

A BODY WITHOUT A HEART

By John Edwards

“The pornographers are the new blasphemers, and it should be the rationalists and humanists driving them out of the Temple, far more than the Christian moralists, since it is now their religion which is being put at risk.”

The Longford Report (1972)

"I am a sick man . . . I am a wicked man.
An unattractive man, I think my liver hurts."

'Notes from The Underground' (1864)

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

PROLOGUE

That afternoon he'd phoned at least a dozen Cash Converters trying to find what he was looking for. He finally found a place in Camberwell just off Denmark Hill, a shop that specialised in second-hand audio and video equipment.

"It's definitely Hi-8?" he asked the man at the other end of the line.

"Yeah," replied an elderly voice "It's been knocking around for ages. Can't get rid of the bloody thing. You sure it's Hi-8 you wanted? Not 8mm or Super 8?"

"No. Hi-8. That's the one."

By the time he got back to the flat it was already dark. He brought it in from the car and hooked it up to an old portable TV through a bunch of frayed wires then he drew the curtains and turned off the lights as if they were not at home.

The mechanism on the dusty video camera sprang into life as he pressed eject and carefully loaded the tape and then, as a flickering image appeared on the screen, they both sat huddled around the television in the darkness.

"What's that big line at the bottom, babe?"

"It's a bit of the wardrobe, I think. I don't know. It was all set up in a rush."

"I can't see anyone. I just see a bed."

"Yeah just wait. Look, now..."

"Oh yeah. I see. Shit! That's him, isn't it?"

"I told you."

"Yeah, I mean it's *really* him. Definitely. Who's the girl on the left with the tattoo?"

"That's Charmaine."

"You can tell he fancies her. Can't keep his hands off her."

"Switch it off now. That's enough."

"What? No, I want to see what happens."

"I told you what happens and I don't want to see it. I never want to see it again."

“Linda!”

“No. Just turn it off. It gives me the creeps.”

He leaned over and pressed stop on the camera. The television screen buzzed with static until he felt for the remote and switched it off. They both sat in the silence for a couple of minutes until he could hear her heavy breath.

“What you thinking?” she said.

He paused for a moment trying to comprehend the enormity of it.

“I'm thinking someone would fucking kill to get hold of that.”

CHAPTER 1: 'GLAMOUR GIRLS'

If there was one particular quality Jack Clarke prided himself on as a journalist, it was a way with words but that afternoon, as he sat in the basement of the Missionaries of Charity building in a quiet street in Southwark, it was formulating the right words that was the problem.

Slowly he rose from his seat, pausing only to glance at the group of faces around him. He still recognised some of them although the names had long been forgotten. It had been over a year since he'd last attended but the room still looked the same, the walls still the same shade of drab grey. Even the ritual itself felt achingly familiar, a rite as old as the building in which it was practised.

“My name is Jack,” he mumbled, stiffening his spine as his hand clawed at the tuft of his goatee, “And I'm an alcoholic.”

Somehow he'd hoped the words might bring a sense of relief, an absolution from that morning's anxiety, but instead they seemed to ring hollow in the half-empty space.

“Welcome, Jack,” said Martin, the group's chair, “It's good to see you again.”

Jack nodded but as he took his seat the cheeriness of the response was already needling him. When he'd woken that morning he wanted to believe that this time he'd see it through. *Heed the call to abstinence. Make the necessary positive adjustments to his own mental attitude.* The same promises he'd made to himself this time last year but now he was here he struggled to see anything positive about this peculiar homecoming. As the next member of the circle stood up to introduce themselves, he began to dread the self-indulgence of it all, part of him already wondering if his decision to attend had been an impulsive mistake. After all, he couldn't imagine Charlie, his boss, being sympathetic to him secretly attending meetings during work time. But then he knew he needed to do something.

Recently, he'd felt himself slipping again, last night's bottle of Jack Daniels still secreting itself from his sweat glands like a sour cologne. He needed to get a grip. He

needed to respond to that inner voice telling him that he had a problem, he reminded himself, as in his pocket he could feel his mobile phone vibrating with an incoming call.

“David is doing his share today,” Martin continued “I’m really glad to say that David’s only a couple of days away from a year’s sobriety so let’s all show our support.”

There was a slow hand clap as an overweight man in his late forties dressed in jogging bottoms and a track-suit top stood up to speak. His nose looked swollen and misshapen, his arms and stubbled face streaked with what remained of an ugly rash.

“They say booze is cheap,” stuttered the fat man, his eyes peering down at a pair of battered tennis shoes, “But, well, it’s cost me a lot. It’s cost me jobs, a marriage and my kids who don’t want to see me no more. I’ve been drinking every day for as long as I can remember. I’ve been starting to change that but one thing I’ve learned on the way is I can’t beat this thing on my own so today I wanted to talk about step three... about our need to accept a power greater than ourselves... about our need to trust in God.”

Jack couldn’t help but let out a snort. With a throbbing migraine the last thing he needed was a theology lecture from a recovering alcoholic. And, besides, how would those who still clung to the belief that man was made in God’s image even begin to explain the collection of fuck-ups who sat around him.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” said Martin, “If you have something to add then perhaps you can share it with all of us after?”

Jack nodded but a resentment was slowly coming to the boil within as he wiped the sticky sweat from his palms against the pockets of his trousers. The meeting had only just started and already he hated being here, the obsequiousness of these self-help groups with their pathetic displays of politeness and the passive-aggression to those who dared to challenge their principles.

“The thing is,” continued the man, “The other day I joined a bible group. I’ve accepted Jesus into my life and I’ve put my recovery in his hands because –“

Jack felt sudden stab of nausea in his belly. His throat was feverishly dry as if the room was being slowly starved of oxygen. Without thinking he let out a groan only to look up again and find both Martin and the man both glaring at him.

The riptide of nausea was swelling again within him, the remnants of his hangover still working its way through him like venom. He tried to focus on the floor, gathering his thoughts as a trickle of sweat ran down his back, and when he looked up again the gaze of the room had come to rest on him.

“Look, can't we just leave out all the Jesus stuff?” said Jack, leaning back in his chair, “I mean... I'm not against... well, all I'm trying to say is that what we *need* is just a way to stop drinking. That's why we're in AA, isn't it? ”

Some of the other members of the meeting grumbled under their breath whilst a few dissenting heads nodded in approval. Meanwhile, Martin was now barely masking his contempt for Jack's presence.

“With respect, Jack, I'd rather you didn't interrupt during David's share.”

Jack could see he'd riled him. It hadn't even been intentional but even so he felt a certain illicit thrill about puncturing Martin's priggishness.

“Look, I'm sorry too,” replied Jack, now reaching for the strap of his messenger bag, “If you lot want to sit around talking about Jesus then good luck to you. It's just maybe some of us got stuff to be getting on with.”

He got up from his seat again and, with his shoes squeaking across the laminate floor, made his way towards the exit as the heads of the group swivelled round to stare at him. He could still hear the whispers by the time he reached the door. He felt guilty now at his own childishness.

As he opened the door he turned around one final time to see their faces still staring at him. He wanted to say something, some words of mitigation, but in the moment he couldn't quite bring himself to marshal the words. In the end he just shook his head then walked out as the doors swung shut after him.

Outside on the street the November rain was still beating down. Crouching in

the entrance to the building, he checked his phone. There was a text message from Laura - "Come str8 home frm wrk tonight" - and a missed call from the news desk. He'd told his colleagues he was just popping out for a couple of hours to chase a story on a Page Three girl who had been found dead in her flat that morning. He'd tracked down a photographer, an old guy called Kenny who'd worked with her and who still ran a studio somewhere around Old Kent Road. After a quick phone call he'd scribbled down an address and managed to convince his news editor, Charlie, that it was a lead worth checking out. It was bullshit really but it got him out of the office at least and just enough time for his hangover to pass.

By the time he reached Old Kent Road, it was late afternoon. Grey pavements huddled under a fading sky, the traffic lights reflecting off wet tarmac. He walked briskly along the road trying to stay out of the rain, passing neon signs advertising All-You-Can-Eat Chinese buffets and Cut-Price Liquor as soaked pedestrians ran the last of the day's errands. The rain fell harder and he hurried on resisting the urge to duck into an off-licence to pick up something to soothe the pain.

Twenty-two turned out to be an anonymous-looking doorway next to a vacant café. No sign, just a plain white door from which the paint was gradually peeling, sprinkled with droppings from a pigeon's nest in the eave above. But it was the right door. He recognised the name "L.A. Photographics" on a fading sticker above an intercom. The door was slightly ajar and splintered around the keyhole as if it had been recently forced open.

He pushed it open a couple of inches and shouted through the crack.

"Kenny, it's Jack. We spoke an hour ago on the phone."

"Come up," he heard a voice reply, "Mind yourself on the way up with your wet shoes. You can break your fucking neck on them stairs. Studio is the first door you come to. The office is the next one on your right."

He stepped into a hallway of cheap linoleum flooring and wood-chip wallpaper that looked sepia in the dim light of a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling above. The

door shuddered behind him as he stared up at the steep wooden staircase. Then, as he made his way up, he heard a faint voice from down the passage beyond the landing, the sound of a man grumbling to himself in a room beyond.

“She could have been a superstar. I know they all say that but I mean it. Something about the eyes, the poise, you see. You can't capture that if it ain't already there and, believe me, I've tried enough times. You're after a picture then, I suppose.”

Jack nodded.

“Yeah if you got one.”

He watched as the grey-haired man pulled open the drawer of a filing cabinet and rummaged through its contents.

“Oh, I got some alright. Gonna cost you though. Cash too if you don't mind.”

He watched as Kenny carefully eased a manilla document wallet out of the filing cabinet and then, with the man's back turned to him for a moment, Jack glanced around the office. The walls were covered in photographs. Coloured and monochrome prints of woman in various stages of undress. A collage of multicoloured breasts and nipples, crotches and fleshy thighs, fastened to the walls with Sellotape, each one labelled with a post-it note with a name and a mobile phone number in biro.

He couldn't help but stare at them. The rows and rows of toothpaste-white smiles. Middle-aged women with peroxide blonde perms grinning through thick strawberry lipstick. Fresh-faced girls barely out of the teens' with uncomfortable smirks clutching small breasts. A black girl with a huge afro and a fierce stare. A mawkish selection of mugshots, their lips and mouths trying to articulate something seemingly beyond the limits of their repertoire.

“Take a look at these,” said the man, pushing his horn-rimmed glasses on to the bridge of nose, “I dare say you'll find what you're looking for in here.”

Jack watched as Kenny took the wallet over to a beech table nearer to the window on which a tall, aluminium desk lamp cast a harsh, white light. A perspex

ashtray held a half-finished cigarette, its smoke throwing swirling patterns against the darkened window, as the man's nicotine-stained fingers arranged the selected photographs on the desk.

Jack recognised her immediately. He picked up one of the colour prints of her when he guessed she was in her late teens. Her body was splayed over burgundy silk sheets on an enormous bed. The sheets were half rolled back exposing the upper reaches of her thighs and the fleshy cheeks of her buttocks but the pose had been carefully orchestrated to lead the observer's eye upwards, beyond the swell of her bosom, to her face which radiated a youthful innocence. He stared more closely at the image, craning his neck towards the desk lamp.

Linda Lavonne. The name had meant nothing to him earlier that morning when a contact at the East London Advertiser had given him the tip off. Now he calculated that those breasts had first graced the inner pages of the tabloids before he'd even been born. She had a childish prettiness. He could see it in the freckled cheeks, the small nose and the pale eyes that stared longingly into the lens, framed on either side by long locks of curly blonde hair. She reminded him of his older cousin, Denise, who'd been killed three days before her seventeenth birthday when her boyfriend had flipped his car into a ditch driving them both home drunk from a party. At thirteen, it had been the first funeral he'd ever attended; his first taste of human tragedy.

“Quite a looker, wasn't she?” said Jack, placing the photograph back on the table.

“Like I said, she could've made it to Hollywood that girl. The lens loved Linda. Everyone did. What paper did you say you're from again?”

“The Evening Post,” replied Jack as he studied the other photographs on the table.

“Oh right... the Post. I thought you said you were from one of the nationals. Just started there, have you?”

“No, I used to shift for one of the nationals. Actually, I prefer it at The Post. I'm guessing you're more used dealing with tabloids?”

The man shrugged and lit another cigarette.

“I'm a photographer. You go where the work is. You can't afford to be picky in this game. Not these days anyway.”

“Right. You been in the business a while then?”

“Way back. Right back to the sixties .Kodak Brownie – that was the first camera I had. My old man gave it to me for my tenth birthday. After that, well it becomes an addiction... taking pictures, I mean.”

“I meant more...”

“More what?”

“Well, you know.... the porno stuff.”

The man said nothing but scowled as he took a long, silent drag on his cigarette.

“As I said, I'm a photographer,” he replied with a flicker of resentment, “Glamour photography. Tits-and-arse, that's what I do. See you're looking at the walls here and I know what you're thinking. I knew it when you first walked in here. You're thinking what's this dirty old feller doing with all these—”

“No, I was just —”

“Let me finish! What I'm saying to you is that I started out like you once. I had ambitions once believe or not. I reckon I could have been a David Bailey or a Snowdon. I mean it's not like I didn't have the talent. Do you honestly think this is where I thought I'd end up? In a shitty little office off the Old Kent Road? But things don't always pan out the way you want. You do what you need to pay the rent and then one day you wake up to discover there ain't any signposts back.”

Jack looked at the pictures on the walls again. Glamour seemed an incongruous description for this particular line of work. To him it was nothing more than vacuous titillation: sex reduced to the banality of the supermarket shelf, the mobile numbers displayed like human bar-codes.

“What happened to your door by the way?” he asked, reaching inside his bag for his notebook

“A break-in... the other night. Some fucking kids probably. It's all Somalis 'round here these days. Didn't take nothing. Just done it for the buzz probably. They're a right fucking nuisance. They all think they're black or something.”

“They are black, aren't they?”

“You know what I mean,” said Kenny leaning over to tap a long snake of ash into the ashtray.

“You knew her well then?”

“Who? Linda?”

“Yeah.”

“You could say that. I did a lot of her early work. The Page Threes. The Mayfairs. The work she did in the early eighties. We did some lovely shots together and she was a good girl to work with. Well, before she got all messed up. Most of the ones I'm showing you here are from around those early days but then the business always wants fresh faces. You either move up or you move out.”

“Move up?”

“More action-oriented, shall we say?” said Kenny with a sly chuckle, “And, well, I don't do that. Not hardcore. It's not my thing, you see. I do mainly portfolio work now. That's what most of this stuff on the walls is. They come here to get some cheap pictures done that they can take to the television channels - all these digital adult channels that have sprung up – and that's where they all want to be working now. On the telly, that's where the good money is so there's not so much call for what I do nowadays. Not photography. I mean why would you buy a magazine when you can see all that on the Internet for nothing?”

Jack scribbled some shorthand in his notebook.

“So when did you hear about Linda?”

“I got a call this morning,” Kenny replied, pausing to let out a phlegmy cough, “Someone I know up in Soho. Called about ten minutes before you did.”

“So do you have any idea why she would have committed suicide?”

“Suicide?”

“Well, that's the line I believe the police are working on.”

“Are they now? Well, well... the good old coppers are on the case, are they?”

“What? You don't think it was suicide? The police said she'd been drinking. Vodka and valium, I heard.”

“Look, Linda got involved in some fairly murky business. She was a lovely girl but, well, not the best judge of character let's just say. She had some tough times in the last few years what with the booze and the drugs but when I last saw her, she seemed to have pulled herself together. She'd stopped drinking, I knew that, and she had a steady boyfriend too she told me. They were moving to Spain to open a café. That was the plan. Said she had some money coming in from somewhere.”

“And you believed her?”

The man seemed to recoil, one eye-brow raised in an expression of outrage almost reminiscent of a Soho drag act.

“Look, Linda never had no reason to lie to me. Beyond the work I never tried to get anything out of her. Not like a lot of the other blokes she had around her. I mean, I don't try it on with the girls. Ask anyone in the business and, well, I'm not that way inclined if you must know.”

Jack nodded but he remained unconvinced. Facts were his stock in trade not the half-baked conspiracy theories of fantasists. But there was a nice angle there: a modern morality tale. The chronicle of one starlet's fall from grace in a world in which flesh had become a commodity.

“Could I ask you one more –”

“No. Not really,” Kenny snapped, “I've got a locksmith coming to fix the door any minute and I've got some stuff to finish off so you'll have to get going.”

Jack took made a couple more jottings in his notebook before picking up the photo again.

“You can take it,” said Kenny, appearing to anticipate his question, “It's a good one that. Shall we call it a hundred?”

“Sorry. I can only stretch to fifty. Company policy.”

“Fifty-quid? Christ! I used to charge more than that just for developing. Things that bad at the Post then, are they?”

“It's all about cost-cutting these days.”

“Tell me about it! Well leave the money there and don't even think about asking me for a fucking receipt.”

Jack took out some notes from his wallet and placed the money on the desk pausing as he did so to take another look at the photograph. The pale blue eyes continued to stare out at him. The fixed smile beaming out from the behind strands of golden hair.

Linda Lavonne, he thought to himself. This was her elegy.

CHAPTER 2: 'DEATH OF A SALESMAN'

At just after ten'o'clock in the evening Donnell Johnson was almost at the end of his long bike ride. Dressed in dark jeans and a black Nike puffa with a matching beanie hat, the tall, skinny black seventeen-year-old could easily have passed for a fleeting silhouette as he steered his mountain bike silently through the quiet back streets of East London in the direction of Canning Town.

As he hopped the front wheel off the pavement and turned the corner of Manor Road, he stopped pedalling for a moment to admire the view of Canary Wharf with its skyscrapers glimmering in the moonlight. Through the wisps of silvery cloud in the December night he could still make out the bright, blinking beacon on top of the tallest of the towers. He felt a strange sense of wonder every time he saw it. Although he'd grown up only a few miles away on Hackney's Kingshold Estate the skyline of London's new financial district felt like an alien colony, a mysterious futuristic city which had beamed itself down from some far flung region of space to stage a hostile takeover of the planet. And as he stared up at the towers Donnell couldn't help but wonder what sort of work went on behind those thousands of windows, each of them shimmering in the night sky like polished diamonds.

Cycling the last half-mile he eventually came to the entrance of the Beckton Arms pub where he pulled up and waited as a couple of elderly patrons waddled out of the pub's doorway and then further on towards the main arterial road. As he watched the figures disappear he could make out the small clouds of steam that rose up from their mouths into the night as they chatted and then, just as he was about to set off again, he felt his phone vibrate through the lining of his pocket.

He took it out and glanced at the glowing screen which flashed the name of the incoming caller.

“Can't talk right now, babe,” he whispered, “I'm on my grind innit. If you wanna show me the bag then we'll go West End tomorrow but now I gotta do my thing, you get me?”

He hung up the phone and sniffed at the cold air that signalled the onset of winter. He could feel himself shivering, his heartbeat still racing from the long cycle ride as he checked his watch again. Dead on half-ten as per his instructions. As he wheeled the bike into the car park he noticed the red BMW parked in the shadow of an overhanging tree. The headlights were turned off but the engine of the car was still humming and from inside Donnell could just make out voice wailing a lament from the car's stereo accompanied by a heavy, thumping beat:

*Ain't no love in the heart of the city,
Ain't no love in the heart of town.
Ain't no love, sure 'nuff is a pity,
Ain't no love 'cos you ain't around.*

Propping his bike up against the wall of the pub, he glanced around before calmly approaching the car. Its windows were misted up but as he got closer he could just about see the shape of a figure sitting behind the steering wheel. Whoever it was was hardly paying any attention but now he suddenly turned in his seat as Donnell tapped lightly on the window.

“Yeah... what's up, bruv?” said the man as the window slid down.

Like Donnell, the man was black and spoke with a London accent. He was well-built, probably in his mid-thirties and dressed in a dark bomber jacket with a fur-lined hood. At a glance he looked like the kind of bloke whose job it was to stand outside the doors of bars and nightclubs with the precise purpose of preventing people like Donnell from entering but in the cold winter night Donnell noticed the man's forehead and temples were glistening with tiny beads of sweat.

“You Lewis Campbell?”

“Why? Who wants to know?”

“I'm asking, man. Are *you* Lewis Campbell? ”

“Yeah. You Rafiq's boy? Where the fuck is Rafiq then?” said the man, looking

tense.

“Nah, blud,” replied Donnell as he coolly reached under his jacket, “I don't know no Rafiq.”

And then just as the words left Donnell's mouth it appeared: a long protruding piece of black steel, the muzzle of a handgun hand pointing straight at the driver's face. Donnell watched as driver's hand scrambled for the window button, his lips trying to mouth something that seemed to get caught in his throat, but gripped with a morbid panic he could do nothing but watch as Donnell's finger slowly squeezed the trigger.

A single shot rang out shattering the silence followed only a dull thud as the man's body slumped against the steering wheel of the vehicle.

He glanced impassively at the windscreen of the BWM which was now sprayed thick with blood and small chunks of red-grey matter and then, taking a moment to admire his own handiwork, stared at the remains of the man's head which leaned lifeless against the windscreen. The bullet – a single clean shot at point-blank range, just as he'd been instructed – had ripped the upper part of the man's skull clean off leaving a fleshy cavity about twice the size of a tennis-ball where the remains of the man's brain still glistened in the dim light. It reminded him of a scene from Hitman, one of his favourite XBox games. Then, carefully slipping the handgun under his jacket and into the crotch of his jeans, he returned to his bike and pedalled off back into the night.

By the time Jack arrived for the early morning meeting of the news desk Charlie Drayton, the news editor of the Evening Post, had already picked up the story of a suspected gangland shooting in Canning Town on the BBC London radio station.

