



LETHBRIDGE —
STEWART

**SWEATY
FLOW**

IAIN MCLAUGHLIN

LETHBRIDGE
STEWART

SWEATY FLOW
OR
A QUIET WEEKEND
IN BRIGHTON

Iain McLaughlin



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EVERY MORNING when she arrived at work, the first thing Jenny Carter was pleased about was that she didn't own the hotel, which according to the sign with letters the locals loved messing about with, was currently called SWEATY FLOW. At least that was better than yesterday's title of WET FARTS. As usual, the brats had left the unused letters discarded on the grass.

Jenny had no objection to running or even owning her own hotel one day, possibly back home in Canada, but definitely not the one in Brighton she was currently working in, and certainly not if the current owner and his wife were involved. She absolutely didn't want to take the blame for everything that went on at that hotel.

And a lot of *everything* happened there.

Most of it... insane.

'Jenny! Jenny!'

And there he was, the cause of most of the insanity. Mr Sinclair. Six and a half feet of manic beanpole, trying to hide his lunacy and insecurity behind a neat moustache.

Beanpole was just one of the names the staff called the owners of the hotel: usually the code names were Moustache and Hairspray. They weren't in any way terms of endearment. None of their nicknames were. In fact, they were quite a ghastly couple. The only redeeming feature about them was that they had married each other and not inflicted themselves on anybody remotely normal.

Jenny stitched a smile on her face and hoped it looked more genuine than it felt. 'Yes, sir?'

Sinclair seemed even more frantic and agitated than usual. And that was saying something. 'You haven't seen my wife, have you?'

'No,' Jenny answered casually. 'Is she looking for you?'

'Probably with a hunting rifle and a telescopic sight,' Sinclair answered sourly.

Jenny was only half listening. When he was talking she was usually only ever half listening. 'What?'

That stopped Sinclair in his tracks and sent him in a different direction. 'What do you mean "what"? ' he asked sourly. 'The correct answer would have been pardon not what.'

Jenny sighed. 'All right then, *pardon?*'

Sinclair just looked at her with disdain and sighed back. 'It's like drawing teeth trying to get a bit of class in today's world,' he said in a withering tone.

Jenny had heard that tone before and knew to ignore it, as she ignored most of his rants. 'About your wife?' she asked, trying to get him back on topic.

That seemed to register with him. 'Right. Yes. I'm asking if you've seen her.'

Jenny shook her head. 'No. Do you want to see her?'

His eyes widened as if Jenny had asked the

stupidest question in the world. 'Why would I want to do that? You've met her, haven't you?' He shook his head. 'She's looking for me, which means she has a job for me. I just want you to tell her you haven't seen me.'

Jenny glanced past his shoulder at the approaching twin-set in pink, giving off a reek of tobacco, perfume and hairspray. She was brave using that much hairspray when she smoked quite so much. It was a wonder Mrs Sinclair hadn't gone up like a bonfire, Jenny mused. How many cans of the stuff did she use? Her hair looked as solid as Barry Sheene's crash-helmet.

'You can tell her yourself. She's coming this way.'

Sinclair went from startled to panicked to sarcastic in two blinks of the eye and he turned to look at his heavily lacquered wife. 'Oh, hello, dear. There you are. I thought I heard the mice throwing themselves on the traps.'

'What was that?' his wife asked. Her nasal voice had the quality – if quality was the word – of sounding like it could scrape paint from a door.

'Oh, nothing,' Sinclair muttered, 'just wit, you know. You're halfway to having it.'

'Speak up,' Mrs Sinclair said *at* her husband rather than *to* him. 'I can't hear when you mumble like that.'

'Just as well,' he muttered before continuing in a clear – and clearly false tone of bonhomie. 'I was saying to Jenny that we're doing rather well, dear.'

Mrs Sinclair barely waited for her husband to finish speaking. She rarely did. 'We're going to be doing even better. I just took a phone call asking if we had a room free.'

'A room?' Sinclair looked and sounded pained.

'Yes,' Mrs Sinclair said as if she was talking to a particularly slow child, 'those things people pay to stay in.'

