1

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‘My father, who had derived such happiness from his childhood, found in me the companion with whom he could return there.’

Christopher Milne, *The Enchanted Places*

‘Some people talk to animals. Not many listen though. That’s the problem.’

A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*

Forest floor.

Between trees, under rain

and over puddles, trees, more trees.

There. Over there. Spectacles, dropped in the dirt.

The fox stops, noses them, looks around for their owner.

Humans love to be lost. The fox's eyes shine like coins found.

The fox runs, now. It runs and runs, the water running off its back.

This is it, the fox realises. Cold rain on my fur, warm earth beneath my paws.

I exist, thinks the running fox. I live, I've existed, and I am happy to have done so.

It runs and it runs, until: a bright flash, a loud bang. Lightning? The fox stops.

The sky falls in sheets and the ground has become a flat, slick mirror.

The fox does not move. It is waiting for something, for someone.

A man steps from between the trees. Wild, wide eyes.

Hair like beansprouts. Soaking wet, caked in mud.

He shields his eyes. He squints.

Looking for something? Yes.

For you.

PART ONE
CITY

one

‘Sorry, I think I’m hearing things.’

Jack hadn’t been paying attention. In his defence, there was a squirrel jumping from branch to branch in the tree outside the window of the meeting room.

‘No, you aren’t hearing things.’

Jack allowed his vision to blur, the acrobatic squirrel becoming an indistinct smudge of fur, yanked this way and that like a puppet on a string. His eyes refocused, taking in the two men opposite. The man on the left’s brow was furrowed, the man on the right’s mouth tightly pursed. I wasn’t ignoring you, Jack wanted to say. There was a squirrel.

‘Sold,’ he said, instead. He turned the word over in his mouth. It had a bad aftertaste. ‘Wait. Sold?’

Across the glass-topped table, Hugh looked at Hugo. Hugo looked at Hugh. Hugh laced his fingers before him on the

tabletop. Visible through the glass, one of Hugo's chino-clad knees began to jiggle. Jack looked from Hugh to Hugo, Hugo to Hugh. To most people, they'd be indistinguishable. But up close, Hugh's hair was mousy brown, Hugo's a dirty blond. Hugh tended to smirk, while Hugo preferred a sneer. They both stared at him with inscrutable expressions, now, as if they might break character at any moment and admit it was all a joke. Jack was the first to break eye contact, looking down at his legs. His own knee was jiggling now, no matter how hard he tried to stop it.

'Yes,' said Hugh.

'The company is being sold,' said Hugo.

Not 'We're selling the company', as that would suggest some agency on their behalf. And to come to a decision like that at an agency like this, they would have had to tell their third-in-command. Jack handled the money side of things. And though Hugh and Hugo had begun to take more of an interest in the company accounts of late, asking him to produce extensive financial records for mysterious third parties, Jack had been stretched so thin that he hadn't had the time to question their motives. He'd been silently optimistic, hoping that there might be new backers on the horizon. He'd been obliging, as per usual. He rarely asked questions.

Jack's eyes flicked over the mug in front of him, the company logo on the side, the black coffee sitting untouched. He wondered if it would seem strange to take his first sip now. He wondered if it had already gone cold. He wondered if he was so sweaty because, on a warm day like this, he'd opted for smart wool trousers and a button-down shirt. He'd known he had an

important meeting this morning, but he hadn't expected it to be about this. Jack clenched his fists, unclenched them, set his palms flat on the tabletop. He moved them again, transferring them to his lap, leaving a sweaty smear on the glass. He looked up at Hugh and Hugo, avoiding the brown envelope that lay on the table between them.

'Sold to whom?'

The pair shared a glance.

'Multiple buyers,' one said.

'Sold off, really,' added the other.

'Stripped for parts.'

'Gutted.' A pause. 'Like a fish.'

Jack didn't know what to say. He tended to avoid conflict, so he wouldn't say what he wanted to say, which was: how could you? And how am I only now hearing about it? Instead, he stole a quick look at the envelope. It was thin. A redundancy pay-off would be thicker. Wouldn't it? Working things out was Jack's forte. And Jack had worked out, a while ago, that he could make himself into someone indispensable. He never took time off. He worked harder than anyone else. Redundancies happened to other people, people less integral to the operation, people who didn't want it as much as he did. Even as his bosses' spending became ever more erratic and the company found itself in ever-choppier waters, Jack had assumed that he could fix things. He'd thought that he alone could turn this ship around. He hadn't considered that Hugh and Hugo might have been making their own plans behind his back. Now their lifeboat was disappearing into the distance, and here he was, clinging to a glass tabletop to keep from drowning. There were

beads of sweat forming on Jack's hairline. He was beginning to think it wasn't just his clothes. He was beginning to think he'd made a miscalculation.