The function of the morning meetings was supposedly to decide the news agenda for that evening's edition of the Post but Jack had soon realised after joining the Post that Drayton also viewed them as opportunities to personally humiliate his

staff of reporters. For a news editor, he was relatively young - only just into his early forties - and like Jack he'd also served his apprenticeship on the Sunday Exclusive where he'd risen to news editor before eventually being ousted in a management coup. Physically he was unassuming - short and slim - and with a boyish complexion that seemed to mask the brutality that lay just under the surface.

As the news team gathered around the long, oval table of the conference room, Drayton sat its far end, directing his team of reporters like an overbearing, feudal lord.

“Find out who's covering the case, Jack. Don't bother with those fucking muppets down at the press office, they'll just give you the run around. I mean, it doesn't take fucking Columbo to work out he was probably some drug dealer. And take one of the snappers down with you. We'll need a picture.”

Jack decided to take Kevin, one of the Post's veteran news photographers who had grown up in Canning Town. After the meeting he found him in the kitchen area making himself a mug of tea.

“The Beckton Arms?” said Kevin as he spooned a wet teabag into the bin, “Oh yeah I know it. Practically my local. I'd say it's about ten minutes from here by cab.”

“Charlie wants us to get down there right away.”

“Jesus,” moaned Kevin “I've only just made a cup of tea.”

Outside the entrance to their building, Kevin waited to flag down a black cab while Jack rushed into the local newsagent to pick up a copy of that day's Guardian. On page seven he found the item that someone in the newsroom had mentioned, a short, one column article entitled “Porn Star Found Dead” written by an ex-reporter from the Post:

“Police were called to a flat in Poplar, East London late on Friday night where they discovered the body of a 43-year-old woman. Police later confirmed the identity of the deceased as Linda Lavonne, a one-time glamour model who will be remembered by many as the face of Britain's once lucrative adult magazine market. Born in Stepney in 1967, Lavonne left school at fifteen to pursue a career on the London stage but ran into difficulties

after her agent dropped her after just six months. Her break into modelling occurred when a photographer in a cocktail bar offered to take topless pictures of her for the burgeoning Page Three market. Almost overnight her name became synonymous with Soho's porn industry and she became a regular face on London's social scene dating a string of nightclub owners and boxers. Within a decade, however, Lavonne had left the world of soft-core porn and moved into adult videos appearing in a series of hardcore films. By the mid-nineties she was reported to be struggling to find work and was alleged to have descended into a spiral of drink and drugs. She will be most famously remembered for appearing in a live television debate on Channel 4 where she clashed with outspoken critic and feminist Germaine Greer remarking: 'It's just jealousy. Don't you think they'd kill to have a body like mine?' A police source who refused to be named said: 'A quantity of tranquilizers were found at the scene. We are working on the assumption that it's suicide.'"

As the black cab crawled its way amongst the traffic towards Canning Town, Jack found himself thinking again of Kenny's office and the gallery of false smiles covering its dingy walls. He'd been thinking about it ever since his visit that day, wondering if any of those faces was another Linda: a morsel thrown to a beast with an insatiable appetite for fresh flesh. And that's what Kenny was doing, he told himself. Kenny was feeding the beast.

Outside The Beckton Arms a small knot of people stood huddled around the entrance. As Jack approached he noticed the area had already been sealed off with blue-and-white police tape. Beyond he could make out a seventies red-brick pub with the paint peeling from its sign. It looked the kind of place where only locals from the neighbouring council estates drank; too ugly for any aspiring entrepreneur to consider converting into a fashionable gastropub. Two women police constables stood just the other side of the tape and, to the side of them, a gravelled car park where a white tent had been erected from which figures in masks and white forensic suits emerged, attending to the crime scene like curators of some macabre museum.

"Kev, see if you can get a couple of shots of the forensics blokes coming out of the tent."

As his colleague snapped away, Jack noticed a dark Ford Orion pull up just beyond the entrance to the car park and two middle-aged men in cheap-looking, charcoal suits emerge. He pushed his way through the crowd to the far side of the entrance as the two men approached the line and flashed their ID cards to the WPC. Another middle-aged man dressed in a white forensic suit emerged from the tent holding a mobile phone. He was a short, stoutish man with a receding hairline and a business-like demeanour that indicated he was no stranger to such crime scenes. Jack pressed up against the tape and as he did so the WPC glared at him.

“I'm sorry, sir. You'll have to stand back from there I'm afraid.”

“I'm a reporter with the Evening Post,” said Jack flashing the WPC his press pass, “Can I ask who's in charge of this investigation?”

The woman examined his laminated identification with suspicion.

“Look, I'm only asking who I should follow up with if I want to confirm details.”

The woman turned to the trio of plain-clothed officers on her right who were still engaged in a discussion before looking back at Jack with a nervousness that led him to infer she was a recent recruit to the beat.

“Detective Inspector Andrews of Limehouse CID has been handling the crime scene but it's in the hands of Operation Trident now. If you have any questions then I suggest you speak to the Press Office.”

“So the victim's black then, is he?”

“As I said, sir, if you have any questions you should really refer them to the Press Office. I can give you—”

“But Trident investigates gun crime in the black community, right?”

The WPC hesitated.

“So I'm presuming the victim is black?”

She looked increasingly irritated at the line of questioning and glanced once again towards the three men before turning back to face Jack. She was saying something but he was ignoring her now and instead straining to hear what was being

said between the three men standing a few feet away.

He could just about hear elder of the two men who had just arrived.

“You got an ID on him yet?”

“Sir, I won't tell you again.”

She took a step towards Jack but he was still trying to listen and read the man's lips. He thought he could just about make out what the other man with the mobile phone was saying: “Campbell.”

“Sir, if you don't stand back.”

But Jack had already seized his opportunity.

“Excuse me! Evening Post,” he shouted in the direction of the huddle.

“Right, that's it,” said the WPC.

“It's okay,” replied the older man as made his way towards the police cordon, “I'll deal with this.”

Jack pretended not to notice the woman constable glaring at him as the older detective approached.

“DCI Raymond Beech,” said the man, “The Post, you say?”

Jack offered his press pass to the detective who gave it a cursory glance.

“You got an ID on the victim yet?”

“Yeah but at this stage we're not releasing a name. Not until the relatives have been informed. Come on, you know how this works.”

“But it's a Trident case?”

“Yeah.”

“So the victim's black then?”

“Correct.”

“What about age?”

“Not confirmed and I'm not willing to speculate at this stage but we're not talking about teenagers.”

“Is he a local?”

“We don't know yet. I'm guessing he probably is but, as I said, we're not

prepared to say any more at this stage.”

“So he's not known to the police?”

The man sighed.

“Look, you've got all you're going to get so don't push your luck, yeah?”

The detective shrugged and started to walk away.

“But presumably it's drug-related?” Jack continued “I mean these type of things usually are, right?”

“Christ,” replied the man, turning around again, “You blokes don't give up, do you? Well, let's just say we're not treating it as a domestic.”

“But not gang-related? I mean you seemed to be suggesting he's a bit old for that.”

“I'm not suggesting anything, sir, and you before start up again I've said all I'm going to say,” said the detective before taking a step towards the tape again and reaching into his pocket, “Here's my card. If you want to have a chat in a couple of days then call me.”

Jack watched as the older man walked towards the white tent and then paused to speak to one of the forensics team. It was pointless now trying to get any more information out of the detectives. He had a name though. He took out his notebook, turned to a blank page and scribbled a few notes: “Campbell. Black male. Twenties? Thirties?”

“You get everything?” Jack said as Kevin approached.

“Yeah, got a couple of good wide shots and a close-up on the tent. What about you? Got everything you need?”

“Yeah. They're not giving much away at this stage. Just saying it's a shooting. Some gangland thing probably.”

“Second one here then. This place will be getting itself a reputation,” remarked Kevin.

“Really?”

“Yeah, Tommy Hole and Joey The Crow got done here. Two old East End

faces from way back. A good ten years ago it must have been.”

“What happened?”

“Two masked-up blokes came in one Sunday when they were watching the football. Joey got two shots in the head at point-blank range. Professional job it was.”

Jack frowned at Kevin.

“What? You mean you were *there* at the time?”

“No, I wasn't but my old man was. Just before Christmas it was. He'd only just finished helping my Mum put all the decorations up and nipped out with one of his drinking pals. I'll tell you, I don't think he slept a wink for the rest of December – it put the proper wind up him seeing all that.”

“And what about the gunmen?”

“They walked out cool as anything apparently. Down that underpass that goes into the estate opposite. Police never caught 'em anyway.”

“You make it sound like that world of East End gangsters still exists,” said Jack as he glanced back at the huddle of detectives still surveying the crime scene, “I thought those days were long gone.”

“Yeah, well,” said Kevin, “The scenery 'round here might look a little different but some things never change. Anyway, looks like we're done here. You fancy a quick one before we get back to the office? There's another boozier I know just round the corner.”

Jack hesitated for a moment, his mind conjuring up the image of some corner of a warm pub, the two of them nursing a couple of pints as the rest of the world toiled. It would only be the one, a reassuring voice in his head kept telling him, just a quick sharpener before lunch. And then the ugliness of the previous morning intruded: the memory of waking up on the couch with his head pounding and Laura screaming something at him as she dangled an empty bourbon bottle before him like a barrister presenting an item of evidence to a jury. He'd told her it was a one-off, a bump in the road. There would be no return to how things had been a year ago, he'd promised her, and at the time he meant it.

“Well?”

“Nah, not today, Kev,” he said walking away, “Let's just say I've got a lot on my plate right now.”

CHAPTER 3: 'THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT'

As usual, Rhys was late. He'd said half eight at the Alphabet Bar on Beak Street and now it was nearly nine. For Jack, it felt like a cruel test of will power as he sat alone at a corner table sipping a glass of mineral water. He'd suggested coffee but the Alphabet, he'd learned, was Rhys' latest favourite hangout and he was in no mood to argue. Around him he could almost smell the sweet alcoholic vapour as he watched a group of young clubbers at a neighbouring table downing tequila shots to celebrate the weekend's arrival.

Fridays in Soho were raucous. The maze of narrow streets that had once been associated with seedy peep-shows and small-time crooks, were now a magnet for a crowd of London's new arrivals energised by their own optimism. Watching them as they congregated around the bar, Jack felt a ripple of nostalgia. He remembered once feeling the same – that London would somehow be the making of him. It didn't even feel so long ago. But as he watched a couple of sharp-suited men entering the bar he had a sinking sense that in the narrative of this great city he'd been cast in only a minor role. Lately, he'd even found himself contemplating moving out. Retreating to Bristol or Birmingham perhaps. A smaller pond with fewer predators.

Rhys, on the other hand, was a rising star. The two of them had met when they'd both started working shifts on the tabloids and, whilst the older hands in the tabloid world seemed to revel in their affected displays of machismo, he'd found the Welshman's shy demeanour endearing. He could still remember Malcolm, the associate editor of the Exclusive, pointing from across the newsroom, viciously parodying Rhys' valleys' accent as he bellowed, “Grab your shovel, boyo, and get down the shit pit. Go and dig me up some fucking dirt!”

To begin with, Rhys seemed miscast, a misfit even, but when he'd been offered a permanent position as a reporter Jack had witnessed the change. There was the awkward moment between them when he noticed how Rhys had switched to drinking lager and begun to appropriate the London vernacular, referring to the 'birds' on the

features desk. When he'd picked him up on it one time when they'd been out drinking together, Rhys had dismissed it but when the Exclusive decided to cut Jack loose it was Rhys' words that haunted him: "You've got to learn to play the game, Jack."

Now he saw his old colleague coming through the front door of the bar, pushing his way through a group of girls with his mobile phone still clasped to his ear. He looked wide-eyed, jaw-clenched and was dressed in a shiny suit the colour of sharkskin with a tight white V-necked t-shirt that showed the makings of an ugly paunch. The other customers bristled as he pushed his way through the crowd.

"Sorry, I'm late. All go-go-go at the moment, mate," said Rhys as he finally sat down at the table.

"No worries. So what's with the suit?"

"What? You don't like it?" said Rhys opening his jacket to show the label stitched to the inside pocket, "Hugo Boss."

"It's alright but since when did you start blowing cash on designer labels?"

"You mean I didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

He watched as Rhys fished into the inside pocket of his jacket and handed him a business card.

Rhys Evans. Showbusiness correspondent.

"I'm in showbiz, mate! Got the promotion last month. I thought I told you."

Jack shook his head.

"Oh well, let's have a drink to celebrate. What you having?"

"Just get me a lime and soda."

As his friend heaved his way to the bar, Jack stared at the business card again. He was aware of a sickly sensation in the pit of his stomach. A pang of professional jealousy. Still, Rhys deserved it, he kept reminding himself.

"So how's things at the Post?" said Rhys as he returned to the table clutching two glasses.

"Oh, you know. Same old same old. I've got a good contact inside City Hall

who's put me on to a couple of stories but I'm not rummaging through his dustbin just yet.”

“Hey, don't knock it, mate.”

Jack took a sip of his drink and then almost choked as he swallowed.

“Wait... is there vodka in this?”

“Yeah. I thought you asked for a vodka lime soda.”

“No. Just a lime soda,” he replied pushing the glass away.

“Oh well, just drink it. It's Friday for fuck's sake! Anyway, I got something that'll cheer you up.”

He watched as Rhys dipped into his trouser pocket for his phone.

“You recognise this little feller?”

Jack squinted at the picture on Rhys' iPhone. A familiar-looking teenage boy sitting on a white leather sofa. Next to him sat a woman who Jack recognised as one of the junior reporters from Rhys' paper. The two of them seemed to be performing a toast with two champagne flutes.

“Isn't that that Joey kid from the TV show... Popstarz?”

“Yeah. So me and Adele found him in this bar round the corner last week. Let's just say I had a little tip-off about his particular engagements that night. So, we sidle up to him and I introduce myself and we get chatting like –”

“Making friends with the stars already, eh?”

”Yeah. You could say that. I mean he's what eighteen and the little shit thinks he's going to be the next Justin Timberlake so we're playing along with it. *The rumour is you're the hot favourite to win Popstarz*, I'm telling him. *How you coping with all the fame, mate?* We're pumping up his ego like a beachball and pouring him more champagne to loosen him up a bit. And then I go to the toilet and while I'm away Adele starts telling him what a good-looking bloke he is. Touching his knee, telling him how he'll have all the girls chasing him when he's playing Wembley.”

“Well, that's unlike you two to be so generous.”

“Funny you should say that because I can be *very* generous when I need to be.

Like when when Adele goes to the bar a bit later to get another round and I say to my little friend here, 'Hey, Joey you fancy a line?'"

"Oh no. You didn't give –"

"Yeah. You should have seen it. At first he looks all confused but then I give him this little wink like now we're best mates. So we go back downstairs to the toilet. And standing outside is this big Nigerian feller. You know how they put these attendants in there to check there's no funny business but I've slipped the bloke a score to disappear for a couple of minutes. So me and Joey go in. *'I think Adele really fancies you'* I say as I'm chopping a couple of lines by the sink. Joey is staring at it then looking up at me... all hair-gel and hormones. He's obviously never had a sniff before. So I do mine quickly and then pass him the note and just as he's leaning over to Hoover it up I take out the phone. 'Give us a wave, Joey!' I say as I snap a nice little picture. "

Rhys took the phone and then flicked to the next picture before handing it back. Jack glanced at the image: a young man holding a rolled note to his nostril with look of childish delight on his face.

"Oh, you bastard!"

Rhys laughed.

"Hey, like I always say, there's no business like showbusiness. Anyway, it takes about five seconds for the little prick to realise what he's done. *'Look sorry to be a party pooper, Joey'*, I say, *'But I've got to get back to the office. I've got a story to write.'* And that's when it dawns on him because suddenly his face looks like all the blood has just been sucked out of him."

"So how come –"

"No, well, when I get back at to the office and show Malcolm he nearly wets himself. He's slapping me on the back and telling me this is front page tomorrow – my first big showbiz exclusive, he reckons."

"What? And they didn't run it?"

"No. Ruth put the call in straight away," continued Rhys taking a gulp of lager

“Still, we got a good bit of leverage on the show. Offered us an exclusive on the winner's story and all that.”

Jack paused for a moment, still eyeing his drink on the table. By any standards, it was a good result. He longed for some small scandal he could take to the Post: a whisper about sexual harassment within the mayor's office or an exaggerated expenses claim overlooked by City Hall. It didn't have to be Watergate, just enough to earn him a decent byline and get Charlie off his back.

“Well, maybe it's lucky they didn't run it, eh? Or that would have been that kid's big break down the toilet.”

“Big break? What are you talking about? The kids who win these TV shows get a Christmas number one and then they're dropped by their record label and in the bargain bin by January. They're all disposable. That's the whole fucking point, mate.”

Jack shrugged. He knew Rhys was right. There was just something he found a little distasteful about Rhys' brazenness.

“Even so.”

“Come on, Jack. The whole fucking celebrity thing is just an escalator... you're either on the way up or you're on the way down. And what's the point of building someone up if it's not to enjoy turning 'em over when you get the chance? That's what our readers love and that's why the Exclusive's not going down the tubes like everyone else.”

“Yeah but, come off it... those little tip-offs of yours.”

He regretted the pettiness of the remark almost as soon he'd said it.

“What do you mean?”

“Don't tell me you're a stranger to the dark arts.”

Rhys sniffed then wiped his nostrils with the back of his hand.

“Look, you don't think I personally doing any of that stuff?”

“Maybe but don't tell me you don't know how.”

“Mate, don't you think we've got people on the payroll for that kind of thing? Private investigators. We've even got a few proper villains we pay for the odd story.”

And if you get caught doing anything then it's a slap on the wrist.”

“What? You reckon the police –”

Rhys leaned in towards him.

“Jack, who do you think calls us when some actor's been nicked for drink-driving? The cops know there's a few quid in it for them. They get a little backhander and we get the story. Nobody gets hurt so what's the fucking problem?”

Jack was about to respond but Rhys was already distracted by a couple of girls sitting down at a nearby table.

“You want another drink?”

“You haven't even touched yours,” sniffed Rhys, his foot tapping restlessly against the table leg.

“No. I'm off the booze for a bit.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I told you that on the phone. I'm trying to calm it down,” continued Jack, “The other night I went out to the pub after work. I only meant to have a couple but six pints later and Greg on the Sports desk had some little dig about my number of bylines and we end up really getting into it in front of everyone.”

Rhys nodded but to Jack his mind looked somehow elsewhere.

“Anyway, when I got home I must have crashed out on the sofa and the next morning Laura comes downstairs to find an empty bottle of JD on the coffee table. I suppose I must have bought it on the way home. To be honest, I don't even remember. So then she starts going into one about about the drinking, saying she couldn't cope with all that again. And, well, maybe it's stress. I don't know... the problem is Greg wasn't far off the truth. My contract's up for renewal in a couple of months and –”

“Oh, you'll be fine.”

“No, I'm serious! I'm getting really shitty stories to chase. I feel like Charlie doesn't even trust me with anything decent. The other day I had to twist his arm to let me chase up a story on that Linda Lavonne.”

“Oh, that porn star who topped herself?”

“Yeah.”

“Tragic waste of silicone, eh?”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, they –”

“You know your problem?” said Rhys turning towards him, “You take it all so fucking seriously. You think what we do is Bernstein and Woodward and it's not. This is two-thousand-and-ten, Jack. People just want to be entertained.”

“Entertained? You mean trawling through some celebrity's Twitter feed or rehashing some PR's press release? Are you telling me you don't miss the days when newspapers actually told people what's going on in the world?”

“No,” said Rhys shaking his head, “Why should I? Tell me, what's the circulation of a broadsheet? Three-hundred-and-fifty thousand on a good day? We're getting two million every Sunday. That's where the market is, Jack. You ever stopped to think that maybe no-one cares about all that stuff that *you* think is news. They don't want your fucking moralizing. They just want a bit of fun at the breakfast table”

“Maybe,” said Jack as he rose from his seat and sloped off to the bar.

As he waited to be served, he looked at the faces of the baying crowd. Rhys was right. He was a dinosaur. Entertainment, that was the commodity that everyone around him craved. Booze and sex and drugs and vacuous celebrity tittle-tattle all dished up in generous portions to be consumed by a greedy horde. Why was he still clinging to this faded notion that there was something worthy about what he did for a living? Only a few years ago he still held an ambition to carve out a name for himself as a news reporter. Now he wasn't sure what he believed in but what really consumed him was the thought that his heart was no longer in it

When he returned to their table with the drinks Rhys was sitting with the two women he'd been eyeing up, two twentysomething blondes with matching strawberry-red lipstick and nail varnish who were laughing at one of Rhys' jokes.

“Jack, let me introduce you. This is Chloe and this is Emma.”

Jack nodded at the women who sat sipping glasses of rosé.

“Are you a journalist too?” asked one of the girls.

“Yeah. I work for The Evening Post. What about you?”

“Oh, I'm in PR.”

“Yeah, I was saying to Chloe we should swap numbers,” said Rhys, “I'm sure we could do something for each other. Professionally, I mean.”

“Is he really a showbiz reporter?” asked the other girl with a giggle.

“Oh yeah, he does a bit of showbiz reporting. But he also does a bit of photography on the side, don't you?”

The girl look confused as she turned to her friend.

“Yeah,” replied Rhys with a smirk, “I do the odd photo now and again. Now tell me, ladies, have either of you ever thought about doing Page Three?”

The girls laughed nervously, both of their faces flushed with embarrassment.

CHAPTER 4: 'FOOTSTEPS'

By the following Monday morning Jack had managed to obtain the the name of the victim in the shooting at The Beckton Arms from the Metropolitan Police's press office: Lewis Campbell of Abbey Street, Plaistow. By then he'd already filed the copy from his crime-scene visit. The story had made page two of Friday's edition along with a photo of the white tent erected by the police forensics unit. When he'd picked up a copy of the final edition he felt a sense of relief, satisfied to finally find himself with a decent byline again. At least he could now look his colleagues on the newsdesk in the eye, he told himself. Perhaps Rhys had been right – perhaps he just need to lighten up a little.