'It's such a classless word,' Sinclair protested. 'Why can't they ask if we have any *accommodation* free? Or if we have a *suite* available.'

'We don't have any suites,' his wife countered.

'But *they* don't know that, do they?' Sinclair snapped as if she'd perfectly made his point. 'We need a better class of customer.'

Mrs Sinclair had opened her compact and was examining her make-up in the mirror. There was lipstick on her teeth again. 'I'll settle for ones who pay.' Yes, there was some sharp needle in that one.

And the needle found its mark on Sinclair. He sucked his teeth and then pulled a deep and deeply offended breath. 'Oh, it's *that* again?'

His wife managed to be patronising before she even spoke. 'All I'm saying is that I would have got the payment before helping them to their car with the luggage.'

'So, we're to presume everyone is a crook now?' Sinclair snapped back. 'All right, fair enough.'

'Now you're being silly.'

'Sorry, dear,' Sinclair answered, clearly not sorry

one bit. 'Just wondering if we should get Shaw Taylor on a retainer to vet the guests.'

'You're still being silly.'

'Oh, how very naughty of me.' Sinclair's voice was part defensive, part snide, part that barely controlled impotent rage that underpinned his every moment. 'I must remember not to be silly.'

'Well, just remember we've got that guest coming,' Mrs Sinclair said, 'and remember the chap from the museum is coming to pick up their silver tray as well. It was very kind of them to lend it to us for the Historical Society's function.' She turned and headed for the front doors. 'I'll be getting my hair done.'

That clearly annoyed Sinclair as well. 'Well, that'll be nice for you.'

'You should consider getting yours done,' his wife called back. 'What's left of it. Goodbye.'

And with that she disappeared through the doors.

'Good riddance,' Sinclair seethed. He turned back to Jenny. 'Why didn't you warn me?'

'Your wife's coming,' Jenny said.

'Yes,' Sinclair nodded vigorously. 'Why didn't you warn me my wife was coming?'

'No,' Jenny punched his arm. 'I mean *now*...'

He turned and squawked at the sight of his wife marching towards him. 'And don't forget about the tray.' Her patronising done, she turned and strode towards the door again.' A moment later the voice screeched from just outside the front doors. 'I'll be

back later.'

'Proof positive that there is no god.' Sinclair seemed to count to ten internally before heading across Reception to the desk. 'Come on, we've got plenty to do before She Who Must Be Obeyed gets back.'

They passed behind the desk and into the little office beyond. Sinclair dropped into the chair at the desk and picked up the book in which guests and their stays were noted prior to their arrival.

'What's this?' he said looking at a scrawl in his wife's handwriting.

'Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart?' Jenny read. 'Friday to Monday.'

'That woman's memory gets worse every day,' Sinclair grumbled. 'Accepting a guest by phone when she's already booked out our last room. I mean *suite*.' He eyed the name appreciatively. 'Still, that sounds like the sort of guest we want, not somebody phoning to see if we have a *room*.'

A loud *DING!* came from the reception desk.

'Be with you in a minute,' Sinclair called irritably.

A second *DING!* answered him.

'I said we'll be with you in a minute, all right?' Sinclair snapped, shooting to his feet. He stopped at the doorway, looking at the couple waiting to be attended. 'Do you see that?' he hissed disdainfully to Jenny. 'Flat cap and moustache? Travelling salesman, probably a weekend away with his secretary. Well, I'm not having that sort of thing

under my roof.'

Jenny thought the couple actually looked really rather nice. He was tall, handsome and had a good set of shoulders. His moustache was neatly clipped and there was an amused twinkle in his eyes which was matched those of his blonde companion. She was a little younger than him, perhaps just under thirty. She had a face that looked like it was comfortable smiling. 'What sort of thing?' Jenny asked.

'You know.' Sinclair nodded his head and winked in a way that meant something him and absolutely nobody else. '*That* sort of thing. Unmarried couple, sharing a room. Sharing a bed. I'm not having it.'

'Neither are they if you get your way.'

Another *DING!* came from the desk, this time with an impatient bite to it.

'All right. All, right,' Sinclair snapped. 'Yes? What do you want?'

The gentleman in the flat cap's eyebrows rose at the tone but he maintained a calm demeanour. 'I telephoned earlier about a room.'