'So, we keep going?' Jack said, though his voice betrayed him. 'With new backing?'

Silence.

'We're actually going to be stepping back,' Hugh said, eventually, reluctantly.

'Stepping back?' Jack blinked at one of them, then the other. 'What about me?'

'That's the great thing,' Hugo said. 'The world's your oyster.'

Hugo and Hugh both looked down at the envelope. They both looked back up at Jack. In perfect unison, they frowned. The effect was unnerving. There was a sound from outside the meeting room, and Jack glanced over his shoulder, as if expecting to see someone holding up a placard with instructions. *Frown*. But, no. Just two of his colleagues, weeping. Jack watched as one of them put his arms around the other, gently manoeuvring her out of the way of two removal men shimmying past, carrying the coffee machine. He'd imagined offering to mentor these two, both junior to him, next year. He'd hoped that he'd be good at it. He'd hoped that he'd have more time. Jack had barely ever spoken to them, beyond weekly team meetings and hurried budget reports. He'd never been a shoulder to cry on.

Jack's eyes returned to Hugh and Hugo. He wanted to say, surely there's something we can do to fix this. Surely at least *I* can stay.

'We all wanted to make it work,' said Hugo.

‘We’re all gutted,’ said Hugh, sliding the envelope slowly across the table.

‘Gutted,’ Jack murmured. ‘Like a fish.’

His eyes went to the window again, but the squirrel was gone. He felt the sharp corner of the envelope pressing against his solar plexus. He took it, slid it under the table, let it sit unopened on his lap.

‘We’re going to the pub in a bit,’ said Hugo.

‘For a swiftie,’ said Hugh.

‘Or four.’

‘The parting glass.’

Jack knew it would be odd to open the envelope right now, just as he knew it would be odd to drink his coffee, now definitely cold. He knew he couldn’t grab both Hugh and Hugo by the collars of their clean shirts and slam their heads into the thick glass below, though the twitching of his hands made him feel like he just might. Bile rose in his throat. His vision was edged with black clouds, with sparkling lights. He needed to be somewhere, anywhere else. Abruptly, he pushed back his chair and stood up. The metal legs clanged against the glass wall of the meeting room. Jack gulped, holding tightly on to the envelope as if they might try to take it back. Tell them what you really think, he thought.

‘Thank you,’ was what he said, forcing his mouth into a smile.

‘No,’ they both replied, smiles unforced. ‘Thank *you*.’

The glass door of the meeting room wobbled pathetically as Jack closed it behind him. The door of the office building was quieter, the click of it shutting behind him barely audible over the howling sirens and tutting bicycle spokes, the

beep-beep-beep of a reversing truck, the hyena-like laughter of a passer-by on the phone. And the hollow sound of Jack's own, thudding heartbeat, which now filled his ears at such a deafening volume that he felt as if it might knock him off his feet. Jack found himself, lost, on the pavement. For the first time in over a decade, he didn't have a clue what came next.

To Jack Penwick's logical brain, his career had been like a computer game. Everything was laid out in levels to be completed, with high scores to be achieved if he only worked hard enough. Jack was a numbers guy, and nothing had ever added up so easily. For the best part of the last fifteen years, he had progressed diligently from stage to stage. In his late teens, while his schoolmates deferred university places and planned gap years, he landed work experience in the city with their uncles and godfathers. He got himself on a good course at a good university, scored an even better placement in his third year, beat out competition for the best graduate scheme going when graduation came around. Finance felt like a calling, the ultimate equation to be solved. But as the numbers grew bigger, the levels got harder. And as the hours got longer, the friendly faces became fewer and further between. If it became more difficult to come up for air, to look around and wonder what he actually wanted – and if this was actually it – then that email from Hugh a couple of years ago came at just the right moment to stick a plaster over the opening wound. Jack and Hugh had known each other since university. Now, with Hugh's contacts and the financial backing of his

friend Hugo's father, they were starting their own business. They shook his hand. They offered him equity. They showed him the numbers, and the numbers looked good. When they told him that the company was going to be a unicorn, Jack had swallowed it hook, line and sinker. Like a fish.

Jack now sat beneath a tree, on a bench on the common, unsure exactly how he'd ended up there. Leaving the office had been like stumbling, bloodied, from a battlefield, P45s billowing out of printers and shreds of sensitive documents raining from roaring shredders. He remembered, of course, that he'd been on the pavement outside his office, then on a bus. He'd disembarked at his usual stop, taken the usual, direct route home across the common. But his memory of these events – and the mechanics of how they led here, to this particular bench – were hazy. He supposed he'd needed a rest. He supposed there wasn't much point going any further. Jack had no one to come home to, no one to tell. And the spacious two-floor flat which had once been a towering monument to his sizeable earnings already seemed like a gaping void into which he was throwing an income he no longer had.