“Glad to see you didn't fuck that one up, Jack,” said Charlie in the Monday morning briefing, “I want to see if you can squeeze another story out of it for tomorrow. Track down the mother and see if she'll talk.”

Jack had sensed Charlie's request coming before it had even been verbalized. It was part of the job but it was always an unenviable task trying to squeeze a few quotes from someone so recently bereaved. In some way, he'd hoped the burden would fall on one of the other members of the news team and now Charlie seemed to sense it in his hesitation.

“Look, by the weekend this story will be fucking cold, Jack. She must have some clue about why her boy has just got his brains blown out. And I don't want some whining piece about poverty and lack of youth clubs. Make sure you come back with something decent. I want to know if her son is a villain or some big-time drug dealer and, if so, who might have had it in for him?”

By late afternoon on the Tuesday Jack had managed to track down a birth certificate from the records office and the name of the mother, Cynthia Campbell. He tried an internet directory service for London on the hunch that the woman still lived locally and at around the fifteenth attempt he found her. Mrs Cynthia Campbell of

Reighton Road, Clapton.

“I know it must be a very difficult time for you, Mrs Campbell, but if I can keep the story alive then it increases the chances that someone will come forward. Someone must know who killed your son. It's possible someone may have seen something. Surely, you'd want them to come forward if they knew anything?”

The voice at the other end of the line was elderly and frail. She professed her ignorance about the motive for the murder before she finally broke down sobbing, her voice trailing off as she strained to finish her sentence. It took a further ten minutes of persuasion before she begrudgingly accepted Jack's offer of a little chat.

As he hung up the call there was a twinge of guilt. He knew what Drayton really wanted: some sensational accounts of her son's life of delinquency. Guns and drugs in the house and cars pulling up at all hours of the night. That's how the Post's readers would have imagined all this. Not some gentle old woman alone in her house gently sobbing on the phone to a reporter's questions; her murdered son's body lying on a cold slab in the morgue awaiting the coroner's report.

By early evening he was almost at the house. The street was a row of Victorian terrace houses a few hundred yards away from the overground station. A turning off Upper Clapton Road before it veered up towards neighbouring Stamford Hill famous for its tightly-knit community of orthodox Jews who paced the streets with their long locks of dark, curly hair trailing from fur hats. Although it appeared peaceful enough Jack knew of the area's reputation in the early nineties as the epicentre of London's violent gang culture, a period during which a series of drive-by shootings had led to the press dubbing the area's main road as Murder Mile. He was still wondering if the streets had shrugged off their once infamous reputation when he finally he came to it, a green door next to a large bay window where a set of net curtains twitched nervously as he opened the gate.

“Hello, Mrs Campbell. I'm fom the Evening Post. We spoke on the phone

remember?”

An old West Indian woman was peering at him through the crack in the door. He could just make out her dark, wrinkled face and her greying, wispy hair tucked into a purple headscarf.

“You said you didn't mind answering a few questions. I realise it must be a difficult time for you.”

Timidly, she opened the door.

“Yes. Well, you best be coming inside then but you can't stay long I'm expecting my sister. She coming down from Bristol tonight. I only told her the news this morning.”

Jack followed her down a narrow hallway with a green faded carpet and into a lounge where she offered him a seat at a table opposite a three-bar electric fire that struggled against the cold draught of the hallway. While she went out to make some tea he studied the room. A cheaply-framed print of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* hung above the mantelpiece of an empty fireplace, its colours bleached by sunlight and then, on a wooden dresser to the side of the fire, a portrait of a smiling schoolboy in a blue school blazer. Some other framed wedding pictures and snaps of what looked like a family holiday. But what intrigued him was a photograph of a muscular boxer, his face sweat-soaked and exhausted, and surrounded by a group of men who were holding the man's gloved hand aloft.

“That's Lewis then, is it?” asked Jack when Cynthia finally returned, carrying a tray with a teapot and two china cups.

“Yes. He loved the boxing. Not that I ever saw him. I could never bear to see him fighting. Pure brutality it seem to me... See him getting beaten in the ring like that.”

Jack's mind was already busy formulating an angle on the story: the ex-boxing champion who'd strayed into the dangerous world of gangland crime. There were plenty of parallels. From the Sonny Liston's mob connections through to the bareknuckle fights reputedly arranged and attended by members of the London

underworld, boxers and criminals never seemed to stray too far from each other.

“Pretty handy then, was he?”

The enthusiasm of his question seemed shrill in the sombre surroundings of the room.

“Yes, he was a good boxer so they tell me. Won a couple of them belts. Even when he give it up he'd still train every day. And he was a good boy too, my Lewis. I want you to know that when you write your story. He wasn't one of those to be hanging around the streets at all hours causing trouble like some of them 'round here.”

The woman strained the tea into the cups as Jack opened his messenger bag and took out his dictaphone to start recording.

“So did Lewis have a job?”

“He work in a nightclub. Security work, he call it, and he had to pay to do the training. Can't say I like the work - coming and going at all times - but it pay him a wage and job is a job at end of the day. Was no big scholar when he was in school, you see. What paper you say you from again?”

“The Evening Post. We covered the story earlier in the week. The editor is keen that we do anything we can to help you, Mrs. Campbell.”

She sipped from her cup and nodded but Jack noticed her eyes scrutinizing him suspiciously. Instinct told him to probe the security angle, aware of the rumoured collusion between the doormen of clubs and the drug dealers who sought to ply their trade there, but he sensed he needed to be delicate in how he broached the subject.

“What about Lewis' father?”

“Rodney move back to Jamaica a few year ago. He go back home to look after his mother in Clarendon when she get sick and by then... Well, we still talk and he send card to me and Lewis at Christmas time. I phone him last night and break the news and...” she took a sharp intake of breath “Well, he not take it so good. He have two daughters back home but...”

The woman paused and stared into orange glow of the fire.

“Well it's a terrible thing... a terrible thing to –”

She stopped mid-sentence and tried to compose herself but Jack could already see the tears welling up, the sound of the china saucer clinking as the teacup trembled in her frail hand. He could sense the expanse of grief inside her, the delicate grace with which she was trying to come to terms with her loss.

“I know how difficult it must be,” he ventured.

“No. I don't think you *can* know. You just want to know enough for your paper.”

There was an awkward silence that followed her reprimand.

“The thing is, my pastor always tell me that the Lord never give you a burden too heavy for you to carry. But this burden.... Well, I just don't know if I have the strength to carry it all alone.”

There was a pause which seemed to linger in the emptiness. Outside a siren echoed somewhere in the streets beyond.

“You see, my son lie in some mortuary and I can't even bury him until...”

She bit her lip as her voice tailed off and Jack watched her as she stared into the fire; tears slowly dripping down the crevices of her wrinkled face in the orange light. His human instinct was to try to find some words of comfort, to tell her that at least her son's killers would face justice in court, although with no suspect in custody he knew the odds of the case being solved were only lengthening.

“Was Lewis married? Or maybe a girlfriend?”

“He had a girl he was steady with. Lewis was never big one for bringing girls home but he see her for a while now, I think. He bring her round here one time for Sunday lunch if I remember right.”

“And do you remember her name?”

“Lyndsay or Linda, I think. Can't remember now for sure. White girl she was and pretty too. Used to be a model so Lewis said. And she seem nice enough. Quiet she was and I'm not one to pry. He is a grown man and a man's business is his business.”

The equivocality of her responses were frustrating. From experience he knew how easy it was when interviewing the bereaved to get snagged on his own empathy but back at the office his news editor demanded a story and as Charlie had once remarked: "Pity doesn't sell papers." His needed to probe the work angle again. The motive for the murder had to be somewhere there.

"Was there anyone at work who Lewis might have had a problem with? Or do you know if the club he worked in had any trouble recently?"

"I don't know. He never talk much about work with me. He work in same place for a few year now and never seem to have no problem there."

"And which club did you say he worked at?"

"A place down on Curtain Road."

Jack knew the area well. Shoreditch had at one time been one of his favourite haunts to go out drinking with Rhys. There was a late night bar Jack knew of on the road Cynthia mentioned but he didn't remember it for attracting a bad crowd. He made a note to call the manager when he got back to the office.

"And had Lewis ever been in trouble with police before? Never been caught with drugs or anything like that?"

The woman flashed him a disapproving look.

"Like I tell you, my Lewis was a good boy. He got into a fight once after school and police take him away and I have to go to the police station to collect him. I give him a mighty good scolding that time and far as I know he never have no trouble with police after that."

"But maybe it was someone else he knew? What about friends or relatives? Were any of them ever in trouble?"

"He had a cousin on his father's side. Dwayne. He got mix up in all sorts of trouble and end up in a prison. I think Lewis not so stupid to get caught up in all that kind of thing. Lewis want a quiet life. Lately, he even talk about getting out of London to me."

"Did he mention where?"

“He talk about going abroad. He liked the sunshine, you see. Hated all the rain and snow. He talk about moving somewhere hot but I think it was just a dream, you know.”

She smiled as she glanced across at one of the photographs on the dresser.

“Thing is – apart from when Rodney and I take him to Jamaica when he was a baby – he hardly spend more than a week or two out of England his whole life. I think it just something he like to think about from time to time. I think everybody need some kind of dream, don't they?”

Jack nodded.

“So do you have any idea why someone would want to have killed Lewis?”

The woman let out a long sigh.

“Police keep asking the same question. Over and over. Like I say, I don't know. All I can think is that someone mistake him for someone else or maybe he say something to someone. I can't tell you. It doesn't make any sense to me... Lewis wasn't the type to go looking for trouble. He just –”

Before she could finish, they were interrupted by the sound of the doorbell.

“You'll have to excuse me.”

Jack jotted a few more words in his book and then stood up as he heard another woman's voice in the hall. She was standing in the doorway staring at Jack with a piercing stare. She looked younger than Cynthia, a plump woman with her hair in thick dreadlocks and small glasses that rested on her broad nose.

“If you wouldn't mind leaving us now,” said the younger woman, “As you can see, my sister is very upset at the news. It's a time for us as a family. We don't want to talk to reporters.”

The woman placed an arm around Cynthia's shoulder before adding, “Can't you just show a little respect?”

“I'm sorry,” replied Jack, “I'm just trying to help. As I explained to your sister if we can keep the story alive then we increase the chance that someone will come forward.”

“You work for The London Evening Post, right?”

“Yes.”

The woman sucked her teeth.

“Then I know what kind of story you want.”

She stood in the doorway, arms folded and still glaring at him.

“Look, I should probably get going.”

He picked up his dictaphone and turned towards Cynthia: “Thank you for talking to me, Mrs Campbell, and I'm sorry to intrude. I hope –”

The younger woman was now gesturing down the hallway to the front door and he sensed it was best to just leave it at that. He let himself out of the house, closing the gate as he left.

Outside, the street was silent except for the sound of his footsteps against the frosted pavement. He was half-way up to end of the road when he could hear the muffled ringtone of his mobile phone. He'd been half expecting a call from Laura checking to see when he'd be back home but as he took out his phone he noticed the number was withheld.

“Is that Jack Clarke?”

The man's voice at the end sounded gravelly, the low, raspy tone of a heavy smoker.

“Yeah. Who's this?”

“Don't worry about who I am. Just keep your fucking nose out of –”

The phone signal dropped out for a second rendering the rest of what the man was saying unintelligible.

“I'm sorry I –”

“I'm just telling you... stay away from the old man,” the voice growled “And remember this, pal.... I know where you fucking live.”

“I'm sorry I don't even –”

But before he could reply the caller at the other end of the line had already hung up. Jack shivered for a moment as he stopped by the end of the street. Part of

him wanted to dismiss it as a wrong number or some sort of crank call. Yet his instinct somehow told him otherwise. There was something about the sinister efficiency of the threat, the mark of someone for whom violence was a profession. But he was left baffled. The only old man who came to mind was Kenny. And then Jack recalled something Kenny had said when he mentioned Linda's suicide, the murkiness of the world she had become embroiled in.

Had it been a voice from that world at the other end of the line?

CHAPTER 5: 'DROPPING THE BOMB'

On the twenty-fifth floor of Canada Tower in Canary Wharf Jack was sitting at one end of a cluster of beech-coloured tables in the chaos of the Post's newsroom. For its noise-level the floor had always resembled more of a battlefield command centre than an office. Over the constant hum of laser printers, the endless drone of the rolling TV news channels and the sound of his colleagues' barking into desk phones, he was struggling to hear himself think as he reviewed his copy from the previous night's interview with Cynthia Campbell.

Earlier that morning he'd checked on Lewis Campbell with the SIA, the organisation set up by the Home Office to regulate the security industry. One of their administrators – a surprisingly helpful woman with a thick Mancunian accent - informed him that Lewis' doorman's licence had been granted six years ago. There hadn't been any convictions either prior or subsequent to its issue. Afterwards he'd called the bar in Shoreditch where Lewis had worked but the account was much the same.

A reliable and respected member of staff according to the bar's manager, he had only been recently promoted to the head of security and all the staff had been stunned by the news of his murder. Jack even tried the publican of one of the pubs he used to regularly frequent in the area to enquire about the reputation of the place but there seemed nothing untoward.

Instinct told him the motive was probably drug-related but with so little to go on he framed the story around the apparently motiveless nature of the crime, managing to work in the boxing and the heart-broken mother for a little colour. He knew it wasn't what Charlie wanted but he reckoned it had enough merit for a page five or page six piece. And then, as he clicked his mouse and filed the story with the Post's central database, he wondered on how Cynthia would come to terms with the murder of her only child. Perhaps that's what police work and journalism had once had in common, the business of piecing together some form of coherent explanation.

As he drained the remains of his morning latte, he found himself staring out over the heaps of cuttings, empty sandwich cartons and coffee-stained Styrofoam cups that were piled up next to his workstation. He still couldn't get the phone call from the previous night out of his head. In the sobering light of the morning, he'd tried to dismiss it as a prank again but if it had been Rhys or one of his other colleagues trying to put the wind up him then he guessed he would have received some follow-up call mocking his gullibility. And then there was something else.... something genuinely sinister in the coldness of the man's tone. He was still deliberating over it when he noticed Ivan Woodbridge, the Post's political correspondent, who was hovering around the desk watching a news interview with a Cabinet minister on one of the flat-screen televisions which hung just above Jack's desk.

At sixty-two Jack regarded Ivan as the Post's elder statesman, having served a long career on a number of broadsheets. Amongst some of the Post's staff, he had a reputation for aloofness but to Jack this was probably as much attributed to his rigid adherence to a suit and tie as it was to his rather formal way of conducting himself with colleagues. Even so, behind the thinning hairline and the grey beard Ivan was just as sharp as any of the news team and as a veteran of the Westminster lobby he was as keen as a bloodhound in sniffing out any scent of parliamentary intrigue.

“So you know who's in and who's out yet?” asked Jack, referring to the rumoured cabinet reshuffle that had been dominating the breakfast news.

“Well, the lobby rumour is that the PM's planning a shake-up. Bringing in some new faces and getting rid of the old-timers. Sounds all rather familiar, wouldn't you say?”

Jack smiled.

“Come off it, Ivan. I don't reckon The Post will be getting rid of you in a hurry.”

“Oh, spare me the pity! I'm already counting down the days. I think the PM isn't the only one trying to position themselves as more in touch with a youthful

audience.”

“Positioning. So that's what they do now is it? Why have a policy when you can just have a position, right?”

The remark seemed to somehow fall short of the percipience Jack had intended and he was conscious of himself trying to impress his elder colleague, as if Ivan's approval might somehow offer him a ledge of professional integrity to cling to.

“Well, that's what you get from a prime minister who worked in PR. I suppose you've heard about the Sunday lunches the PM enjoys with Ruth Gibbs and the other tabloid editors?”

“Yeah. It all sounds a little too cosy for my liking. You'd think it would be pistols at dawn after the battering they gave over MPs expenses.”

“On the contrary,” said Ivan, shooting Jack a wry smile, “Quid pro quo, Jack. Quid pro quo.”

Jack couldn't work out if Ivan's response was some witty Latin pun which he 'd failed to grasp.

“Go on. Explain.”

“I mean that government and the media are the archetypal dysfunctional couple. They may beat each other up from time to time but they always get back together. There always has to be element of forgiveness. After all, they both need each other.”

“You really think so?”

“Of course! And it's a two-way thing. For instance, you remember Operation Motorman a few years back, don't you?”

Jack could vaguely recall the case.

“That guy who got caught tapping into the Police National Computer and selling stuff on to the tabloids?”

“Yes... and not just the tabloids. Broadsheets too. Apparently the police raid uncovered invoices from practically every paper in Fleet Street and yet not a single editor even got questioned. Not in their interest, you see?”

“But they charged the investigator, right?”

“Oh yes. He had to face trial but afterwards the investigation was shut down,” Ivan replied with a feint trace of a smile, “On the grounds that it was too *expensive*. Not in the taxpayers' interest apparently.”

“You're kidding?”

“Not at all, Jack. On that occasion the government decided to offer the proverbial olive branch. After all, they know that if they pick up that rock and start looking underneath then all manner of nastiness will be creeping about under there. So whilst Her Majesty's government requires the services of the Fleet Street's editors to keep them ahead in the polls then I presume certain people are willing to overlook – how should I say – a little irregularity.”

“Well, it couldn't happen here. Can you imagine the Post paying for any private investigators? It's hard enough to get accounts to sign-off on my taxi receipts.”

“The funny thing is,” whispered Ivan as he glanced around to make sure that no one else was in earshot, “I had it on fairly good authority that the signature on one of those cheques was none other than the then news editor of Sunday Exclusive. Our esteemed boss, Charles Drayton.”

Jack hardly had time to consider his colleague's indiscretion before he noticed the hunched figure of Charlie stalking the corridor outside his office.

“Can I see you in here, Jack?”

“Oh dear,” said Ivan “Looks like the headmaster wants a word with you.”

A hush seemed to descend across the floor and Jack could feel his face flushed with embarrassment as he headed to the open door of the news editor's office on the other side of the office. As he passed the sports desk he noticed Greg, the Post's football correspondent, pretending to type up copy but as he stepped into the glass cube of Charlie's office he was sure he could feel the hot gaze of the entire floor centred on him.

“Shut the door, will you?”

Jack swung the door shut and took a seat in front of the large glass-topped desk

as his boss' eyes stared at the computer monitor in front of him. Charlie was snorting long gasps of air as he read from his screen and shaking his head.

“What did I tell you the other day, Jack?”

“Sorry, what are we –”

“What did I tell you about the story on that shooting at the Beckton Arms?”

“You said get an interview with the mother. I filed the copy about ten minutes ago.”

“Oh, I know you filed the copy,” snapped Charlie “What do you think I called you in here for? *Boxing Hero Slain In Mystery Shooting*. What kind of story is that?”

Jack knew what was coming next. He'd witnessed it before. The anger that was bubbling inside Charlie would any minute would reach critical mass leading to a fearsome explosion of obscenities.

“Look, it's the best angle I could get,” said Jack sensing Charlie growing indignation “There's no apparent motive. The police aren't saying anything and the victim's clean. I checked him out with his employer and the SIA. I thought the boxing was a nice touch. Could have turned professional apparently.”

“For Christ's sake, Jack, you're talking about him like he's Muhammed Ali. He was a schoolboy champion.”

“Actually, it was British Under 21s –”

“For fuck's sake, I'm not in the mood to argue. I'm telling you: as a story, it's a piece of shit and you know it. I mean, listen to this: *'The victim's mother looked distraught as she explained “It doesn't make any sense to me... Lewis wasn't the type to go looking for trouble.”* Now tell me, what am I supposed to do with that?”

“She didn't know anything, Charlie. The woman was in bits. What did you want me to do?”

“I wanted you to come back with a decent story, that's what I expect from all my reporters. This isn't fucking Amnesty International, Jack. Why do you think we're paying you?”

“I did come back with a story. A human tragedy. An innocent man who's the

victim of meaningless inner-city violence. That's a decent story.”

“You don't tell *me* what a decent story is. I tell you! I'm the fucking editor round here in case you'd forgotten! Christ, Jack... I'm having to battle management against cuts to the reporting staff and your bringing me fucking crap like this? I mean.. don't you get it?”

Now it was happening, Jack thought. Charlie's rage was just about to go nuclear.

He braced himself. Now he was about to experience the F-Bomb, as the other staff referred to it as; any second now it was about to explode in all its terrible thermal intensity.

“Fuck me! If I wanted this bullshit I'd have given fucking Diane Abbott a call. Have you forgotten what decent copy is? I don't want to hear '*he wasn't the type to go looking for trouble.*' Our readers don't want to fucking hear that crap,” raged Drayton banging the surface of his desk with a clenched fist, “I want to hear about what her son was really up to. I want to know why he's ended up in the morgue with a fucking bullet in his head. Why aren't you telling me that?”

Charlie's angry accusations were spitting at him like rounds from a verbal assault rifle. He wanted to retaliate. He wasn't just going to lie down and take this bullshit.

“I'm telling you, Charlie... the mother.... she didn't know anything.”

“Oh come off it, Jack. She's playing you. Her kid's a fucking wrong 'un. Are you telling me that if your kid was a big-time drug dealer, if your kid was running around with a bunch of proper villains with guns, that you wouldn't know about it? Of course, she knows. Don't be so fucking clueless.”

Every fibre in Jack was now straining to keep his anger in check. Part of him wanted to let rip, to remind Charlie he wasn't some trainee fresh from work experience on some regional rag. He knew exactly what kind of questions to ask and if they didn't elicit the kind of answers the readers wanted to hear, well, that wasn't his fault. He was right on the verge of blurting all of this out when the reality of his

predicament struck home: for a few seconds after saying it he would have felt the virtuous champion of truth and then for a long time after he would be looking for somewhere else to work.

Well, if she did then she wasn't saying, was all he could settle for in the end.