That only seemed to confirm Sinclair's low opinion of the man. 'Oh, yes, that was you, was it? You spoke to my wife.'

'That's right,' the would-be guest replied affably. 'She said you had a room free for a few days.'

'I'm afraid not,' Sinclair said with a ridiculous amount of glee.

The guest was rather taken aback. 'I beg your pardon?'

'My wife was wrong,' Sinclair said dismissively. 'There's no room at the inn. She must have forgotten that she had pencilled in that the room was for Colonel...'

'...Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart,' the guest completed. 'Yes. I know.'

That took Sinclair by surprise. 'How could you know?'

Jenny elbowed him hard in the ribs. 'How do you think? He's the...'

A look of startled horror crawled onto Sinclair's face. 'But of course.' He seemed to shrivel, his spine curving and his hands clasping together as he became a snivelling Uriah Heap. 'My apologies, Colonel,' he oozed. 'I didn't recognise you out of uniform.'

'I should think not,' the young woman with the colonel said.

Sinclair didn't quite know how to answer that. 'And this is Mrs Lethbridge-Stewart?' he tried.

The colonel took just a fraction before not answering. 'Can we just sign in, please? It's been a long drive.'

That was enough for Sinclair. He always collapsed in the presence of people from higher in the social structure. Jenny had never understood the English and their class system and she didn't want to. 'Nuturalement, mon Col-o-nel,' Sinclair smarmed.

The colonel simply looked rather bemused.

Jenny poked her boss in the ribs again. 'Could I have a word with you?'

Sinclair didn't even look at her. 'Not now, Jenny. I'm with a guest.'

'But I need a word.'

'Not now.'

The colonel waved for them to continue. 'Oh, please go ahead.'

'Thank you,' Sinclair said reverentially. 'So kind.' He turned an agitated fact to Jenny. 'Well? What is it?'

'They're not married,' Jenny hissed. 'The colonel and the woman. They're not married.'

He frowned. 'How could you tell?'

'The way they reacted when you asked if she was his wife. Plus, no wedding ring.'

Sinclair looked blank for a few moments then did what he often did when confronted. He was rude and dismissive. 'Thank you, Miss Marple, but what's that got to do with us?'

'Nothing,' Jenny hissed, 'but you said we weren't having any of that sort of thing here.'

Sinclair loomed over Jenny. 'Look, he's a Colonel, and not a dusty old fossil, an active one. He's double-barrelled. That means he's quality and that's the sort of guest we want, right?'

'Even if they're not married.'

'What they get up to is nothing to do with us,' Sinclair said dismissively. 'Not their sort.'

‘What do you mean “their sort”?’ Jenny demanded.

‘You know,’ Sinclair hissed, ‘the nobs. The quality.’

Jenny frowned. ‘So, people can do what they like if they’ve got money and a double barrelled name?’

‘Of course, they can. This is England.’ He nudged Jenny back towards the desk. ‘Now let’s get them booked in before they go somewhere else.’ Again facing the colonel, Sinclair turned on his most ingratiating smile. It also happened to be his *least* ingratiating smile. ‘I apologise for the delay. My assistant was... *something*.’

‘Not a problem.’ The colonel’s smile was looking a little more strained.

Jenny spun the guest register and indicated a line on the top page. ‘Just sign here, please, Colonel.’

Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart signed. ‘Of course.’

‘On leave?’ Sinclair asked, trying to sound as if he knew of such military things.

‘Hmm?’ Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Yes, it’s been a busy few months. I thought I could do with a bit of R and R.’ He smiled at his companion. ‘We both could.’

‘I imagine we could all do with a bit,’ Sinclair sighed, and then he froze. Had that been a double-entendre faux-pas? He would have hated to do anything quite so rude – or French. ‘Of rest I mean.’

‘Of course you do,’ the colonel said. ‘Well, that’s us signed in.’ He sounded rather relieved that it was

over and dropped the pen onto the sign-in book.

Jenny noted with some interest that the colonel had quickly cast his eyes over the names of the other guests registered and then glanced around the Reception area, taking in the faces of the guests who were present. He was affable but there was something in his eyes... he was definitely looking for someone.