It was game over. How had Jack not seen this coming? And even if he'd had an inkling, how had he not been smart enough to stop it? He'd thought of himself as a startup Svengali, a Doctor Dolittle for the age of digital disruptors. He might not have been the boss, but he'd thought he had a handle on things. He'd at least assumed there would be more conversations before that one, the final one. He reflected on the open-plan loft office that had cost four times what the company could afford, the ingoings and outgoings that were uneven, even to him, the guy

who was supposed to make it all add up. Hugh and Hugo never listened. They fobbed him off with the same things they said to all the app developers, to the event organisers, to the angel investors with deep pockets and short attention spans. Don't focus on the numbers. Focus on the feeling.

Jack didn't feel good. From the glances he was getting, he looked even worse. His hair had become lank in the heat, his exhausted eyes ringed by welts of purple. His face was stuck in a grimace, though that wasn't just a today problem. Jack had spent £4,000 having his teeth whitened and straightened a couple of years ago, and for what? Smiling still didn't come naturally. He massaged his jaw, catching the concerned eye of a woman pushing a toddler in a pram. Jack looked down at the box he was clutching. It had been the only empty container left in the almost-empty office, one last humiliation on his way out. A huge, gold-ribbon-wrapped gift box, now filled with the sparse remnants of his former life. A notebook, a laptop, a vape pen. One phone charger, one vape charger, one laptop charger. One charging case, containing one pair of wireless headphones. One small desk plant, proven to boost office productivity. One small bottle of CBD drops, proven to reduce work stress. The woman with the pram was smiling, now. She probably thought it was his birthday.

Jack scowled, then opened the box and took out his vape, which he inhaled from as if it were an oxygen supply. As steam billowed from his nostrils, he surveyed his surroundings. The lunchtime sunbathers with their picnic blankets had moved on, leaving only a few stragglers. A couple of teenagers were snogging on the next bench along. A greyhound zipped back

and forth across the dry grass, chasing squirrels it never managed to catch. Jack thought of the brown envelope in the box, of what might be inside. He didn't know what he'd do without a job. He didn't know how he'd cope, who he should call. His family had never understood the importance of his work, and he'd never been much good at maintaining friendships. Above his head, a pair of bright green parakeets leapt from a branch and took flight over the common. Jack thought about crying. He'd never been much good at that, either.

Jack's shoulders were rigid, his upper lip stiff as ever. But as he sat on the bench and stared out across a hazy expanse of yellowing grass, he felt something begin to give. It started with a jiggle in his left leg, then a slight twitch in his right eyelid. Then, pain, both physical and metaphysical. He clenched his fists, clenched his jaw, rocked slightly back and then slightly forth. He wondered if it might be a migraine. He'd been plagued by them all his adult life. It felt like there was always one hiding in his peripheral vision, crouching just out of sight behind his eyes. They seemed to creep up on him from nowhere. He could pinpoint all of the triggers: screens, stress, screens, too much socialising, too many screens. Was it normal to always feel this tired? To be thirty-three years old and exhausted in every bone in one's body, at every hour of every day? Creatine was a plaster, caffeine a crutch. And though Jack kept himself going with six black coffees a day, he was really surviving on adrenaline alone. When a migraine did finally break against the walls of his brain, all he could do was crawl to his bedroom, close the blinds and ride the crashing wave with his head under a pillow.

He wanted to crawl there now, back to his bed, and envelope himself in darkness. He closed his eyes, tried to shut out the ever-familiar nausea and that excruciating pain that seemed to slice like a cleaver through his cranium. This time, there was a noise attached to the pain. Something tinny. Not the wheeze of distant traffic or the squeal of playing children, but a scratch, a scrape, a high-pitched, hollow moan. Like the sound of an old radio, tuning in.

Jack rubbed his eyes, then the back of his taut neck. He thought of his empty bed, in his flat on the other side of the common. He thought of Hugh and Hugo, back in the office on the other side of a glass table. And as he sat there on the bench, plagued by that awful sound scraping itself along the back wall of his skull, the still-functioning part of Jack's brain beat against the confines of his throbbing head. He held on to his seat as if he were battling seasickness, tried to find a fixed point on the horizon. To focus on something, anything.

There, in the distance. Something moving, slowly, across the grass. Jack steadied his breathing, felt some of the tension dissipate. It was a dog, he thought. But then, it didn't seem to have an owner. And it wasn't moving like any dog he'd seen before. His heartbeat picked up again. The dog-like creature was limping, loping. Jack leaned forward, frowning. There were two black dots behind it, jumping about, not leaving it alone. With his eyes almost closed, the creature looked like a lit match, a tiny sun with two black planets in its orbit. With his eyes wide open, it looked like what it really was.

A fox. An injured fox. A half-dead fox, stalked by crows.