“Wasn't saying? What the fuck are you talking about?” continued Charlie, his mouth spitting flecks of saliva “I wanted you to get her to talk. That's your fucking job, Jack. Be a little bit creative for Christ's sake... I mean the bloke is lying in the fucking morgue he's hardly going to have us up for libel now, is he?”

Charlie folded his arms behind his head and for a brief moment there was a respite from the F-Bomb's toxic fall-out. As he sat there, Jack's mind wandered back to Cynthia's front room. The memory of the looming presence of her sister as she entered the room and her coldly-delivered words. *I know what kind of story you want.* Even she seemed to know what Charlie wanted, what the Post's readers demanded.

“Look,” said Charlie as he leaned back in his executive chair, “Frankly, I'm not happy with your performance lately. You need to up your game. Your contract is up for renewal soon so I've decided I'm giving you a month. Bring me something decent or you can forget about an extension.”

Jack nodded but inside he felt winded, brutalized by Charlie's verbal rampage, and then his mind wandered to his conversations with Laura. About how she'd been talking about starting a family and spending the evenings browsing property websites for a bigger house. How could he tell her that he was going to find himself out of a job again? He had no choice. He'd have to change. As Rhys had said, he'd have to play the game.

“You understand what I'm saying to you, dont you?”

“Of course.”

“Well, then get your arse out of my office. One of us here has a paper to run.”

He heaved himself out of the chair and then slunk out of Charlie's office back towards the newsdesk. He couldn't bring himself to stare back at the eyes that followed him as he walked between the sports desk and the rest of the news team but

all the same he knew what they were thinking. Greg was pretending to be working on some photos with the sports desk's picture editor. Only Ivan managed a nod of sympathy as he stood by the window, chatting away into his mobile. They'd probably all heard Charlie's voice booming out of the office; all now convinced that Jack's days at the Post were numbered.

He sat back down at his desk and opened his drawer. His hand rooted around at the back grasping for something crushed by a mount of print-outs and magazine articles. He was sure it was still there though, a leftover of the desk's previous encumbent when they'd had a desk re-org a few months back. And then his fingers touched it. A half-bottle of scotch he'd kept meaning to throw out but had decided to keep just in case. He grabbed it, shoved it in the fold of his cardigan, and took the short walk to the gents toilets by the lifts. In the security of one of the toilet cubicles, he broke the seal on the bottle and swigged half the contents. He could feel the hot liquor burning this throat and then its firey warmth as it reached his belly. He sat on the toilet seat for a few minutes until the loathing was soothed away by the alcohol entering his bloodstream. It was just sharpener, he tried to convince himself. Right now he needed it to calm his nerves after Charlie's bollocking. But he also needed something else even more urgently. He needed a decent story or soon he'd be looking for some other way to pay the bills.

CHAPTER 6: 'RELEASE'

Sean McGee was sitting at the small table at the far end of his cell staring at the two armies of chess pieces on the chequered squares of the board in front of him. Beyond the heavy steel door, the sound of someone yelling further down the wing was disturbing his concentration. He carefully regarded the position of his queen nestled behind a row of white pawns before pausing to observe his opponent's rook that looked threatening. He had one line of the advance covered by the diagonal attack of his bishop which could retaliate if the rook moved to seize his advancing pawn. And there was his opponent's knight. He could take that. It was a bit too easy. A set-up. It had to be.

He'd come to the same conclusion three years ago. In the early hours of that fateful morning the police had kicked in the door of Anna's flat and they'd both woken in a daze to find their bedroom invaded by an armed response unit beaming their torches around in the darkness. In the middle of the chaos a figure was pointing a pistol at them, screaming at the pair of them to place their hands behind their heads. It felt like waking up to his worst nightmare.

The previous day he'd robbed this Cypriot bloke's place just off Green Lanes with Ritchie who he'd met whilst doing community service. A stupid idea but it was Ritchie's plan really. It was Ritchie who knew there was a half a kilo of coke stashed in the geezer's loft and it Ritchie who'd got hold of the gun. The same gun - a black 9mm, semi-automatic Beretta – that the police had in a sealed plastic bag placed on the table in front of him when he was questioned later that day by two detectives at Tottenham police station. It was all a bit easy. Too easy really. Ritchie had sacrificed him to keep all the gear for himself. That morning had been a wake-up call in more ways than one.

He stared hard at the board again, visualized taking the knight and then imagined the layout of the board afterwards trying to decode where the ambush lay. He could never have imagined six months ago when he didn't even know how to play how

complex Chess could be and at that stage he'd found it frustrating. Back then, when he'd first diligently learned the moves of each of the pieces, he'd played this stupid offensive style. "Going on the rampage" his cellmate, Geoff, had called it. It took him a couple of months to figure out that protecting your own pieces was just as important. As in life, in Chess it paid to watch your back.

"This time next week, eh?" said Geoff who was lying on the bed at the other end of the cell reading a newspaper.

"Yeah, mate."

Finally, frustrated with his own inertia, he picked up his rook and moved four squares forward where it threatened a line of black pawns.

"You nearly finished with that?"

"Yeah, give us a minute. I'm just reading the City section."

He'd shared a cell with Geoff for the past nine months, ever since he'd been moved to Wayland having finally been granted his Category C status. At first, he didn't get him. The rimmed specs, the plummy accent and all the books. Then it turned out he was in for fraud. Robbed a load of money off a bank or something but not a hold-up. No guns or balaclavas. He'd tried to explain it once – something to do with shares and companies – but it didn't really make any sense. Clever fucker though. Proper clever Geoff. He knew about the law too. Studied it at university in London before he went into the City and that's where he'd been nicking all this money. Said it wasn't even that difficult. Said he'd worked his way around the system – whatever that system was.

"I got greedy," he'd said when he was explaining it all to Sean one afternoon, "That's the thing that brought me down. I just got too fucking greedy."

Geoff got up from his lower bunk bed and strolled towards the table, placing the newspaper down before looking at the board.

"Black bishop to G4. Check."

Sean cursed as he stared at the diagonal where his white king now stood exposed.

"It's not over," said Geoff letting out a long yawn, "You can survive it."

Survival. That's what prison was about and if Sean had learned anything from his two years inside it was that he *could* survive it. He had at one point harboured private doubts about that. Perhaps everyone did at some point, especially anyone doing a long stretch. It wasn't the kind of thing you ever talked about and not everyone did survive it.

He could still remember that kid in the first month in the cell on the other side of the landing when he was on remand in Brixton. Eighteen or nineteen. First bit of bird most likely. Two days of howling, pissing off everyone on A-wing, until they found him one morning hanging from his bedsheets. He was the first one that year and, so he heard later, he wasn't the last either.

He picked up the white king and retreated it back a square from the diagonal attack of his opponent's bishop.

“You should keep the chess up,” said Geoff.

“Nah,” chuckled Sean, “I can't see it happening.”

In a swift stroke Geoff advanced his queen down the centre of the board and snatched one of the white pawns before reaching for a paperback on the table.

Sean glanced at the book as Geoff opened it at a page marked by a bookmark improvised from the cardboard of a Rizzla packet; on its cover was a black and white photo of a man with a strange beard and a wild, insistent look in his eyes.

“Also Sprach..... what?” asked Sean.

“Zarathustra,” said Geoff, completing the title of the book in his hand.

“Fucking 'ell. You'd think they come up with a better title than that.”

That was one of the reasons Sean didn't mind his cellmate. Geoff wasn't always trapping off about this and that like some of the blokes he'd shared with. Instead he always seemed to have his head in some book. Always reading about something or other like he was swotting for some exam.

“Friedrich Nietzsche. He was a German philosopher,” Geoff piped up.

The sound of someone shouting down the wing was growing louder and now accompanied by the clanging of metal as doors slammed shut.

“What? So it's his philosophy on life or something?” asked Sean.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“So, what does he say then, this German geezer?”

“It's hard to summarise. It's all about the *übermensch*....”

Sean squinted at the board again, conscious that his concentration level was beginning to ebb away. His white pieces were all penned in. Geoff now had twice as many pieces as him on the board. Twice as many lines of attack. Geoff was overpowering him. There was no getting out of this one. The endgame would be close now, he could almost sense it.

“And who are the fucking Hoovermen when they're at home?”

“The *übermensch*. It's German. I suppose it translates as something like 'superman'. God doesn't exist so we need to fill the space.”

Sean shook his head.

“Sounds a load of pony to me.”

His patience had now evaporated. This was how it always ended. The gradual shift in the gradient of odds. All lines of attack being contained by an advancing army. Still, it was always better to go down fighting. Go out with a bang. Rash maybe but always preferable to some pathetic surrender like that morning in Tottenham, being handcuffed as he was led out of the flat to a waiting police van.

After another's minute's hesitation, he moved his queen and took the black knight knowing all along that he was walking into an invisible trap.

“I suppose at it's root is *Machtgelüst*,” said Geoff as he took a couple of paces away from the table staring pensively at the ceiling.

Geoff was going off on one again. Sometimes he did that. This weird thinking out loud of his. Sean didn't really get it. He tolerated it because sometimes he secretly enjoyed listening in to what went on in that big brain of his but he'd told him that in prison it didn't pay to let people know what was on your mind. You didn't let anyone know that. It only gave them an advantage.

“You what?”

“*Machtgeliüst*. The desire for power. All life is a struggle for power, the will-to-power... survival, the evolution of species, politics, markets, all of it... we're all trying to assert ourselves in this universal contest... to make the world ours.”

Despite the weird lingo he could kind of see what Geoff was getting at. It reminded him of the Scarface poster his old cellmate at the Young Offenders Institute in Feltham had on the wall. Al Pacino as Tony Montana with “The World Is Yours” captioned at the bottom. But you didn't need philosophy books to understand all that. Everyone inside knew about power and contests. After all, prison was just another contest. You versus the screws. The police, the courts, prison, an array of well-intentioned social workers and sappy school teachers. They had all played the role of opponents at one time or another. All trying to bend Sean's steely will to their own plans and aspirations. They had all failed, of course. And now prison was meant to rehabilitate him.

Rehabilitate? He'd never got his head around that one. *The purpose of prison*, the parole board had recently and solemnly reminded him, *is the rehabilitation of offenders*. It made no sense really. Rehabilitation was what junkies needed. Rehab was where celebrities who'd been overdoing it went off for a month to be told by someone with a soothing voice that they needed to cool it, lay off the booze and the gear for a bit. It was all bullshit really. The real purpose of prison was not mend your ways but to break you down. And if couldn't succeed at doing that, if it couldn't win that psychological contest, then it would settle instead for taking you out of the game for a bit.

“Checkmate,” added Geoff as he placed his book splayed face-down on the table and moved his queen towards an open space at the other end of the board.

“Shit.”

“ I thought you'd seen that coming.”

Sean shrugged.

“Yeah... I'm getting better though, right?”

Geoff murmured something as he walked away from the table. Sean picked up

the board and swept the plastic chess pieces back into the cardboard box where they were kept.

“You having one?” asked Geoff as he filled the kettle in the sink at the other end of the room.

“Yeah, go on then.”

“So you got any plans?”

“Nah... not really.”

Both of them knew that was lie. Sean wondered why he was even asking. Geoff was alright. He'd even grown to quite like his company. Geoff knew about things he didn't know about, like his chess and and his books, but they had been thrown together. It's not like they'd have ever met or would ever meet outside the prison gate.

“Going straight then, is it?” asked Geoff.

Sean caught his cellmate's expression in the mirror above the sink as Geoff dropped two teabags into mugs, a faintly suppressed smile at his own question.

“Yeah something like that.”

“You'll have to get a job. You got something in mind?”

“Nah... not really.”

But he did have something in mind. That's what everyone in prison spent their entire time inside thinking about, what they were going to do when they finally got out. As for a job, well, it was a job of sorts. Not the kind of job a parole officer needed to know about. Not the kind of job that the old dear with the saggy jumpers and saggy tits who came in once a week to teach them vocational skills would approve of either. But it was work all the same. For someone like Sean, for someone with his particular skillset, there was never really a shortage of available work.

Before being moved to the relative luxury of HMP Wayland for the last months of his sentence, he'd done two years at Swaleside. The place was a proper shithole stuck out in the middle of the Kent marshes. Wayland was fucking Butlins compared to there. There was no TV, no Playstations in Swaleside. The screws wouldn't even trust you with a kettle just in case you used a mug of boiling coffee to wet someone

up across the landing. Swaleside was hard. Hard blokes doing hard time. Menace. The place bristled with it. He'd kept his head down there but this Scouse bloke, Trevor, had been giving him some grief. Big muscle bloke. Shaved head and LFC tattoos inked up his arms. Fancied himself as a bit of a nutter. Reckoned he had proper connections up north. Reckoned he was in with Cocky and all that crew.

It had started off with snide little digs in the canteen queue then the reported threats relayed by other inmates, the laughing and the little threatening gestures across the landing, then one day it had finally all kicked off in the gym. Trevor had been eyeing him from the chest press as he'd been taking the dumbbells off a bar. The P.O. had stepped outside for a minute to sort something out and then without a word being said the Scouser had come for him, swinging this big lump of metal at his head, lunging at him Charlie Bronson-style.

He'd miscalculated though. Two years of Taekwondo at Tottenham Green Leisure Centre had taught Sean everything he needed to know about keeping your centre of gravity low. And that's exactly what this northern wanker hadn't known. His stance was all wrong, his balance easily tripped. As he'd swung the bar with all the force he could muster, the Scouser had leaned too far in to connect with his target and that had allowed Sean the space to duck in under him. With a well-timed swipe of his foot, he managed to send his bewildered attacker crashing head first over his knee on to the concrete floor of the gymnasium. As gravity did its work, he could feel the force as the bloke's face hit the floor. Everyone there felt it. After that, he'd seized the moment to aim a hard stamp right into the small of the man's back followed by a forceful kick to his head just below the eye socket. When the screw came back in the Scouser was still trying to pick himself up off the floor. His face was purple and splattered with blood. No one said anything but everyone saw it, everyone including someone who wasn't usually in the gym in the mornings. Lennie Newland.

It was Lennie who had suggested it. Sean hadn't even prompted him.

“I know someone,” he'd said when he beckoned Sean over one lunchtime in the canteen, “You know, if you ever....”

And that was enough. Those nine syllables. Lennie Newland. Premier League villain. Brinks Matt fence. London *face*. He'd been there. Done it all. Worn the fucking T-Shirt. Lennie was no plastic gangster. Everyone on the inside seemed to know Lennie. Who he was, what he was and what he'd done. People worshipped him like some gangland idol because everyone knew it. Lennie was the real deal.

"I'll have to find a new opponent after next week."

Geoff's voice jolted Sean away from his thoughts.

"Oh yeah."

Geoff placed the mug of tea down in front him.

"Can I take a look at that book you were going on about?"

"Yeah, I suppose. I'm not sure it's your sort of read though."

It was one of Geoff's little put-downs. He'd could take the piss like that sometimes. Maybe that was Geoff's own little contest. Some little contest he'd try to stage now and then to remind him that he was the smart one. Still Sean could let it go. After next week, he'd never see the bloke again and maybe, in a strange sort of way, he'd miss his company, all the clever chat and the chess games.

He flicked to the opening page of the book and started reading:

"I love those who do not first seek beyond the stars for reasons to go down and to be sacrifices: but who sacrifice themselves to the earth, that the earth may one day belong to the Superman."

The lingo was weird but even so Sean could see what this Nietzsche bloke was going on about. He knew what sacrificing himself meant. He'd done two-and-a-half years of it for that wanker, Ritchie. One thing was sure: he'd done enough of all that bollocks. Now the world owed him. Now, he intended that it would all belong to him.

CHAPTER 7: 'THE GOLF CLUB'

At around mid-morning on the Sunday after his release Sean found himself waiting outside a tube station at the far end of the Central Line where the grey streets of London finally gave way to the brown, muddy fields of the Essex countryside. Folded in his hand was the letter he'd received a month before he got his final decision from the parole board. It was written in biro on a crisp sheet of watermarked notepaper but it was the Isle of Sheppey postmark that gave it away. Before it had arrived he'd begun to doubt if it was ever going to happen and then the morning it was finally handed to him by one of the screws he'd been filled with a bubbling excitement as he carefully opened the envelope and read its contents:

Dear Sean,

I've had a word with that Golf Club I recommended to you. As it happens they are currently taking on new members. The place is called the Astbury Manor Golf Club in Debenham, Essex. You'll find that the manager, Terry Francis, knows me personally and I've put in a good word for you.

Be lucky,

Lennie.

The scribbled note was his passport to the criminal underworld. No more messing about with small-time crooks and grasses like Ritchie. With this kind of connection he could leave all that bollocks behind. And if he played his cards right he reckoned there was every chance he could work his way to becoming a face in a proper London firm. It was the kind of career opportunity everyone inside secretly dreamed about.

He was still enjoying the prospect of that morning's meeting as the minicab he'd booked finally pulled up and he jumped in the back seat. The driver gave him a slightly wary look when Sean told the man his destination. He guessed his heavy

build and thick biceps didn't mark him out as the average golfer but he tried to put the man at ease with a friendly bit of chat about the weather.

The cab rumbled its way down a country lane, past high hedgerows and in between gaps flashed the occasional glimpse of fields of ploughed earth jewelled with the late autumn frost. It was out of the way this place. Sean couldn't see why anyone would come all this way to whack a few golf balls around but then golf had always seemed a stupid sport, an old man's game. He preferred something a little more physical. Something more full-contact.

"I play a little myself," chirped the driver from the front seat as he manoeuvred around a tight bend, "What's your handicap?"

"You what?"

"You know... your handicap?"

"Nah, I'm fit as a fiddle, mate."

The driver laughed and Sean felt mildly confused.

"You didn't bring your clubs with you then?"

"Nah, I'm just having a look. Might sign up as a member."

"Oh right. I play down the other one. The Belshire. You know it?"

"Nah."

On the road a small creature suddenly scuttled away from the approaching car and into the hedgerow causing the driver to swerve.

"You should have a look down there. It's cheaper than this place. And this place, well...."

"What?" asked Sean.

The driver paused for a moment as if he now regretted his last remark.

"No, nothing. It's probably just hearsay."

"What is?"

From the back seat, Sean leaned in as the driver glanced over his shoulder.

"Well, it's just I've heard the bloke who..."

The driver's concentration was momentarily interrupted by a green Volkswagen

that appeared from behind a bend and was now coming towards them. The driver slowed and turned into a cutting to let the other car pass and Sean sensed the man had welcomed the interruption.

“Yeah... what do they say then?”

He could see the driver now flashing him a nervous look in the rear-view mirror as he revved the engine and pulled the car back on to the muddy road.

“Erm.... yeah... sorry, mate. Forgotten what I was saying now. Never mind, eh?”

Then he watched as the man glanced at him once more in the mirror, his hand fumbling with the volume knob of the car's radio, drowning their silence with the excited football commentary.

The Astbury Manor was a sprawling mock Tudor pile. Beams of stained oak set into a creamy, plastered exterior. It reminded him of a Harvester restaurant. Its long, lead-lined windows looked like they belonged in some Hollywood caricature of Olde England straining to pass itself off as genteel country club. A playground for middle-class suburbia. It only confirmed what's he'd long suspected: golf was a cuntish type of sport.

As the car pulled away, he followed a moss-covered path to an open porch. Inside he could hear the faint sound of classical music being piped in from somewhere and the tang of beeswax furniture polish hung in the air. A honey-haired girl with large hooped earrings was sitting behind a desk across a thickly-carpeted reception. The freckled nose and unlikely tan Sean guessed were probably the result of regular trips to a local tanning salon. She was reading a celebrity gossip magazine but as he got nearer the desk she lifted her head and smiled.

“Are you a member, sir? It's members only I'm afraid.”

“No, I'm here to see Terry. Terry Francis.”

A lump appeared to lodge itself in the soft flesh of her throat. The girl looked edgy and pushed the magazine to one side.

“I don't believe we have anyone of that name here, I'm afraid.”

“Yeah, he's expecting me. He said to meet him down here. It's Sean... Sean McGee. Tell him Lennie sent me”

The girl stood up and cautiously peered at him, probably trying to gather a brief description, and Sean winked back at her. She looked half-decent, especially in her tight pencil skirt slit almost to the thigh, the slither of gold chain and that cream silky blouse which highlighted her golden tan, but she had the air of a girl who got too much her own way. He waited, hands still tucked into the pockets of his bomber jacket, as she turned and entered an office behind the desk before gently closing the door.

For a couple of minutes, he stood in the lobby alone and checked the place out. The antique framed photographs of golfers in tweed caps and plus fours on the walls. At one end a cabinet stacked with silverware, cups and trophies crested with miniature figures swinging golf clubs. Then in another corner of the room, beside the entrance to a passageway and next to a wooden staircase that led upstairs, a full set of rusted plate armour. Somehow it didn't seem to belong there. It looked like something from the Tower of London, reminding him of a junior school outing where him and a couple of mates had got a bollocking from the deputy head for nicking stuff out of the souvenir shop.

“He's on the course at the moment. They're just finishing up,” said the blonde as she emerged from office, “He asked if you'd meet him at the eighteenth. Would you like me to take you outside?”

“You can take me wherever you like, sweetheart.”

The blonde giggled. Even after a couple of years inside it was good to know he hadn't lost his touch.

He followed her through the passageway, his eyes fixed all the time on her pert arse, as she led him into an oak-panelled bar with thick red carpet. A handful of small wooden tables stood empty and the smell of stale cigar smoke still hung in the air. Heavy, velvet curtains were drawn at the far end of the room and a set of blood-red

lamp-shades glowed a dim light from the walls. The blonde walked to the far end where she drew back one of the curtains and opened a set of french doors that led down to some steps and a lawn below. The chill from outside invaded the warmth of the room.

“The eighteenth is over there,” she said pointing a finger capped by bright pink nail polish.