The whole thing took only a second or two but Jenny knew what she had seen. She also knew that her employer hadn't noticed anything.

'Splendid.' Sinclair plucked a key from the board beneath the desk and handed it over as if it was made of gold. 'Here's your key. Number Twelve. Allow me to take your bags up.'

'No need,' the colonel said airily. 'We don't have much. I can manage.'

'Oh, I insist,' Sinclair said, hurrying round the desk and picking up the bags. 'An officer and a gentleman shouldn't carry his own luggage.'

'Really?' the colonel said. 'I'll bear that in mind next time I get posted in the field.'

Sinclair just laughed and laughed.

Jenny thought to herself there was a fair chance that Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart might shoot her boss by the top of the stairs. The notion cheered her enormously.

Less than an hour later, looking refreshed after a change of clothes, the colonel and the lady returned

downstairs and met Jenny in the Dining Room. Jenny was placing an elegant antique silver tray against the wall at the back of the sideboard containing cutlery, napkins, condiments and the like.

‘Are we in time for a spot of lunch?’ the lady asked pleasantly. ‘We couldn’t tell. His watch has stopped.’

Jenny smiled and nodded. ‘You have plenty of time, don’t worry. There’s a table here, Colonel, Mrs...’

The other woman interrupted. ‘Call me Doris. It’s less formal.’ She nodded at the tall man by her side. ‘But even *I* have to call *him* Colonel.’

‘Nonsense,’ Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart chuckled. His eyes turned to the window, which looked out over a quiet street with a small grassy area and in the distance, a flash of blue denoting the channel. ‘Lovely view.’

‘Is it your first time in Brighton?’ Jenny asked.

‘First time on leave,’ the colonel said, not quite answering the question.

Jenny made sure the couple were seated comfortably. ‘Let me get you a couple of menus.’

‘Thank you.’ Doris smiled.

‘Ah, Colonel. How long lovely to see you again.’

Jenny didn’t have to turn around to know the pained expression she would see on the faces of Doris and the colonel. Mr Sinclair had found them again. ‘Let me get a menu for you.’

‘The young lady is already getting menus,’ Doris

said, adding pointedly, 'for *both* of us.'

'Is she?' He sounded miffed that she had beaten him to his prized guests. 'Well, hurry up, Jenny. Don't keep the guests waiting. Do you have plans for this afternoon, Colonel?'

'Just a quiet lunch,' Lethbridge-Stewart replied. 'Just the two of us,' he added for emphasis.

Sinclair carried on as if the colonel hadn't spoken. 'I usually just manage a quick sandwich on the move.'

Jenny moved quickly to save the couple. 'Your menus,' she said, handing the printed sheets over.

There was relief and gratitude in Doris' eyes. 'Thank you, Jenny.'

'My pleasure,' said Jenny with a smile. 'I'll come back in a few minutes to take your order.' She caught Sinclair's sleeve and pulled him towards the sideboard laden with cruet sets, napkins and some very appealing-looking sharp cutlery. 'Over here.'

'I'm with the guests,' he hissed.

'Please, don't mind us,' the colonel said optimistically.

Sinclair reluctantly let himself be led away. 'What is it, you stupid girl?'

'Stupid?' Jenny came very close to snapping. 'I'm not the one who noticed the colonel and Doris wanted to be left alone, just the two of them. They're a couple,' she added with exasperation.

'So are my wife and me and I can't stand the thought of being alone with her.'

'That's different,' Jenny retorted.

‘Excuse me,’ a reedy voice said from the table just out of the way at the back of the room. A grey, cold-looking little man was sitting eating alone.

Sinclair turned irritably to the guest. ‘Yes? I’m talking to my soon-to-be-ex-waitress.’

‘I’m sorry to disturb,’ the grey man said, ‘but did you call that distinguished gentleman “Colonel”?’

‘We do get *some* quality guests here,’ Sinclair sniffed. ‘They’re not *all* riff-raff.’

‘Oh, obviously,’ the grey man said and eased himself out of his chair, hurrying for the door. ‘Excuse me.’