“Cheers, babe. I might have a drink here later when the bar opens. You gonna be around then?”

“Yeah maybe... By the way, I'm Natalie,” replied the girl, returning the smile, “My dad's the one in the red sweater.”

Outside Sean walked across the course in the direction of three figures standing on one of the putting greens. The grass underfoot felt lush and looked freshly cut and the course appeared to stretch out towards some woodland half a mile away. Over on his left he could make out a sandy bunker and, further still, a small lake with a willow tree whose branches stooped low over the dark water.

He picked up the pace when he noticed the figures had turned to face him, waiting for his arrival. They were standing by a couple of large golfing bags and next to one of those golf buggies that he'd once seen in a James Bond film. Two of the men were in typical golfing attire - checked trousers and argyle V-necks under thin waterproof jackets – and the other figure was a large black guy wearing a woollen hat, black leather coat and dark jeans.

“Good to finally meet you,” said the older of the two golfers as he caught up with them. The other man he noticed now was a pale-skinned Indian with a thick, black moustache resting on his upper lip.

“You're Terry, right?”

“Yeah.”

The older man was smiling but somehow Sean felt there had been some mistake. This didn't feel right. Lennie had said this Terry feller was old school, a heavy

London villain, but the bloke in front of him looked like some ageing dinosaur. The slightly greying hair. The Pringle jumper. The fat, saggy jowls of his face. This couldn't be the Terry Francis that Lennie had talked about. He was big alright. Broad shouldered and still trim for his age. But he couldn't believe this guy was same bloke who'd headed up one of the most feared football hooligan firms in the seventies, reputedly turned over a dozen security vans in one year back in the eighties and then flooded London clubland with ecstasy a decade later. He looked like he belonged on a cruise liner or on a sun-lounger on a beach in Tenerife. He seemed, well, more SAGA lout than lager lout.

“You play golf, Sean?”

Terry was staring at him now with this kindly glint in his eye and Sean was struggling to find a reply. He stared again at the bloke's white golf shoes and then at the grey, cashmere scarf that draped from his neck. Sean couldn't see how the bloke could be running a serious firm in all that clobber. Besides, at his age he was probably more into the Viagra than any villainy.

“You should give it a go. Sport of gentleman and all that.”

“Yeah, right.”

The man paused before turning to his golf bag and selecting a metal club from the bag.

“You see, golf is all about control,” said Terry turning back to face the group, “Well, power and control. Power is what you need to drive the ball a few hundred yards down the fairway but at this stage of the game – when you're on the green - you also need control. And I think you'll agree... power is nothing without control, right?”

Sean nodded whilst the other two men murmured their approval.

“Sorry I'm being a bit out of order. I haven't introduced you to my caddy, Curtis.”

The large black guy squeezed a smile that exposed a gleaming gold tooth. He was towering over the rest of them. He must have been six-five at least and a chest which spread so wide that it made the coat look too small for him, like an older brother trying to squeeze in his younger sibling's school uniform.

“And this is Rashid. A business acquaintance of mine.”

The pale-skinned Indian nodded in Sean's direction.

“Yeah. Rashid, here owes me fifty grand. He should have had it for me today and...”

The Indian suddenly looked anxious, his pale face flushed with colour.

“Mr Francis,” he interrupted “We have discussed the matter and I thought —”

“Shut up, Rashid. Can't you see I'm fucking talking to the man?” Terry replied “So the question to you, Sean, is who has the control here? Is it me who's been fucking stupid enough to lend him the dough? Or is it this cunt who's turned up with empty pockets?”

He was staring at Sean again but now there was no friendly glint. Only a frozen stare from behind dead eyes.

Sean paused. The question had seemed to drop out of nowhere.

“Err... I dunno...I'd have to think about that.”

Terry nodded, his head bowed, and took a few of steps towards a golf ball on the green a couple of meters away from the hole where a flag marking the eighteen lay on the manicured turf. He was standing over it, considering it in some silent meditation, as he took the club in his hand and swung it high into the air.

“Oi! There's a fucking divot here,” he said prodding the earth with the toe of his golf shoe, “I swear there's a fucking divot here.”

Sean watched as the other two men peered down at the flat grass.

“Rashid, get down there and have look, will you? I can't get down that low. Not with my back.”

The Indian looked around nervously, unsure at first about whether to take the request seriously.

“I don't think there's —”

“I don't care what you *think*! Get down and have a proper look. I'm not throwing this game because of a fucking divot.”

The man leant over and peered at the turf.

“Not like that. Get on your hands and knees and have a proper look.”

There was a slight delay before the man squatted down and inspected the ground with a sweeping motion of his hand.

Terry edged back slightly as the man turned and looked up at him.

“I'm afraid I don't see anything.”

“Not there,” said Terry pointing with the tip of his golf shoe, “There! Next to my ball.”

The man look puzzled and turned his head to inspect the ground more closely as Terry suddenly and silently swung the golf club high above his head. Sean took in a deep inhalation of breath and glanced away. He never saw the downward stroke of the club but he could still feel it its impact. It seemed to resonate right through him. He could feel it in the grim crack as steel met flesh and bone and in the long echoing scream the Indian let out once he'd recovered from the awful shock of the blow. Sean winced as he looked back at Rashid who was crouched on the ground, blood streaming from his face. The man's upper cheek bone seemed to have completely caved in giving his face in a strange, inhuman form like some gruesome plasticine face. His dark moustache was now caked in thick, foamy crimson blood and his open mouth exposed a couple of fractured teeth. At Swaleside, Sean had seen more than his fair share of nasty scraps amongst inmates but Terry's reaction seemed a touch excessive even by their standards.

“Get me the money tomorrow, you useless cunt,” bellowed Terry “Or next time I'll really do you some fucking damage.”

The indian was still writhing around on his back and screaming so hard it sounded like his lungs might explode. His hands and face were now soaked in his own blood and his legs were flailing around in the air like some animal who had realised all too late it was for the slaughter.

Terry sauntered over to the golf bag where he replaced the club before pulling up his trouser leg to inspect his shoe; its white leather upper was smeared with blood.

“Fucking 'ell. These are brand new and all.”

He glanced up at the huge black figure in the leather coat.

“Take him down the hospital, Curtis. Looks like Rashid here had an accident. And make sure that wanker doesn't get any blood on my car seats.”

Curtis nodded before bending down and dragging the man to his feet. The indian was still sobbing to himself, his hand tightly clutching one side of his face and his entire outfit now completely soaked in blood.

“Yeah... Sorry about all that, Sean.”

Terry was smiling again. The glint in his eye had returned but now it seemed to have lost all trace of kindness. It was self-congratulatory. An expression of a workmanlike pride as he inspected the blood-stained tip of the golf club.

“You see, I'm all about equal opportunities me,” continued Terry as he stared back down the fairway, “I'll deal with anyone. Black, white, chink, paki... I don't give a shit. It don't bother me where you've come from or what you've done in your past. That ain't an issue. You understand?”

Sean was already sensing the heavy gravitational pull of Terry's expectations.

“Yeah, I get you.”

“Thing is...” Terry added, “There's a flip-side to all that love and understanding bollocks. See, if you disappoint me then I don't give a fuck who you are or where you're from. I don't give a monkey's if you're English born-and-bred, a Paddy or straight out of Calcutta like that cunt over there. Anyone who let's me down has an equal opportunity of getting fucking hurt - you understand me?”

Sean nodded. He still felt overwhelmed by the sudden savagery of what he'd just witnessed a minute ago. Over Terry's shoulder he could just make out the enormous figure of Curtis picking up a blubbering Rashid and dumping him into the golf cart before setting off across the grass. The sight of this giant figure steering the cart alongside the whimpering Indian seemed like some gruesome comedy double act.

“Good. We understand each other then. You come recommended by the way so I know you won't disappoint me”

Terry paused for a moment as he pressed a clump of earth into the green with his

toe.

“There is a fucking divot there as well. Now grab the bag will you? The doctor says it's bad for my back lugging that thing around.”

Sean walked over to the golf bag from which Terry had retrieved the club and heaved it over his shoulder.

“By the way,” said Terry as he strolled across the putting green back towards the entrance of the bar “Welcome to the club. It's always good to have a new member.”

CHAPTER 8: 'THE BIG SLEEP'

Sitting in a crowded compartment of a tube train rumbling its way along the Victoria Line, Jack's finger flicked restlessly across the iPod that Laura had given him the previous Christmas. He groaned to himself as the screen flashed and then the device shut itself down; like Jack, the thing lately seemed to be unreliable, permanently low on battery. He didn't really mind. He reckoned he was coming to that age when most music had lost its appeal and his concentration that afternoon was being eroded by a monstrous migraine.

He'd spent the the previous couple of hours talking to two police officers in Tottenham who were investigating a bogus marriage racket centred around the Broadwater Farm Estate. A couple of local men had been involved, acting as prospective match-makers for a stream of young African women seeking indefinite leave to remain. It was a shitty story really. Less of a criminal conspiracy and more a series of inter-related tragedies; desperate tales of flight from civil wars in failed states, relentless famines or grinding poverty. In the hands of Charlie Drayton he knew it would all be spun as a parable about those who sought to cheat the red tape of Her Majesty's Immigration Service, the leeches who were intent on living an idle life in the United Kingdom at the expense of honest taxpayers.

From inside his messenger bag he fished out the print-out of a Wikipedia article he'd picked up off the printer before leaving the office and started to read.

He cursed to himself as he read it - it didn't seem to make any sense – and he guessed he'd clicked on the wrong link. As the train slowed into the next station, he reached inside the pocket of his jacket for his small Moleskin notebook and flicked to the centre pages where he'd taken notes from a phone call to the Scotland Yard Press Office that morning. The toxicology report had finally been completed. He wouldn't have bothered normally except that the menacing phone call he'd received that night he'd visited Cynthia had still been taunting him. Instinct told him that toxicology report would prove Kenny's insinuations to be nonsense and he could put the call

down to either a prank or a wrong number. The woman at the other end had read the words to him like they were a foreign language, the long, flat monotone of Estuary English.

Pentobarbital. He checked the article's heading against his notes again and was left confused. He could recall making the woman spell it out to him. He scanned the print-out again.: “Pentobarbital is a short-acting barbiturate... available as both a free acid and a sodium salt.” But what baffled him was the heading of “approved uses” which listed only “treatment of seizures and preoperative sedation”. And then his eyes came to rest on one particular sentence halfway down the page: “The common pharmaceutical brand name is Nembutal.”

He'd heard the name before. It had come up in a story he'd covered where an elderly man with terminal cancer had obtained the drug through an internet site in Mexico for his wife who was in the downward spiral of dementia. With the onset of the man's cancer, he knew there would be a point when he would be unable to care for her and he'd promised himself that before that time came he would allow his wife to die with a degree of dignity. Unwisely, he had recounted all of this to a home help who visited them weekly at their home in Northolt and the young woman had reported it straight to the police. When the pensioner was arrested, Jack had picked up the story off the newswire and filed some copy for the Post but eventually the CPS had rejected the case.

But if that was the same drug – the same Nembutal – then what was Linda doing with it? It was hardly a recreational drug and it wasn't the kind of thing you could procure at a pharmacy or anywhere outside a hospital trauma ward and that was with good reason. Nembutal was a highly dangerous sedative. According to the Wikipedia entry, it had been used in the United States as a lethal injection in executions. You couldn't even obtain it in Mexico any longer as, after mounting pressure, the government there had prohibited its sale over the counter. If Linda had intended to kill herself then it seemed an unlikely method of suicide. So was it simply bungling that had led the police to overlook such an obvious discrepancy? After all, it wasn't

Valium as his original source had suggested. You didn't pop a couple of Nembutal because you were stressed or couldn't sleep; you administered it because you wanted the big sleep.

Now he felt it again. The tiny heart of a story beating somewhere out there. It was only embryonic now but he felt that familiar instinct that he had stumbled on to something, something struggling to make itself heard over the noise of the world. If it hadn't been for the phone call he would have forgotten all about Linda Lavonne. In the meantime, he'd been busy chasing other stories: a young banker who'd strangled his wife when she discovered he was having an affair with a colleague; the ongoing row about the extension of the London congestion zone; a top Mayfair restaurant whose kitchen was alleged to be infested with rats.

He was meant to return to the office to file the copy on the marriage scam but his gut told him to chase this lead. For a couple of stops he dithered. At Euston he got off and walked through the tunnels to the platform of the southbound Northern Line. Throughout the next tube journey Kenny's words from that afternoon seemed to echo in his mind. At the time, he'd put it all down to a fondness for melodrama or maybe a contempt for the Met that probably stemmed back to the bungs and backhanders in the days of the Dirty Squad. Now he wondered if there was perhaps more to those suspicions than he'd first given the old man credit for.

At Elephant and Castle he got off and took a cramped, dirty lift up to street level. Within ten minutes he found himself back on the Old Kent Road. A thick winter sleet was falling from the grey sky overhead slowing the dense traffic to a crawl. He found the door easily this time. The lock had been fixed and above a light was on in the upstairs office.

“What do you want?”

He recognised Kenny's cockney twang through the intercom.

“I just wanted to ask you a couple more questions.”

“No. I'm busy. I'm doing a shoot. You asked me all about this the other day.”

“Yeah but there's been some developments.”

“What?”

“I don't really want to discuss it on the street, Ken.”

There was a pause for a couple of seconds as if Kenny was trying to ascertain whether it was some journalistic bluff.

“Alright. Come up then.”

As the intercom buzzed he pushed hard against the door. Inside, the same musty smell hung in the hallway as he climbed the stairs to the first floor in darkness.

“You'll have to wait in the office,” came Kenny's voice from beyond the landing, “You can make yourself a cup of coffee if you like. I'll be another twenty minutes at least. Stick the radio on if you want.”

The first door on the gloomy landing was slightly ajar. A bright, fluorescent pulse of light momentarily dazzled him. As he passed he tried to glance through the small crack in the door and could make out a naked girl kneeling with her breasts cradled in her palms. He could sense an erection stirring but he tried to ignore it, ashamed at the thought of himself as some seedy Peeping Tom spying on a private moment.

Inside the office the desk lamp was on and he edged his way over to the sink where he filled the kettle. He tried to resist looking at the walls again, conscious of an unsettling voyeurism which had been stirred inside him. Once he'd made himself a coffee, he made his way back to the front table and, through the blinds, watched the pedestrians on the street below as they passed. He wondered how many of them could imagine what kind of enterprise existed only a few feet above them and then, finally, he found the radio and tuned it to a news station whilst he waited for the shoot to finish.

It was half an hour later when he heard the door down the landing creak open and a couple of muffled voices in the passage.

“Yeah, there's a couple of really good ones there. If you're interested in doing the other stuff we talked about then you've got my number.”

Kenny came into the office followed by a brown-haired girl wearing tight jeans

and a pink t-shirt with a “let's fcuk” slogan printed on it. Jack smiled at her but she ignored him, looking embarrassed at his presence, conscious perhaps that he probably knew too much about her reasons for being there.

“It's the standard hundred for a portfolio set, sweetheart.”

The girl nodded and reached into a Chanel clutch bag before pulling out a white envelope and handing it to Kenny. He opened it and checked the contents.

“You want a receipt?”

“No, that's fine. Look, I should get going really if I'm going to catch my train.”

The girl's politeness was disarming. It wasn't the South London drawl Jack had expected; more Home Counties if anything. And how old was she? Nineteen? Twenty? Did her parents know she was here? Was this how university students paid their tuition fees these days?

She picked up a grey raincoat off a coat hook on the back of the door, inside it was lined with an expensive designer check, then she slipped it on and within another moment Jack could hear her clattering her way down the landing and then down the steep stairs in her stiletto heels.

“You made yourself at home then?”

Downstairs he heard the door slam shut and they were alone.

“Yeah. Sorry for the intrusion.”

Kenny paused for a moment as he fished a cigarette out of a packet of Rothmans on the table. In the background the radio droned on “...in the Prime Minister's reshuffle Henry Hunter-Goodwin has replaced...”

“Shut that off will you. It gives me a fucking headache all that talking,” said Kenny as he lit his cigarette and puffed a thick cloud of tobacco smoke into the space between them, “So what's all this about?”

“Well, as I said there's been some developments and...”

“Yeah, let's cut to the chase, shall we?”

“It's the toxicology report. The report on Linda. It came out today. It wasn't booze and tranquilizers as the police said. It was pentobarbital.”

“So?”

“You know what pentobarbital is?”

“No. Should I? I'm not fucking Boot's the Chemist.”

“It's a controlled substance. In the state of Mississippi it's used for lethal injections. You know... executions of prisoners on death row.”

“So what you saying?”

“I'm saying I don't think it was suicide. I mean... why would she have had pentobarbital? Where would she have got it from? Something just doesn't stack up, I reckon.”

There was silence for a second or two as Kenny took a long drag on his cigarette.

“Yeah, well, I never thought she topped herself.”

Jack watched him as he paced to the other side of the room and placed the contents of the envelope in a metal cash box.

“So what do you want me to do about it?”

“Well, you were pretty close to Linda, weren't you?”

He nodded.

“Yeah. I suppose so. What you getting at? You don't fucking think I –”

“No! I'm just saying if it's foul play...”

He was aware of his own use of the present tense in the question. Linda was dead. The coroner had done his work. A few days from now she'd probably be lying in cold earth somewhere or reduced to a urnful of ashes in a crematorium furnace.

Kenny chuckled, shaking his head.

“Oh I see, you're Batman and I'm Robin, is it?”

“Sorry?”

“You wanna play at being a fucking superhero? Ridding London's streets of villains, is it?”

He was confused. He couldn't believe Kenny wasn't taking the news seriously.

“Look,” said Kenny, tapping his cigarette into an ashtray, “Firstly, you're doing this because you want a fucking story. It's not about injustice. There's enough

injustice in the world. If you want to write about that then just take a look around you, it's everywhere. And, secondly, I don't think you know what you're getting yourself into. If Linda was murdered – and I'm not doubting what you're saying – then the people who did it aren't fucking about. Believe me, they're not people you'd want to meet. They're way out of your league.”

He watched as Kenny took another drag from his cigarette. Now he was sure that he knew something; more than he'd let on in their first encounter.

“What people? You said she was involved in some murky business.”

Kenny coughed up a lungful of phlegm and then walked over to the filing cabinet and opened the bottom draw.

“Look, I'm knackered. I fancy a drink. Do you want one?”

“I've just had a coffee thanks.”

“No I mean a real drink,” he said as he pulled a bottle of Bells out of the lower drawer of the cabinet.

“No really, I'm fine,” said Jack, trying to steer his gaze away from the bottle.

“You sure?”

He hadn't touched a drop in almost three weeks but now he could hear the familiar metallic scrape of the bottle cap being loosened and the glugging of liquid as Kenny poured himself a scotch. It was calling to him like an old friend who'd recognized him as they passed on the street.

“Okay.. Just a small one then.”.

“I'm not really sure I should be telling you this,” Kenny said as he made his way back to the with two whisky tumblers, “And this is all strictly off-the-fucking-record by the way. I want your word on that.”

Jack nodded.

“Well since she's dead and you're so keen to know....”

He passed one of the tumblers to Jack before slumping into the other chair and glugging a mouthful of the amber liquid.

“Back in the late eighties, she got into this weird thing. Like some weird new-age

thing. A cult, I suppose you'd call it. *Exegesis* I think they called it. I think Carole got her into it. I don't know really.”

“Carole?”

“Yeah. Carole Caplin.”

“You mean Carole Caplin, Cherie Blair's friend?”

“Yeah. Her. Everyone knew everyone back then. Carole did some modelling for one of Paul's magazines. That's how she got to know Linda. You've heard of Paul Raymond, right?”

Jack had heard of Raymond, Soho's legendary porn impresario. Raymond had started out in the late fifties with the Raymond Revue Bar – the first club to perform striptease in the country – but by the seventies he'd become a kingpin in the world of sex shops and adult bookshops. It was then he'd moved into the magazine business. Titles that filled the top-shelves of newsagents up and down the country. The business had made Raymond fantastically wealthy but from what Jack recalled his life had been marred by personal tragedy and drug addiction.

“Anyway, they tried to control you... the cult, I mean. Tell you what to eat and have these weird meetings where they'd all shout at each other. They sounded like a bunch of real fruit-and-nut jobs to me. And they'd try to recruit girls. Pretty girls like Linda. I mean, she was a sweet girl in those days but not exactly the sharpest tool in the box if you catch my drift.”

“What do you mean? Recruit them for what?”

“From what I heard, they had these businesses.... telesales and all sorts. I suppose it was all about persuasion really. I mean they'd persuaded Linda to get in with them. But one of their sidelines was this thing called The Exhibitionists.”

Instinctively, Jack took out his Moleskin book but Kenny motioned with his hand and Jack put the notebook back in his pocket.

“I heard Pearl Read was the brains behind all that,” Kenny continued “It was her idea. At that time she was still married to Joe Wilkins. A proper heavy bloke who ran a couple of clubs back in the sixties where gangsters and film stars used to rub

shoulders. He'd had run ins with the Krays. Apparently, Ronnie really had it in for him.”

“So you think this Joe bloke might have killed her?”

Kenny laughed.

“Not unless you believe in reincarnation. Joe snuffed it a few years back. I heard he'd gone to Spain. Costa del Sol. He'd made a tidy pile smuggling drugs in the late eighties. Hash from Morocco apparently. Served a bit of time for it too.”

Jack was confused. He couldn't understand where Kenny's ramblings were going.

“So I don't understand.... this thing... The Exhibitionists. What was that all about?”

“Well, when Pearl started out she was modelling swimwear. It was all more innocent back in those days but she had this gorgeous figure. I'd seen her pictures when I was just starting out in the business. But by the time she got together with Joe they had another earner. Agencies.”

“Agencies?”

“You know. Escorts. Brasses, if you wanna call 'em that. I think Joe got collared for that too and had to go away for a bit. Anyway, Linda got roped into going along to one of The Exhibitionists' things. She'd been told she was just having dinner with some businessmen and a couple of the other girls. I mean she seemed to be quite green about it all. It turned out it was at this flash hotel up in Mayfair with these rich Arabs – oil sheiks or something – and all the girls were blondes like Linda. Throughout the dinner, one of the Arabs kept groping her under the table and then he suggested they go upstairs to his suite for coffee. It was only then she twigged what was going on.”

“So what did she do?”

Kenny chuckled.

“What's that phrase you tabloid blokes use? Yeah... she made her excuses and left.”

“So what's all that got to do with her death?”

“Yeah, I'm getting to that. For a while in the early nineties, I lost touch with her. She was done with all the Page Three stuff. Too old for it really. By then, she'd move into other stuff. Video and whatever. Not my kind of thing but the rumour was that she was also running girls. Probably got the idea from Pearl.”

“Go on.”

“Well, she had her own agency of sorts, I suppose. High-class. She knew the girls on the scene and she had some good contacts. Rich blokes with money. City people and music industry types... even a few Lords and politicians. They put on these parties at this big old house up Hampstead way. Proper orgy type do's. I mean, the modelling was all over for her by then so what else was she going to do?”

He took another slug of whisky, stood up and stared out through the window on to the street below.

“Anyway, I hadn't seen her for a few years but then she phoned me up one night. She was in a right state. Talking ten to the dozen. Said she needed to talk to someone. Someone she trusted. So, she came down here. I can still remember it. She was sitting in that chair. Right where you're sitting now.”

“A chat about what?”

“Well, she'd got into a bit of trouble. I mean they weren't exactly being discreet. Word had got round and they'd got a visit from some people. Heavy people who'd threatened her.”

“Did you know them?”

“Knew of them. Well, one of them anyway.”

“Who was he?”

“I'm not saying. More than my life's worth. I wouldn't even breathe that name.”

“Why?”

“The bloke's a fucking psychopath. Big-time villain. Makes the twins look like Laurel & Hardy. You don't mess with people like that. Believe me, he's the stuff of fucking nightmares.”

“So I don't get it... what was it all about?”

“I don't know really. She wouldn't say. Maybe they were putting the squeeze on her. I mean I heard the parties were raking it in. I think they were into other stuff too. Selling a bit of gear or whatever. She told me they had all this cash lying around and they couldn't stick it in the bank. In the end, they were paying some bloke in Knightsbridge just to look after it for them and she said something about having to take out some insurance.”

“What do you mean insurance?”

“Life insurance, she said. Search me what she was on about it... I just reckoned she was off her head. She'd been drinking.. on the gear too probably and she was all jumpy. I don't think she knew what she was saying. It killed me to see her like that. She was such a lovely girl when I first met her. Not a malicious bone in her body. I don't know why she ever got into that side of things.”

He reached over and poured himself another whisky then sat down and leaned back into his chair.

”I remember her sitting in here that night. She was shivering. I put my arm around her. 'There, there' I was telling her, 'No one can get you here.' And then she stared up at me, her eyes all bloodshot. 'You don't understand,' she kept saying to me 'You don't understand. What have I done to myself? I've had my heart ripped out. I'm not a person any more, Ken. I'm not. I'm just this body... I'm just a body without a heart.’”

They sat for a moment in silence as they both sipped their whiskies. Outside from the street a car horn finally broke the silence. He was trying to comprehend it all, this brief lesson in the history London's underworld. It was as if he had turned the handle of a door into a secret world.

“Look, I've got to get going. I'm meeting an old mate in Peckham for a drink. But I found something you might be interested in the other day,” said Kenny as he reached up to one of the shelves next to the window “I was having a sort out and found 'em wedged under one of the filing cabinets. I think it was from just after that time she came here. Sent it to me from Spain or somewhere. I think she'd gone there to lie low for a bit.”

He passed a couple of polaroids over to Jack. In the first photo he could see two women in bikinis lying on a white, sandy beach. A brunette and a blonde. In spite of the oversized sunglasses, he recognised Linda immediately. She looked older than the other picture Kenny had given him but she still had the figure, the striking good looks that would have turned heads. On the bottom she'd scribbled a date and a short message "Thanks for looking after things for me in London. I know I can always trust you with my life. It's 36C here. Sweet Dreams, Ken. Love always. Linda. xx"

He flipped to the second one. His heart thumped when he saw it. There she was sitting at a table of what looked like a beach bar and in the chair sitting next to her a tall, muscular black guy. He recognised the face instantly from the photographs in Cynthia's front room. It was Lewis Campbell. He was sure of it.

"I think that was her bloke. The boyfriend I told you about."

Jack's mind returned to the conversation with Cynthia. She had mentioned a girlfriend. A model. And they had both been killed within days of each other. The timing couldn't have just been coincidence. Whoever did it wanted both of them out of the way but what threat had they posed that someone wanted them dead?

"What about the other girl in the first photo?" Jack asked staring at the brunette.

"That's Tracy Kirby. Her and Linda were old pals from her Page Three days. Back then it was always Tracy, Linda and Maria. They all shared the same agent. She wouldn't have been on it though... the parties, I mean. She was dead against all that – the drugs and everything. Quite straight-laced really. I think that's maybe why Linda invited her. She thought she'd be safe around Tracy."

"Do you mind if I hang on to these?"

"I suppose not. I mean, they're worth fuck all to me."

"And do you know where I can find this Tracy? I might try to pay her a visit."

"Oh, you can try," replied Kenny with a smile, "I think you'd have to make an appointment."

"Where does she live?"

"Holloway."

“So you have a current address for her then?”

“Oh I know the address alright,” said Kenny as he gulped the last of his whisky,
“Her Majesty's Prison Holloway.”

CHAPTER 9: 'ARTISTIC LICENCE'

Around mid-morning Jack was sitting in front of his computer on the news desk staring out at the heavy rain beating against the windows of the twenty-fifth floor. He'd just filed a piece that morning about Linda Lavonne's funeral which had taken place the previous day at St Dunstan's in Stepney, a grey stone church with a square Norman style tower that looked like it belonged more in a Cotswold village than sandwiched awkwardly between a couple of East End council estates.

The small congregation had been composed of a few family members along with a few old friends and associates. Kenny was there, looking grey and haggard, and talking to David Silverman, another soft-porn magnate who'd made a fortune from top shelf magazines in the eighties and had now taken over a local football club. Jack approached him after the service for a quote.

"I don't talk to the press" he'd replied frostily before getting into a chauffeur driven Bentley and speeding off towards Mile End Road.

Still, Kevin had still managed to snap a decent picture of him leaving the church with Kenny lingering in the background.

Jack's story dwelt on Linda's connections to the Exegesis cult mentioning its unlikely business offshoot, The Exhibitionists. He'd worked the Carole Kaplin angle, mentioning her connection to Cherie Blair, in the full knowledge that it would appeal to Charlie. He'd even managed to track down Pearl Read but she'd refused to comment and had put the phone down when he'd persisted with the questions. The rest of the piece alluded to an unnamed source suggesting that Linda may have been the target of gangland threats. He didn't mention Linda's connection to Lewis Campbell. For fear of jeopardizing his own investigation, he reckoned it was something that for now was best kept to himself. It was just enough sensationalism he reckoned to earn him a byline but it kept Kenny's name out of the frame.

Sipping his eleven'o'clock latte, he began flicking through a glossy holiday brochure screened from the gaze of the others by his computer monitor. In the New

Year he'd promised Laura a holiday. Somewhere hot and with a beach, he'd promised her. She'd mentioned Barbados but that seemed a bit on the pricey side. Besides, there was no need to spend an entire ten days sunbathing. There was always Florida. He looked at the fly-drive deals the brochure advertised. Fly into Orlando and then drive down to Miami and on to Key West. Hemingway's house was there. He'd always wanted to see that after he'd read 'The Old Man And The Sea'. And then on the way down take in the Everglades, take a boat trip through the swamps where the alligators lurked in the mangroves. That could be an adventure. Better than spending all day on a beach in the baking heat where there was nothing to do except drink beer and gaze longingly at girls in swimsuits.

He was imagining the holiday when he suddenly felt the presence of someone hovering behind him.

“Planning on going somewhere, Jack?”

He knew immediately it was Charlie. As he looked up, he was standing there with that familiar, fake smile of his. Jack shoved the brochure to the side of his desk.

“Oh, this.... it was just lying around.”

“I've just read your copy on the Lavonne funeral.”

So that's what he'd come over about and now he was going to subject Jack to some humiliating rollicking in front of the rest of the news team. He could already feel the muscles in his back tensing in anticipation.

“Yeah.... Loved it, Jack!”

For a split-second, Charlie's response seemed to catch him off-guard.

“A page three piece, I reckon.”

“Really?”

“Well, I suppose it would be fitting. Our little tribute, eh? Loved all that stuff about The Exhibitionists, mate. Was that a bit of artistic licence? I mean you can say what you like about the old scrubber now. After all, you can't slander the dead, Jack.”

Charlie always seemed to revel in his displays of public heartlessness.

“No, that's all true actually.”

“What? Your *source who wished to remain anonymous*?”

“Yeah.”

Charlie laughed.

“Well, it's a nice touch anyway and it's been quiet today apart from all the economic figures. Keep it up, mate, and you'll be able to afford that expensive holiday.”

Jack took a long breath and watched as Charlie sauntered back to his office.

At around six, Jack noticed Ivan collecting his umbrella from the coat stand and decided to invite him for a quick drink in a wine bar around the corner. He was surprised when Ivan accepted. For a journalist, Ivan wasn't the most sociable being. He was never really the type to be out drinking after work with other reporters. Maybe that was because they so rarely invited him. But Jack sensed it was an opportunity to see if Ivan had heard anything on the grapevine about his contract being renewed.

Davy's Bar was crammed with the usual mix of bankers and traders. After finding a table in an alcove that afforded them some privacy, Jack could overhear their gloomy conversations about credit markets as he stood at the bar waiting to be served. He returned with a pint of bitter for Ivan and settled for an orange juice for himself.

“Joining the temperance movement, Jack?”

He felt himself blush for a moment and looked down at the table.

“No. Just a bit of a health kick before the big Christmas splurge.”

“Oh, I see. Very wise if I may say so.”

“So, you were right about the reshuffle,” he said, desperately trying to change the subject.

“In what sense?”

“Well, wasn't that Henry Hunter-Goodwin you mentioned promoted to the cabinet?”

“Ahh yes.. but that was about all. I had the impression that the reshuffle would be more wide-reaching but then I suppose with coalition governments one doesn't always have the whip hand so much. The rumour in the lobby is that the PM may have lost his nerve.”

“So, this Hunter-Goodwin guy – that name rings a bell – wasn't he the one who was forced to resign before? Something he said about Africans?”

Ivan smiled as he took a sip from his pint.

“Well, I'm not sure it was directed just at Africans but I think that was how it was interpreted given that he was Shadow Development Secretary at the time. He was certainly advocating large cuts to the overseas development budget.”

“Yeah, I remember. Wasn't it something about Africans being unimportant?”

“No, I believe the quote was that *we should accept that some lives were more important than others.*”

Jack snorted and shook his head.

“I'm surprised he still has career in politics after that kind of gaffe.”

“Gaffe? Oh no... I'm sure he was vocalizing what many on the right of the Tory party think,” Ivan continued, “And it was something of a calculated move given that he was launching a bid for the leadership of the Conservative Democratic Alliance at the time.”

“The Conservative Democratic Alliance?”

“Oh, you may have heard of it. It's a hangover from the Monday Club. A collection of the more.... fiercely, traditional Tories.”

“The lunatic fringe, you mean?”

“Well, I'm not sure that's how our Flash Harry would describe them.”

“Flash Harry?” replied Jack with a chuckle, “Why do you call him that?”

“As I understand it, he earned the nickname at university. His family are old money but he was known for.... well, a certain degree of largesse, shall we say?”

“Largesse?”

“Fond of champagne and nightclubs. He disappeared off to the Far East for ten

years to make a small fortune in the stockmarket not long after graduating but whilst at Oxford I heard he was president of one of those obnoxious dining societies.”

“Oh a bit of a party animal when he was younger then?”

“Yes, you might say that. All very bourgeois, of course. God help us all if he's in charge of defending the nation's culture. Although I don't think there's really much to defend. Everyone seems to be glued to *Popstarz* and those other dreadful reality TV shows. It make *Eastenders* look like a production of the English National Opera.”

Jack laughed. He couldn't help but be amused sometimes by Ivan's unapologetic snobbery. But then Ivan seemed to belong to another age. He was the only person Jack knew who regularly attended the ballet and listened to Schubert on his iPod.

“So do you think I'm safe?”

“What ? You think the culture secretary might pick you up on your grammar?”

“No. I mean at work.”

“Oh right. I didn't think you were really that under the cosh.”

“You must have heard that bollocking I got off Charlie a while back?”

“Oh that's just his style. The man is a complete oaf. I don't know why you put up with it.”

“For the same reason you put up with it, I imagine.”

“Remember, I'm a permanent member of staff. I've got a pension to collect, Jack. I retire in two years after which time I'm planning on a move to Provence. My sons are out of university and settled in their careers. Actually, I'm looking forward to being put out to graze.”

He could picture the scene. Ivan sitting in the shade of an old French farmhouse as the sun beat down on distant vineyards. Lizards scuttling across a dusty garden path and Ivan sipping from a glass of wine whilst reading Flaubert. It was an enviable existence.

“Well, I don't think I'm going to be retiring any time soon. Not unless –”

“Oh, you'll get your contract renewed. I heard him talking about your copy today. You're back in his good books. If he doesn't then you could always go freelance.”

Jack shrugged.

“I can't see it really. I'm a reporter not a features writer.”

“Even so, you'll survive. You're a rare breed today, Jack. A journalist who actually cares about what's going on in the world.”

He wondered for a second if Ivan was joking but the words were not accompanied by the usual wry smile. It seemed entirely genuine and from a veteran newsman like Ivan it was a touching compliment.

“Fancy another?” Ivan asked.

“Yeah. Go on then.”

“Another orange juice?”

Jack hesitated for a moment.

“No. Get me whatever you're having. I think I deserve it.”

A couple of pints later on the train ride home, he was still mulling over Ivan's advice. Maybe freelancing was an option worth considering. After all, it seemed no less secure than the twice yearly torment of wondering whether his contract would be renewed and, besides, there were still magazines and the trade press who required staff. If Charlie decided to let him go then it would be a setback but not a disaster. Him and Laura would muddle through somehow. And if the Post did renew his contract then perhaps it was time to think about them finally starting a family. Nowadays there was always an unspoken tension between them about the subject. He knew that at her age they couldn't be putting it off much longer and, besides, a baby would be another good reason to keep the booze at bay.

As he finally approached the front door and put the key in the lock he noticed the light was on in the front room and a couple of silhouettes through the curtain and then suddenly the door opened and Laura was standing there in the hallway. She was wearing a black dress with her hair neatly tied in a pony tail and staring at Jack with a look of contempt.

“Where the fuck have you been?” she whispered, under her breath, “I told you my

sister and her new boyfriend were coming to dinner tonight!”

He'd forgotten to charge his phone at the office and had completely forgotten about Laura's planned dinner although now some hazy recollection of her saying something about her sister visiting London now surfaced in his memory.

“I'm sorry I was working late.“

“You've been at the pub more like.”

“No, I mean I –”

“Jack, don't lie. I can fucking smell it on you. I thought we agreed –”

“I know what we agreed. It was a work thing. I had one... that's all.”

“Whatever! I don't want to hear it.”

“Hear what?”

“Look, I told you before. I'm not going back to how things were. You better decide. I'm not telling you again; it's me or the booze, Jack.”

She frowned at him and then turned and he followed into the front room where Laura's younger sister, Rebecca, was sitting on the sofa with a young bearded guy by her side drinking coffee.

“Hey, Jack! How are you doing? This is Peter. You know you just missed a fantastic dinner?”

He noticed Laura still scowling as she collected up the empty dinner plates.

“Yeah. I'm really sorry about that, Becky. I just got caught with something at work.”

CHAPTER 10: 'ENDANGERED SPECIES

“Make the left just here,” said Terry.

Sean flicked the indicator and then pulled the Range Rover off the main road. Delicate snowflakes were beginning to fall all around them. He wondered if it would stick around for Christmas. It had been a while since he could remember a white Christmas. It reminded him of being a kid. Bing Crosby in his red cardigan crooning away on the TV. His mum and her new bloke having some blazing row about something in the kitchen.

Where they were heading seemed a strange place for a meet. Somewhere out on the marshes between Tilbury and Rainham. He hadn't asked who they were meeting. He reckoned there was an unspoken understanding in this game that you didn't ask those sort of questions but he was also anxious to impress, to make it clear to his new boss that he had a bit of potential. Later Terry had said they'd sit down and work something out. Curtis sat in the back seat the whole time. He never seemed to say much - kept his gob shut for the most part - which was probably just the way Terry liked it.

They continued down a narrow road. A light covering of snow was now beginning to settle on the frozen tarmac and then he noticed a metal sign with what looked like a picture of a falcon. *Welcome to Rainham Bird Sanctuary*. Beyond it, a pair of heavy, metal gates.

“Stick it up over here,” said Terry gesturing inside the gate.

He pulled the Ranger Rover into a gravel car park. It was deserted apart from a couple of other cars. It was hardly surprising. Who in their right mind wanted to visit a bird sanctuary in December? Why couldn't they meet in a pub where it was warm and they could have a quiet pint?

As they got out of the Range Rover he noticed two men in sheepskin coats get out of a metallic blue Audi parked nearby. They nodded at the three of them as they approached.

“Sean,” said Terry as their footsteps crunched over the icy gravel, “I want you to meet a couple of associates of mine, Izzet and Arben.”

The two men offered him a businesslike handshake but their expressions remained serious. To Sean, they looked Eastern European or possibly even Turkish with their swarthy complexions and rough stubble.

“That's for that little job you did for me,” said Terry handing them a brown envelope from inside his overcoat. The taller of the two men took the package and passed it to his companion.

“Let's take a little walk shall we?” said Terry motioning to the entrance of the bird sanctuary.

A strong breeze was now blowing, whipping the snow around their faces as they walked. The place was empty. Only one member of staff, a fat bloke in an RSPB cap, was manning the entrance gate and he seemed slightly surprised at the sudden appearance of this unlikely group of visitors.

Within a couple of minutes they were inside, the five of them strolling around past tall steel bird cages. Inside one, a barn owl sat on a wooden perch shrinking its feathers around its body against the cold. Its huge yellow eyes seemed to follow Sean as he passed, as if the bird was somehow suspicious of his presence there.

At the end of the path, beyond a barbed wire fence, he could see a stretch of brown marshland from which occasional thickets of rushes grew and further out the cold, grey waters of the Thames Estuary rippling in the wind.

They all stopped by one of the largest cages as Terry peered in. On the ground inside, pecking at the frozen earth, was a large, ugly-looking bird with dark brown feathers and a sharp, black beak. Sean was amazed by the size of it. Sensing it was being observed, the bird now turned its bald head to face them and stared menacingly with the shiny, black pearls of its eyes.

“Do you know what that is?” said Terry turning to the two men in the sheepskins. They shook their heads blankly.

“It's a Black Vulture. See? It says it here,” he said pointing to a small plastic sign

fixed to the cage, “*Aegypius monachus*. That's fucking Latin that is.”

The two men stared silently into the cage. Above Sean noticed another sign which read 'Please do not disturb the birds' in bold capital letters.

“Ugly looking fucker,” quipped Sean.

Terry flashed him a glare.

“That's the largest bird of prey in the world,” continued Terry “That fucker will eat anything. Dead or alive. It looks all calm now but I was speaking to one of the blokes down here before and he was saying if it went for you with that beak of his, it would take your arm clean off.”

Terry picked up a small pebble from the ground and threw it through the cage at the bird. It struck the bird on the neck and it let out a shrill squaw, opening its huge wings in a display of angry defiance. Instinctively, Sean took a step a back.

“Apparently, there used to be loads of 'em,” said Terry turning to one of the brothers “Not so much round these parts but southern Europe. Well, your neck of the woods really. They're an endangered species now. Funny that... you know, when you consider how dangerous they are.”

“I thought we come to talk about business not about birds,” said the man impatiently.

“Calm down, Izzet. All in good time, mate. I'm just giving you a little talk about the importance of conservation.”

The man took out a cigarette and lit it with a flick from his silver Zippo.

“See, these birds are practically extinct. That's why they got to be kept here in this sanctuary. If they let this bird out then it wouldn't last for too long. Well, it might last a few weeks. Maybe a month. But, you see, England ain't its natural habitat and it's always best for an animal to be in its natural habitat. If you introduce a new species over here then, well, who knows if it would survive.”

Terry now waggled his little finger through the cage. With a powerful flap of its giant wings the bird tried to swoop towards it but Terry managed to withdraw just in time. Its beak snapped against the wire of the cage and the bird slid to the ground.

“Izzet here is from Kosovo,” said Terry turning to face Sean, “That's his natural habitat. Fought with his brother here in the KLA against the Serbs, didn't you?”

Izzet nodded.

“You wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for old Tony Blair. Ain't that right?”

“Yes. Tony Blair... very good man,” replied Izzet.

“Yeah.. anyway, what I'm saying to you is this place ain't being run by Tony Blair any more. And, you two... well, you're are a long fucking way from Kosovo.”

Izzet exhaled a cloud of cigarette smoke and for a moment Sean thought he noticed a slight tremor in the Kosovan's hand.

“Now let's have a little chat in private, shall we?” said Terry as he took a few slow paces away from the cage with Izzet and his brother following closely.

Sean stayed behind and stared at the bird again while Curtis looked at his watch. The bird was still eyeing the pair of them warily. A few feet away from them, Sean could see Terry and the two Kosovans already deep in conversation. Terry was shaking his head and making a grand sweeping gesture with one of his hands.