Sinclair looked from the grey man to his half-eaten meal and then back again. ‘Wait a minute. You haven’t finished.’ But the dull little man was already gone. ‘Mad as a bucket of frogs,’ he said sourly.

Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart had taken an interest in the exchange. ‘What did he say his name was? Morrison, by any chance?’

‘Him?’ Sinclair thought for a moment before the name came to mind. ‘Yes... Morrison, I think. Why? Do you know him?’

‘Not personally.’

The clatter of heavy boots on the drive outside was quickly followed by a barked, ‘Stop there!’

The colonel gave his most charming smile. ‘But a couple of my chaps outside would like a word with him.’

There was the sound of feet running out in Reception, then clattering up the stairs followed by

the thunder of heavy boots in pursuit.

‘Not guests,’ the colonel explained, ‘they’re just passing through.’

‘We’re not a train station.’ Even the ingrained deference of the English class system splintered as Sinclair’s annoyance rose.

A very broad London accent called from Reception, ‘He’s gone upstairs.’ The boots clattered off up the stairs in pursuit.

‘Is there another way down?’ the colonel asked.

‘Alistair...?’ Doris leaned towards her companion, an accusing look in her eye. ‘This was supposed to be a holiday.’

He held up his hands to placate her. ‘It is, I promise you. I was only supposed to report back to the chaps that Morrison was here and they’d deal with it.’

Another yell came from upstairs, accompanied by more stampeding footsteps. ‘There he goes.’

Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart stood up. ‘Would you excuse me for a moment please? I’ll just go and see how they’re doing.’

Doris’ frown grew deeper. ‘Alistair...’

‘Order for me, would you, please?’ he asked. ‘You know what I like.’

A little blush appeared on Doris’ cheeks.

More yells came from the Reception area. ‘Put the gun down. Put it down.’

The answer was a pair of gunshots. A volley of gunfire came in reply. Shots sounded back and forth

and footsteps clattered on the stairs.

Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart lifted silver tray from the sideboard. 'Mind if I borrow this?' He didn't wait for an answer before going on his way.

Sinclair was bewildered by the turn of events. Gunfire in *his* hotel? In *Brighton*? During *lunch*? 'What?'

Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart had already moved into the Reception area. His clipped voice came back. 'Excuse me, old chap.'

'What?' That was Morrison's grey, reedy voice.

They heard the *PANG!* of the silver tray smacking off Morrison's head. Two more *PANGs* sounded quickly afterwards.

'Shot, sir.'

'Played a bit of tennis when I was younger,' Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart answered. 'Backhand was always my strength. Take him away.'

'Right, sir.'

The colonel strolled back into the Dining Room, a small gadget held nonchalantly in one hand. He handed the dented tray to Sinclair. 'Terribly sorry about that.' He glanced at Doris. 'Have you ordered? We *are* on holiday now, I promise.'

Sinclair was still frozen in place, completely lost. So he opened his mouth and said what came into his head first. 'Terribly sorry, everyone. You know how it is with guests who don't want to pay.'

The guests just stared at him.

So did Mrs Sinclair. She stood in the doorway,

her head now wearing hair what looked like a slightly mauve meringue. 'What on earth's going on? I just saw that nice professor chap being carted away by a bunch of soldiers.'

Sinclair was like a deer in the headlights. 'Yes.' The word escaped apparently unintentionally. 'That's right.'

'And there are bullet holes in my front Reception Area.'

'Well, you wanted me to get tough, didn't you?' Sinclair snapped.

The colonel had only just taken his seat but he rose again and smiled quite charmingly. 'I'm afraid that's all my fault, really. Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart. We spoke on the phone earlier. I'll give you details of where to send the bill for repairs. We'll take care of all that, don't worry.'

Mrs Sinclair was unimpressed. 'I should think you would.'

'I can't tell you what it was all about – Official Secrets Act and all that – but he was a rum sort we'd been after for a while.'

Doris raised an eyebrow. 'Do you really think I'm going to let it rest at that?'

'No,' Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart sighed, 'but I don't expect you to believe that this little gadget can be used for mind control either.' He frowned at the machine. 'I don't think I meant to say that.'

'That's science fiction stuff,' Doris protested. 'Isn't it?'