The snow was getting thicker now. Falling in big clumps like cotton wool.

“Is it true about that vulture... that it can take your arm clean off?” Sean asked.

Curtis shrugged before turning to gaze out across the estuary.

Sean sensed he needed to get a rapport going. If they were going to be working together he needed to get on his partner's good side. Besides, Curtis could give him the heads up on things: where Terry was raking all the cash in from and who they needed to be on the lookout for.

They stood in silence for a moment as an eddy of wind whipped the snow around them. It felt like a scene from a plastic snow globe that his mum used to put on the mantelpiece at Christmas time.

“You been working for him long then?”

Curtis now turned to stare at him. His hands buried deep in the pockets of his leather trench coat. The features of his face seemingly frozen by the cold.

“Longer than you,” he replied in a low baritone “And I wouldn't fucking forget

that if I was you.”

So much for the friendly banter. It wasn't the kind of start he'd hoped for but maybe in time Curtis would warm to him. After all, he was hardly a threat to the bloke. From what Sean could make out, Curtis seemed to be Terry's trusted lieutenant and he had the build for it. Sixteen stone of muscle wrapped in expensive black leather.

After a few minutes Terry was exchanging handshakes with the Kosovans and they started to head back from their huddle.

“Yeah, well, have a nice Christmas and all that,” said Terry, “Or do you lot not celebrate Christmas?”

The two brothers nodded but said nothing and then they all followed Terry back out to the car park.

“I don't trust those fucking Kosovans,” said Terry once they were back in the Range Rover and driving back along the track, “All these fucking illegals coming over here trying to get on the fiddle. They think this country's a fucking soft touch, don't they?”

Sean was unsure as to whether his opinion was being sought. In the end, he thought better of it and concentrated on the road ahead.

“I reckon the way it's going we'll have to move against them at some point. Sooner rather than later too... before their outfit starts to get any stronger. They're trying to get a grip on Soho, I heard, and we're getting fucking pressure from south of the river. What do you reckon, Curtis?”

“Yeah. Makes sense really. Just give me the word, Tel.”

“Thing is, right now I need them to clear up that other little mess of Rafi's we got to deal with. And, anyway, they want to do a bit of business with me so it don't make sense to do it now.”

“What kind of business they in?” asked Sean.

He regretted the words as soon as they left his lips. He'd been concentrating on

the road so much he'd forgotten to keep his mouth shut. Now he wondered whether his indiscretion had blown it. Above all, it seemed Terry valued knowing when to keep your gob shut.

“What? Izzet?”

Sean felt relieved that his interruption hadn't been resented. Maybe even Terry was finally getting into the Christmas spirit.

“Yeah, he's in the meat business, mate.”

As Sean glanced in the rear-view mirror he could see Curtis grinning. His gold tooth gleaming like a jewel in his ivory smile.

“Yeah, he's a butcher,” continued Terry, “Ain't that right, Curtis?”

Curtis just nodded and chuckled to himself.

CHAPTER 11: 'A LITTLE JOB'

Sean took a long drag on a joint as he stared from the balcony of his apartment on the upper floor of an apartment block in Clerkenwell across the rooftops where the crest of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral emerged from a sea of grey morning mist. The flat had been part of the deal Terry had proposed in a sitdown after their trip to Rainham. He owned an entire development of what he called 'yuppie cages' and it had been offered rent-free along with a grand-a-week cash retainer. It wasn't a bad deal really. Better than he'd expected but he knew Terry would be intent on getting his money's worth. At their meeting, Sean had asked what the work would entail exactly but Terry had seemed a little vague on the detail.

“Just keeping the cogs of the machine greased... and, you know, straightening out any little problems along the way.”

It was the 'little problems' Terry mentioned that bothered Sean. He didn't mind handing out the odd slap here and there but he wanted to steer clear of anything too heavy. The courts were too hot on that. He'd been lucky to escape the mandatory five years for the gun last time. If the work involved carrying then he'd rather have something he could dispose of easily after the job was done. He'd read in the Post how the Met were now collecting ballistics evidence on a central computer system; if a gun had been used before they'd know about it and you could get end up facing a murder charge for something you had nothing to do with.

His heart jumped as he heard a key turn in the front door of the apartment. Quickly he reached into his pocket, took out his chunk of hash and chucked it over the balcony as he heard footsteps in the hallway. A wave of relief surged through him as he saw Terry strolling in through the hallway.

“Thought I'd let myself in rather than use the intercom,” said Terry as he sat down on the sofa, “You like the place then? Settled in alright?”

“Yeah. It's alright. Not a bad gaffe really.”

“Yeah, well, listen up. I got a little job for you.”

Terry explained it all to him. He needed someone to pick up a lorry from Ashford International Train Station and then drive it to an address in Dalston. Then he handed Sean a train ticket for the six'o'clock train from St. Pancras and a mobile phone – a cheap Nokia model – and told him the driver would text him the exact rendezvous when he arrived.

“What's in the lorry then?”

“Oh, just little gift from our Kosovan friends,” replied Terry with a smile, “A few turkeys for Christmas. Everyone likes a nice a bird at Christmas time, don't they?”

And with that, he was gone.

It was hot in the flat. Nice and toasty compared to the icy chill on the balcony. He should check the thermostat. It was too warm really. He felt his head go all light and fluffy as he stretched out on the sofa and yawned a long bearlike yawn. Yeah, he should probably turn the thermostat down a notch. Keep the electricity bill down. Yeah, he was going to do that. He was going to do that right now....

He was out on the eighteenth hole again. It was a beautifully sunny day and the flat green lawn seemed to stretch beyond him for miles. The warmth of the sunlight was making him feel lazy and lethargic and he couldn't figure out why he was dressed in all this ridiculous golfing get-up – plus fours and a tweed cap – and holding a putter in his hand and then just as he looked up, a few yards in front of him, he could make out this heavy-set bloke with greying hair whose back was turned to him. As the figure turned around he realised it was Terry but covering his right hand was a leather glove of the kind used for falconry and perched on the thumb of the glove was the huge black vulture which Terry seemed to be admiring with a look of delight.

“Everyone likes a nice a bird at Christmas time... don't they, Sean?”

Sean nodded hesitantly. His throat felt dry, his pulse racing. He didn't like being so close to the vulture even though Terry seemed completely unfazed by its presence.

“Give it a little stroke, mate. Come on, it ain't gonna hurt you, is it?”

Terry raised his gloved arm out and the bird began to unfold its enormous wings leading Sean to instinctively step back.

“What's the matter? You lost your bottle or something?”

Sean shook his head but he could feel his legs quivering at the thought that any second the vulture might go for him.

“It's all about power and control. See, you got to let it know that you're in control.... that you've got the power. You understand?”

Terry was chuckling to himself now, revelling in Sean's discomfort and then suddenly he felt something digging in his back. He turned around and there was Curtis standing behind him. He was smiling at him. That big gold tooth gleaming in the sunlight and he had Ritchie's black beretta in his hand. It was pointing now directly at Sean's chest. He was panicking. What was the fuck was going on?

“Just give me the word, Tel,” said Curtis.

He woke with a jolt as if a thousand volts of electricity had just passed through him. He wiped his eye with his palms. He must have dozed off. It was nothing. Probably just paranoia from the hash. The room was hot, the temperature bordering on the tropical. He stood up and stretched. On the table was the mobile phone Terry had left for him. He looked at this watch..

Shit, he thought to himself. It was nearly five'o'clock He needed to get his arse in gear.

Two-and-a-half hours later he was standing in the freezing car park of Ashford International train station. He hated this bit of the job. The waiting around. He took out the mobile phone and checked it but there was no message and no missed calls. He looked at the address again – Ridley Road E8 – then checked his watch and exhaled a breath of freezing misty air. There was no-one else about in the car park. A week before Christmas Day and everyone would be at home putting up their Christmas decorations. And what was he doing? Waiting for a delivery truck to take

to London and when he got back, an empty flat, no one to snuggle up to at night. No warm fire or mince pies waiting for him at home.

His mind drifted back to thinking about Anna. When he felt lonely it was always her. He hadn't spoken to her since that morning. When he'd been inside he'd tried a few times to write a letter but it was too difficult. He could never find the words. He'd never known how to explain it all to her. And what could you say really? *Sorry... I know I really fucked everything up.*

They'd first met when she'd started working as a barmaid at his local pub. It was a few months after he'd been let out of Feltham for a burglary that all went pear-shaped. Her shy, green eyes had drawn him in along with the paper-pale skin and the soft burgundy lips. But she had this vulnerable thing about her, like she needed someone to look after her.

It had taken a few goes to get her to go out with him. But he could tell from the off that she fancied him. The giggles at the little jokes he told her at the bar. It was probably all the weight training he'd started doing around that time. Sometimes he'd even caught himself admiring his own physique in the mirror of the changing room at the gym, the noticeable bulge of his pectorals and biceps.

The first time he'd taken her to this little Italian place and ordered a bottle of expensive wine to impress her. Her English wasn't that good back then and he knew he'd never be able to speak a word of her Polish but she told him about her little boy, Andrezej, who she'd just got settled in a nursery. She wanted a better life for her and the kid but she worried about him growing up in London, about finding the right school and keeping him away from all the dangers of the city. She'd come to England to get away from his father who was on the bottle the whole time and used to knock her about back home but when she'd arrived she hadn't banked on London being so expensive. Even working three jobs she could hardly clear all the bills so she'd started taken out a few payday loans and with the interest she was paying she'd begun to wonder if she'd ever dig herself out of debt let alone find the money for any course at nightschool. He could relate to all of it and somehow the thought of a kid didn't put

him off. It actually made him warm to her even more. Suddenly, out of nowhere emerged the possibility of everything he'd never had growing up.

Soon after that they were an item and within a month they were even talking living together. He fixed up the small spare room of his place as a bedroom for Andrej when the two of them stayed over, giving the walls a fresh lick of paint and even painting some cartoon characters with a stencil he bought from some DIY shop. He felt flushed with pride the first time Andrej had seen it, his little face all lit up with excitement and then in the doorway Anna had given him that look too, that look that let him know she was betting their future on him. He'd never even thought about kids before that but there was that warmth he'd felt when he'd first taken Andrejz up to the park on Sundays for a kickabout and slowly the thought had begun to take hold. He could do this. Perhaps he could make a go of the whole family thing. Maybe he could make this work out for all of them.

When Anna asked him about work he told her he did a bit of labouring. Cash-in-hand work on building sites. It hadn't take her long to figure out that was a lie. He sold a bit a weed here and there, he said. Everyone did it. It wasn't a big deal. Of course, he never told her about Ritchie. He knew she'd try to talk him out of that.

And then there was that morning. The look on her face as the police stood in the bedroom of her flat bawling at them in the darkness. The disgust and shame of it. Little Andrejz's terrified screams from the next room. At that moment he would have done anything to change it, to make it all right again but there was nothing to be done. And every day in prison he'd thought of her and every night he wondered what she was doing beyond those walls. Wondering if she'd gone back to Warsaw after all that had happened that day or whether she was still working at the pub or if she'd met someone else.

Now he took out the pay-as-you-go phone he'd bought the day he got out. He'd played with the idea so many so times since he'd been released but what was there to say? He punched the digits in, her number still etched into his brain after all this time.

“Hello?”

Her timid voice sounded just the same, like a favourite song he'd not heard in years.

“Cześć?”

Then he could hear someone in the background, a man's voice, and then, suddenly, as he hung up he noticed a lorry pulling into the car park and he checked the phone again but there was nothing.

Who was it there with her? It must have been a new boyfriend. He pictured her in the flat with a Christmas tree in the corner wrapped in tinsel and twinkling fairy lights, imagining her on the sofa watching television curled up in the arms of some new bloke. He couldn't help wondering if she ever thought of him and how easy it had been for her to forget about him and move on after that day when, suddenly, the other phone in his pocket started to vibrate. He took it out and picked up the call.

“You see truck?”

The voice had a thick Eastern European accent he could only just make out.

“I make light... You see now?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the truck which had just arrived and parked up in the car park flash its lights.

“Yeah. Got it.”

He made his way across the car park and walked up to a refrigerated truck with 'EuroMeats (Brussels)' on the side in bold lettering. As he approached, the driver's side door of the lorry's cab opened and a man climbed out.

“You take to London, yes?” said the man.

He was a thin, gaunt looking bloke in his mid-forties.

Sean nodded as the man passed him the keys to the truck.

“I nearly forget,” said the man reaching inside his jacket for an envelope, “Here is papers.”

He gave a quick glance around the car park then, taking the sealed envelope (which he presumed were some custom documents), clambered up into the truck.

With the key in the ignition the engine purred into life. Out of the window, the man gave him a brisk wave before heading off in the direction of the station entrance. Pushing the gearstick into first, he released his foot slowly of the clutch and guided the truck gently towards the exit. Finally, he was on his way back to London.

The traffic on the motorway back was surprisingly light. Tomorrow, he reckoned, would be the big Christmas getaway when the roads would be jammed with cars heading to the airports or off to the country for quiet family getaways. Now it seemed the country was already winding down for the holiday season. As he passed the junction for the M25, the monotony of motorway driving led him to wonder what his Mum was doing for Christmas. They hadn't spoken in nearly five years. Not since he'd got put away in Feltham for six months when he'd got caught red-handed burgling that big, old house in Highgate. After his dad had left, Christmas was usually just the two of them. He could remember one year when he was about six playing with his Scalextric set on the floor of the sitting room while his Mum and Aunty fretted in the kitchen over the lunch. The smell of her cooking wafting through the house. Watching her make thick brown gravy in the roasting dish as the golden-brown bird sat waiting on a plate to be carved. For a second, he thought about dropping in and paying an unexpected visit on Christmas Eve.

Maybe he could still patch things up with her, he thought to himself.

By ten'o'clock he was crossing the river at the Blackwall Tunnel. On the other side, he was waiting in a long line of traffic to take the road north when a couple of cars ahead he spotted the fluorescent orange roof stripes of a police car. He could feel his heart quicken, a reflex that had hardened over the years. He tried to quell the anxiety. There must have been a few thousand lorries a day which drove this route and, besides, the cargo was probably nothing more than a few dozen cartons of moody fags or a few cases of booze which had dodged Customs duty. And then from the back of the truck he heard a dull thud, a noise which indicated that whatever it was was moving around back there. Instinct told him he didn't need to be hearing

that; the same instinct that told him that the nature of the cargo was what he'd secretly suspected all along.

He pressed on as the lights changed, putting the thought out of his mind, and raced past the new Olympic Stadium at Stratford with its latticed steel girders like something constructed from a giant Meccano set, and then took the turning heading back into the city towards Dalston.

On Kingsland Road he finally swung the truck into the turning for Ridley Road. The remnants of that morning's market were still scattered across the road. Squashed oranges and clementines, iceberg lettuces left to rot in the gutter along with trampled cardboard boxes and broken plywood crates. He took out his phone and buzzed Terry's mobile.

“Yeah, I'm almost there.”

“Swing it round the back of the place,” said Terry, “There's a yard back there where we'll unload.”

At the next junction, he noticed a shop with a sign, A.B. Halal Butchers Ltd. The corrugated steel shopfront was shut but as he turned the corner he recognised Izzet and his brother opening a pair of large wooden gates that led into a small loading area. He mounted a small ramp by the pavement and pulled the truck to a stop inside a compound crowded with polystyrene crates and black refuse sacks. As he wound down the window, the smell of death seemed to linger in his nostrils and in the wing mirror he could see the two brothers carefully closing the gates after him.

As he got out the cab, he noticed Terry waiting by a doorway to the back of the shop. He was standing in the shadows, wearing a thick dark woollen overcoat and chewing on a cigar like a Prohibition mobster.

“No problems then?”

“Nah.. Roads were pretty empty.”

He reached into his jacket pocket and handed over the envelope the driver at Ashford had given him.

“They're the papers or something. The bloke gave 'em to me.”

Terry nodded and as he tore open the envelope, Sean watched as from inside he took out four green booklets. He opened them, flicking with his thumb to the back page of each one and as he did so Sean noticed their front covers were all embossed with some silver design - they looked like passports or some official documents - then he heard the gates being locked again and Izzet and his brother strolled over with their ugly-looking grins.

“We choose nice ones for you, no?”

“Yeah. Not bad. Not bad at all. Let's unload 'em then, shall we?”

Sean stood around awkwardly for a moment. It was freezing in the yard and now he wanted to be back in the warmth of his flat.

“You finished with me now, Terry?”

“Yeah. Have a good Christmas, mate. I'll give you a bell in the New Year.”

He followed Izzet's brother, Arben over to the wooden gate behind the truck. As he glanced back he could see Izzet and Terry unlocking the back doors of the truck. The doors swung open and he glanced four blonde young girls emerging, their bodies cloaked in blankets and shivering with cold. He stared at them for a moment. They looked dazed stepping out of the back of the truck on to the concrete. Somehow he knew it was a human cargo he'd been carrying and now he felt a slightly queasy sensation in the pit of his stomach as he imagined exactly what fate Terry had in mind for them.

CHAPTER 12: 'WHITE CHRISTMAS'

The radio alarm woke Sean at ten'o'clock the next morning with Noddy Holder's "I wish It Could Be Christmas Every Day" screaming in his eardrums. His hand fumbled for the snooze button in an attempt to put an end to the yuletide torture.

Yawning, he got up to take a shower and then walked into the lounge with a towel wrapped around his waist and peered out through the balcony doors. Outside the roofs were covered in a thick layer of pure-white snow like a scene from a cheap Christmas card.

He flicked on the TV with the remote control. A news reader was saying something about protests somewhere in North Africa. Some country he'd never heard of. Angry faces holding signs and placards filled the screen. He switched it off again and decided to get changed. His restlessness was already bugging him. He still hadn't come up with a plan for the holiday and he hated the way everything always ground to a halt over the Christmas period. By tomorrow, London be a ghost town and he would be alone in the flat trying to while away the lonely hours.

He walked into the kitchen and checked the fridge. There was nothing but three bottles of Stella and a block of cheddar that had started to sprout a green, sporic fungus. Nothing that he could salvage for a bit of breakfast. He needed to get out of the flat for a bit, he decided. Interact with the rest of the world.

He strolled back into the bedroom and, opening the door to his wardrobe, took out one of his old trainers from which he pulled out a wedge of twenty pounds notes and counted them. Nearly eight-hundred quid, enough to get him through the next week easily. Then, throwing on some unwashed clothes, he stuffed a dozen of the notes into his pockets and grabbed his keys off the coffee table.

As he strolled towards Islington, the streets were packed with Christmas shoppers. Everyone seemed to be trudging through the snow laden with bags, presents for family and loved ones. The sight of it only seemed to stir up more anxiety. All these people who tomorrow would be sitting down at the dinner table

surrounded by friendly faces and he'd spend the next few days alone, cooped up in the flat. He almost wished he was back in his cell playing chess with Geoff. Christmas inside wasn't so bad once you got used to it – at least you had other people to share it with.

Along the stalls of Chapel Market, there was a brisk trade amongst the fruit and veg stalls – the traders in their scruffy santa hats looking like an army of minimum-wage elves – and then he remembered a bloke who used to serve up from a flat further down the street above Superdrug. (The irony that the manager downstairs never knew of the alternative pharmacy that operated above had always somehow amused him.) He'd probably moved away or got busted. Still, it was worth a try. He could do with scoring a little something to pass the time. He knocked on the door and from within he could hear someone rumbling their way down the stairs followed by a gruff voice.

“Who is it?”

“Sean.”

“Who?”

“Jason, it's Sean. You know...”

The door opened a crack and a blood-shot blue eye peered through the gap.

“Fucking 'ell. Long time no see, mate. Doing some Christmas shopping, is it?”

“Yeah, something like that. You still –”

“Yeah, mate. Don't talk out on the street. Come up.”

He pushed open the door and followed the man up a flight of narrow stairs. He looked a lot older than when he'd seen him last but he still had the same greasy blonde dreadlocks that swayed across his back as he climbed the steps.

At the top of the stairs they entered a dingy living room that smelled of sickly, sweet skunk. On the carpet there were a couple of empty pizza boxes smeared with oil and in the corner of the room, a girl in a dressing gown was sitting on a faded beanbag smoking a joint.

“Haven't seen you in years, mate. Thought you'd moved away or something.”

“Yeah, been abroad for a bit.”

“Oh right. Getting a bit of sun, eh? Nice one. So what can I do you for?”

“Got any powder?”

“One lump or two? I can do it a bit cheaper if you want more than that.”

“Nah, just give us two.”

The man disappeared through a door into a side room where he could hear him rummaging through some drawers. On the TV, a video game had been paused and somewhere a muffled mobile phone was ringing to the tune of Jingle Bells.

After a minute, the man came back and handed him two small white lumps wrapped in clingfilm.

“Should be one-twenty really but given it's you... call it a tonne.”

Sean reached into his pocket and counted out a hundred in twenties.

“Doing anything special for Christmas then?” asked the man as he folded the notes and pushed them into the back pocket of his jeans.

“Nah. load of bollocks, innit. Prefer to just stay in on my tod.”

He hated drug dealer small-talk. He never really figured out why they did it. It was just a transaction after all; it wasn't the village shop where you'd go for a natter.

“You don't know anyone who wants a Playstation 3? I got one right here. Boxed up and everything,” said the man pointing to a box in the corner of the room.

“Nah, mate. I'm good.”

He made an excuse about needing to do some last minute shopping and within five minutes he was back amongst the crowds of shoppers in the busy market. His stomach was rumbling now. He looked at his watch. It was nearly midday. He needed to get some food.

He turned the corner to find a crowd of people with loaded shopping trollies massed around the entrance of Sainsbury's, and then as he walked up, he passed a young homeless man sitting in a doorway with a pathetic beige cardboard sign that read “Merry Xmas!” in thick marker pen. It felt wrong somehow: the masses of greedy shopper ignoring some poor fucker who had nothing. He reached into his

pocket, taking out a two-pound coin and flipped it to the man as he passed but as he did so the guy turned the other way and the coin smacked against the side of the man's face.