‘It was intended to slow the enemy in war,’ the colonel answered and then frowned again. ‘And I certainly didn’t intend to say *that*.’ He tried to press a few buttons on the little machine. ‘I think this gadget must be malfunctioning and affecting me. I’m afraid I’ll have to get you all to sign the Official Secrets Act.’

Mrs Sinclair stared at the little gadget. ‘And because of that machine the silver tray is ruined? It was only on loan, you know. For an event.’

‘I’m sorry about that,’ the colonel said ruefully.

Mrs Sinclair wasn’t finished. ‘And you bashed that scientist over the head with it.’

Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart sighed. ‘With the gadget here on the blink, I suppose I could have handed him the tray and just said “beat yourself over the head with it” but...’

PANG!

PANG!

Every pair of eyes in the room turned to Mr Sinclair. His eyes were wide and startled and he smacked himself in the head with the tray for a third time.

Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart winced. ‘It’s this wretched device, isn’t it? I must switch it off.’

‘No, no.’ Mrs Sinclair caught his wrist and pulled his hand away from the little machine.

PANG!

PANG!

Mr Sinclair brought the tray down on his head

again and again.

Mrs Sinclair watched her husband's display.
'Take your time,' she told the colonel.

PANG!

'Don't rush on my account. I told him not to let anything happen to that tray.'

Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart sighed. This holiday really wasn't going to plan at all.

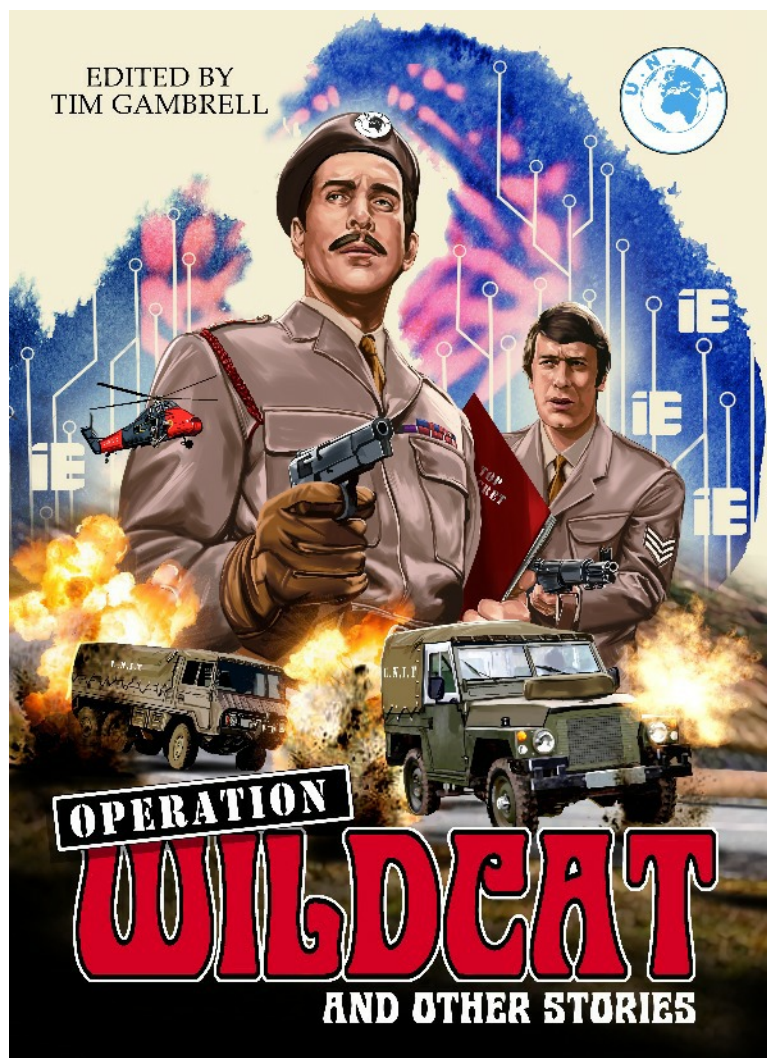
PANG!

Sinclair smacked the tray across his head again.

COMING SOON



COMING SOON



COMING SOON



COMING SOON