“Wanker,” snarled the man back at Sean, his hand nursing his bruise.

Oh well, thought Sean, so much for goodwill to all men.

At the checkout, he unpacked his shopping from the basket. A Bernard Matthews' turkey he thought he'd treat himself to - he was still toying with the idea of surprising his Mum with it - then a bottle of Courvoisier, three packs of Super Noodles, a packet of chocolate hobnobs, a loaf of sliced white, some cheddar to replace the lump he'd thrown away and a DVD of *Scarface* which he'd noticed in the supermarket's clearance section. The essentials – milk, beer and fags – he could always buy at the local shop. After all, those places never shut.

It was only on the way back home that it occurred to him that he didn't have a DVD player. It didn't matter there'd be something decent on the telly. That was the one good thing about Christmas.

When he got back into the flat it still felt warm and welcoming. He packed away the shopping and left the frozen turkey on the sideboard still unsure about what he was going to do with it. He wondered about dropping into his Mum's. He looked at his watch. It was almost two o'clock. He could relax for a bit. There was still plenty of time to make up his mind.

He made some cheese on toast and flipped through a copy of the London Evening Post he'd picked up from a newsagents on the way back. The front cover was some story about the economy. Inside, the diary section had pictures of various celebrities at Xmas Charity dinners. There was a picture of a banker who'd bid £50,000 at a Charity auction to have dinner with a supermodel. What was the point of that? He could think of far better ways of blowing fifty grand like investing in a decent motor, or going on a summer-long bender in Ayia Napa.

He picked up the control again and flicked on the TV.

“London, of course, is a city with many nationalities and many ways of celebrating Christmas,” said a smiling female TV presenter “In many Eastern European countries such as Poland, Christmas is celebrated -”

He flicked the channel over. Now it was scene of British soldiers in Afghanistan. A big group of them all dressed in their desert fatigues crowded around some chaplain singing carols. They looked so goofy.... these big, meaty blokes who'd been sent over to kill the Taliban, all chirping away to “Silent Night.” He flicked the channel again to a music station.

“East London rapper, Kano, is one of the leading talents to emerge from London's grime scene in recent years.”

Grime. He could tell these wankers a thing or two about grime. He's done enough time on kitchen duty in prison, cleaning the place on your hands and knees with nothing but a scrubbing brush and a bar of carbolice until your hands were all blistered. Some sort of rap video followed with some black bloke yapping on about something. Fucking hell... was this what passed for talent nowadays?

He picked up his keys and took the lift downstairs to get some beers. On the way back, as he carried the plastic bag full of beer cans, he couldn't get the image of the girls out of his head. He'd been resisting thinking about it all day but now the thought caught him off-guard, ambushing him like a mugger in a backstreet.

They'd looked so cold and desperate. One of them had long blonde, tousled hair. Exactly the same kind of hair as Anna. He didn't want to think about them but their faces seemed to haunt him. He tried to tell himself that maybe they were just illegal immigrants. But then why was Terry holding their passports? No, he had pretty good idea of what kind of work Terry had in mind for them. He tried to drown out the nagging voice in his head. After all, it wasn't his fucking problem, he kept telling himself. He was just doing what he needed to do to make a living.

When he got back to the sofa, the music channel was still playing. Now it was Wham's “Last Christmas” video. George Michael with the big bouffant hairdo trying to get it on with the ladies. How could those birds not figure it out? George trying to

be straight and not even being straight with himself. What a joke. But then perhaps everyone had to wrestle with a bit of self-denial. He checked his watch again. Half-three. There was still plenty of time. He should probably try to find the number of a local cab company.

He strolled into the kitchen again. The turkey was still sitting there in a puddle of pale blood. It seemed like like some disfigured body part in a morgue. Some big useless lump of meat. Perhaps that's what he was... a useless, lump of meat. Perhaps Terry was just using him as a bit of disposable muscle. He could feel the anxiety again, like a rat clawing its way through the sewers of his belly, as the images of the girls were playing once again in his head. What did it matter to him? He'd only driven them there. He hadn't coaxed them on to the lorry or made any dodgy assurances about the kind of work they could expect in London. He wasn't guilty of anything, he tried to assure himself.

He took another hot shower in an attempt to ease his restlessness then he changed into his black jeans and a black Dior shirt he'd bought with his first week's money from Terry. He checked his watch again. Four'o'clock. He could still get a cab but he didn't know if he could face it now. All the questions.

Where you living?

What are you doing for money?

Why did he have to be the one who offered the olive branch? Why was it his prerogative?

Prerogative? Where had that come from? He looked at the TV screen again. '*My Prerogative*'. Bobby Brown in those ridiculous shoulder pads doing his stupid dance on the telly. Bobby and Whitney what a fucking mess they were. But still, no more a mess than him and Anna. Maybe he was another Bobby-in-the-making? Bobby had fucked it up for Whitney - everyone knew that – like he'd fucked it all up for Anna.

He went into the kitchen, grabbed a glass and poured himself a Courvoisier. He needed to pull himself together. What was it with all this stuff whizzing around his head? A little straightener, that's what he needed.

He went back into the bedroom and found the two lumps he'd bought earlier then marched back into the lounge and burst one of the wraps open on the coffee table. The white powder exploded across the table like an Alpine snowdrift.

He gulped down the Courvoisier and then chopped out a fat line of the powder with a kitchen knife. Rolling a twenty-pound note from his pocket, he hoovered the coke up his nostril then frantically set about cutting another line.

Within a couple of minutes, he could feel the coke in his bloodstream. It's pleasant numbing effect lifting him slightly. He walked over to the balcony doors and stared out across the skyline. It was snowing again. Thick flakes of snow falling from the sky like some gift from the heavens.

“And now for one of the all time Christmas favourites,” came the voice of the TV presenter, “It's Bing Crosby and *White Christmas*.”

He wasn't going to go, he'd decided. Too many questions. Too much fucking history to deal with. All that bollocks about Christmas being a time for families.

Fuck it, he thought as he chopped another couple of lines of coke on the coffee table and cracked open a Stella from the off-licence.

“*I'm dreaming of a white Christmas*,” crooned Bing in his red cardigan on the TV.

Sean snorted the other two lines, the white powder sucking its way up his nostrils like a tiny blizzard as he took a long swig of beer from the can. It was snowing outside the flat. It was snowing inside his head. Still, it was warm in the flat so why did it feel like he'd been left out in the cold?

CHAPTER 13: 'NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND'

Around three'o'clock in the afternoon Donnell Johnson was waiting for his friend outside the flats on St Thomas Square on Mare Street in Hackney. The winter freeze had set in across the city and his breath was forming clouds of steamy vapour as he stood on the frosty pavement watching a figure clutching a can of lager, drunkenly swaying his way up the street towards him. As usual his best friend, Kofi, was making him wait and then, just as his patience was beginning to wear thin, he felt a vibration from the inside pocket of his puffa jacket.

“Finishin now. C u in 5 :-)”

Kofi had told him he was studying that morning. Kofi was always studying. The two of them had grown up together and known each other ever since they could remember. They'd met on the first day at their nursery school on Cambridge Heath Road, then they'd both gone to the same junior school by London Fields and after that the new Academy in Hackney where Donnell had been excluded in his final year. Donnell had never bothered with his exams unlike Kofi who'd sailed through his. But what was the point of all that? Even if he'd passed his exams, he'd already decided there weren't any jobs out there. Not jobs for people like him. And, besides, there were other ways to make money - alternative career opportunities - and he'd already got one foot on that ladder.

“You got any change, son? Just something to get me a lickie bite to eat, y'know.”

Donnell looked up from his Blackberry to see the drunkard now squinting at him, the fumes from the man's breath were enough to force Donnell take a step back.

“Get the fuck out my face, man.”

“Come on, D. Why you gotta be like that? Ain't you at least gonna wish your old man a Happy New Year?”

“I ain't telling you again. You ain't my pops! Look at you.... you fucking crackhead. Checked yourself in the mirror lately? You need to fix up, man!”

The man just laughed and then staggered for a moment, spilling a puddle of beer

over the frozen pavement that came dangerously near the toe of Donnell's beloved Nikes.

“Well, tell that fine-looking mother of yours I said Happy New Year.”

Donnell sucked his teeth. The very thought that he shared the same blood with this man standing in front of him filled him with a sense of disgust. What had he done with his life apart being in and out of prison and when he wasn't banged-up, blowing whatever money he had on booze or getting mashed up in some crackhouse.

“Believe me, Raymond. She don't want nothing from you so just do one, yeah?”

He felt a sense of relief as he watched the man waddle across the road and begin rummaging through a collection of bin-liners left outside a charity shop, stopping only to inspect a pair of jeans and a shirt which might fit him. Then, behind him, Donnell heard the heavy door of Kofi's tower block swing open and, as he turned, he could finally see his friend strolling towards him.

“I've been waiting here time, bruv. Why you always gotta be so *long*?”

Kofi shrugged.

“Told you I was studying. Got my Mum on my case about exams, innit.”

Donnell never took the lift up to Kofi's place. He never even rang on the buzzer. He knew Kofi's mum didn't like him. In fact, Donnell was sure Kofi's mum didn't like any West Indians. Not that Donnell really considered himself West Indian. His grandmother had emigrated to London from St Kitts but if he'd been given a map he couldn't point out where that was. And what did it matter anyway? One term at school, they'd done all this stuff for Black History Month but still he couldn't figure out why people still banged on about all that slavery shit. To him, it was all ancient history. All he knew was that Kofi's mum was one of those church-going, uppity African women who looked down on other ghetto-black people like him. She wanted Kofi to become an lawyer and his older sister Abba, who was already at university, to become an accountant.

“What kind of fuckery is that?” Donnell's mum had laughed when he'd told

her. Kofi's stuck-up-bitch-of-a-mother thinking her kids could become that. No-one Donnell knew in Hackney had that kind of job; in fact, hardly anyone Donnell knew in Hackney had a proper job at all.

“So how was Christmas?”

“Yeah. All good. Got these off my mum,” replied Kofi pointing down at a pair of gleaming, white trainers, “Nike Air Force Ones.”

“Yeah, like mine. You don't wear 'em like that, blud. Wear 'em loose like I do.”

“Whatever,” replied Kofi looking slightly irritated about being corrected on a point of street style, “Anyway, you get Chantelle something nice? I bet you spent bare money on that girl, man.”

Kofi was always winding him up about Chantelle. He'd met her that summer at a music festival in Victoria Park and then messaged her on Facebook. She was pretty. Even Kofi agreed on that. A real head-turner. Tight little waist, expensive finger-nails and blonde hair extensions. She was the first white girl he'd been with – a trophy of sorts – but she was hard work too, always wanting something off him. She'd first started mentioning Christmas presents in early October and they'd only properly got together in August. First, it had been some expensive make-up then in November she'd upgraded it to a purse. By December she'd changed mind once more and she'd told him she'd seen a nice Louis Vuitton handbag in Selfridges. He didn't really know where he'd find the money for all that but then one day he'd been introduced to this foreign geezer by one of the elders in the London Fields Boys. He didn't tell Kofi about any of that. He knew Kofi would go crazy. After all, Kofi had always told him to steer clear of the boys who hung around the stairwells of the estates around the Fields and that was the way that Kofi always did everything... by the fucking book.

“Yeah, got her a handbag.”

“How much you spend?”

He knew Kofi was trying it again but he wasn't going to rise to it.

“Shut up about all that, man. We got to be at the studio at three and it's quarter past now. I told you this producer geezer is cutting a track.”

On the way down Mare Street, they were having the usual argument about how who had the most girls friended on their Facebook account when, out of the corner of his eye, Donnell could see a police car slowing as they walked opposite Hackney Town Hall. He pulled out a small bag of weed from his pocket and slipped it up the inside sleeve of his jacket.

“See what I seen, D?” said Kofi.

“Boydem? Yeah, I checked 'em.”

The car trailed them along the road for a few yards and Donnell could feel them eyeballing the pair of them before it suddenly stopped and two white uniformed officers jumped out.

“Alright, lads? Going anywhere in particular? Or just out for a stroll, is it?”

It was the more overweight of the two and they stopped and stared warily as the other younger, slimmer officer now strode over to block their path.

“See, we've had reports of a lot of muggings and gang-related crime in the area. Now you boys wouldn't be carrying anything on you that you shouldn't have, right? No drugs or knives on you?”

They both stayed silent and shook their heads.

“So then I assume you're not going to object to us searching you both?”

Donnell could hear Kofi sighing next to him.

“It's the middle of the day, man? Do we look like we're muggers? Give us a break, yeah? Why you always harassing us?”

“Oi, Steve, do you wanna do Nelson Mandela here,” said the fatter policeman as he motioned to the two of them to face the wall and spread their hands and feet.

“Well, you tell us then... what does a mugger looks like?” said the other officer, trying to act as moderator, as he began to frisk Kofi.

“Well, I'm guessing he's not white, yeah?” replied Kofi as the older man proceeded to pat him down.

Why couldn't Kofi just shut up? Donnell wondered. What was it with all the chatting shit to the feds? Besides, Kofi never had any worries. Kofi didn't even smoke

weed. Kofi didn't do nothing except study his school books.

The fat cop pushed Donnell up against the wall and told him to spread his legs.

“And take the coat off,” he said, pulling at Donnell's jacket.

“It's freezing, man!”

“Yeah. Just shut up and get your coat off, mate.”

Donnell started to slowly unzip his coat. He knew when he took it off they'd most likely find the small bag of weed hidden up his sleeve. They'd confiscate it, take him down the station to caution him and then he'd definitely miss going to the studio.

At that moment, the policeman's radio suddenly crackled into life.

“520-GD, we have a report of a disturbance at The Dolphin pub on Mare Street. Please assist.”

“Received,” said the other officer, “Dave, looks like we got to go.”

The older man grunted as he turned and walked back to the police car. Within a second, the siren was screaming and the car's blue light flashing as they screeched off down the road.

“Why you going and chatting all that shit for?” groaned Donnell as he zipped up his jacket, “It's fucking bait, man.”

“Yeah but they're always stopping us. You know that. It must be the twentieth time this year, bruv.”

“It's New Year's Day, Kofe.”

“Yeah. Whatever, D. I just hate the way they think they can treat people like us. Like we ain't we got no rights, you know.”

They continued walking up the road in silence as Donnell slipped the bag of weed back into the pocket of his jeans.

“It's adverse selection,” said Kofi after a couple of minutes.

“You what?”

“Adverse selection. We did it in economics this year. It's like this... Why are we on pay-as-you-go Blackberry?”

“Because we can't get no credit.”

“Yeah, they do a credit report. You know why?”

“I dunno. Find out where you live, I 'spose.”

“Nah, man. It's because they only want good customers. See, if they didn't do the credit report then they couldn't tell the bad customers from the good customers. And the bad customers wouldn't pay so the good customers would end up having to pay for them and then that scares off the good customers. So, in the end, there'd only be a market for bad customers and the company can't survive. It goes bust, you get me?”

Donnell was confused. Kofi was always coming up with these wild theories.

“And what's that got to do with the feds?”

“Why does someone want to be a fed, man? So they can feel good harassing people like us. They're the bad cops who stop the good cops applying. You know... so the only people who want to be feds are the people you *don't* want doing the job. People like that fat dickhead, man.”

Donnell still didn't get it. He couldn't get his head round Kofi's notion that there could be *good* feds. As they turned into Morning Lane, he pointed to a block of warehouses with large rusting metal doors.

“That's where the studio is. You should see it, man.”

For the last couple of years, the two of them had starting making beats in Donnell's bedroom. Kofi had a laptop that he'd convinced his mum he needed for studying but, secretly, they'd downloaded some software with which they could arrange drum-patterns and other samples they'd collected. Kofi had quickly mastered how to use it and within a couple of weeks he could even could reproduce the kind of tracks that they'd both listen to on YouTube. Donnell was secretly impressed at how easily Kofi could listen to some melody on the radio and then after a few attempts find the keys on the keyboard to reproduce it. Kofi said it was because his Mum had made him learn piano when he was younger so he could play in church. Meanwhile, Donnell had tried out composing rhymes – little eight and sixteen-bar skits – that mocked rival MCs on YouTube or boasted of a lifestyle of luxury cars and designer

labels.

Donnell thumped on the heavy metal door to the warehouse and after a minute or two it swung open with and a tall white man in his mid-thirties wearing a baseball cap and dark, baggy jeans appeared.

“Dex, this is my boy, Kofi, I was telling you about. You said we could come up and check out the studio.”

The man looked at his watch.

“I said three. It's half three now and I got something I need to finish by the end of the day.”

“Come on, bruv!”

The man sighed and beckoned them in. They followed him down a passageway walled with broken plasterboard and down some stairs into a small, basement room crammed to the ceiling with racks of synthesizers and boxes with various buttons and dials. The room felt warm and stuffy from all the heat generated by the masses of equipment.

Donnell looked over at Kofi who was peering at a huge mixing desk, his mouth wide open in amazement. With all its rows of faders and small knobs, it was the kind of desk that they'd seen in the background when rappers were interviewed on MTV.

“Mad studio, eh? Man's got bare stuff in here,” said Donnell with a huge grin.

“Yeah, D. We need to get some shit like this.”

The man who was sitting in front of giant computer screen swung his chair around and eyed Kofi warily.

“He's safe, Dex. My boy ain't looking to jack nothing.”

The man turned around again to face the screen. They both watched as his hand moved the mouse gliding the cursor around the screen, both amazed at the speed at which he was able to use the software. He seemed to be selecting and moving small red dots arranged on some kind of grid.

“What are all those?” asked Kofi.

“Notes,” replied the man, “You know, like musical notes. You play music?”

“Yeah, Kofi can play,” said Donnell, “Show him, Kofe.... play that *50 Cent* tune you were playing the other day?”

“Go on then,” said the man pointing to a synthesizer keyboard that sat on a table next to the computer.

Kofi hit one of the keys with the index finger of his right hand and a low, squelching bass note resonated out of the huge speakers in the corner of the room.

“Can you get a sound... like a steel drum sound?”

The man nodded and turned a knob on the synthesizer. A green LED display flickered through the names of the various programmed sounds.

“Try it now.”

Kofi hit the key again. The metallic timbre of a steel drum rang out. It sounded so realistic that Donnell felt like was standing by one of the floats at the Notting Hill carnival. He watched as Kofi spread his hands across the keys and then played the melody.

The man nodded approvingly and then within a couple of moves of his mouse brought in a heavy hip hop drumbeat to accompany him. Kofi was laughing.

“That sounds sick, man. So much better than what we got.”

Donnell could feel the beat, it's heavy kick seemed to almost thump against his chest. He swayed, nodding along to the rhythm and then improvised a verse off the top of his head:

*Eastside, eastside we live out on the east side
Where shottas drop shells like it's the seaside
That's how it goes, how I flow, how we ride
MC D spits the truth because my rhymes don't lie.*

“Hang on, do it again. I'll set up the mic and we'll record it,” said the man seemingly excited at Donnell's sudden lyrical outburst.

“Nah, I can't really remember it now,” said Donnell shaking his head.

The man picked up a biro and a scrap of paper that lay next to the computer keyboard.

“Well, write it down then.”

Kofi glanced at him anxiously.

“I don't need to write anything down,” Donnell protested.

“Yeah, man. Write it down. You know.. before you forget it again.”

But Donnell didn't write anything down. The truth was he could barely write at all. He'd missed too much of junior school when he'd bounced between various aunties, uncles and grandparents whilst his mum had tried to sort out her own problems. Now he felt embarrassed that his secret would be exposed.

At that moment, the Blackberry in Donnell's pocket vibrated. He took it out and looked at the screen. It was a text from Izzet.

“Listen, I gotta get going,” he said, turning to Kofi.

“But we just got here, man.”

“Yeah, but something's come up,” he added “I gotta meet someone. I gotta meet someone right now, blud.”

CHAPTER 14: 'HOLLOWAY GIRLS'

It was late January when Jack finally received the letter. The envelope was addressed to him personally, bearing a Holloway postmark, and he knew the sender before he'd even opened it.

He'd written to Tracy just before New Year asking if he could visit but he'd considered it a long shot. Technically, the case was *sub judice* preventing further details being reported but from his research Jack had been surprised to discover she'd been remanded into custody on charges of money-laundering. The case seemed to centre around a major drugs-smuggling ring that stretched its tentacles from Spain to the UK and beyond. He was intrigued by her story. Kenny had mentioned that she'd been straight-laced, vehemently anti-drugs, so how had she become embroiled in international drug-trafficking? With the girls who lived in Linda's twilight world so many stories seemed to end in misery. She was dead. Tracy was in prison. Other girls Kenny mentioned seemed to have become hooked on drugs.

He unfolded the letter and read it as he sat at his work computer.

Dear Jack,

Thank you for your kind letter. My solicitor has advised me not to speak to the press about my case until it comes to trial. I want you to know, however, that I would not knowingly have got involved in all of this. I was manipulated by people who I believed to be my friends and if I am guilty of anything then it was being stupid enough to trust them. I am thinking about writing my autobiography when I get released and I would welcome any help you could give me regarding this. Perhaps you could put me on to a potential publisher? If you want to visit to discuss this then I'd more than happy to see you.

He was impressed by the clarity of expression and the words themselves were

written in a swirly, italic script that to Jack seemed to indicate a certain artistic temperament. He wasn't convinced by her protestations of innocence – after all, prisons were full of people claiming to be victims of some dubious injustice – but, even so, he was eager to meet her and an offer of assistance with her autobiography presented a perfect avenue in.

Within minutes, he had phoned Holloway Prison and arranged a visiting order. After putting down the phone, it occurred to him that he'd never seen the inside of a prison before. He'd seen documentaries on TV and films that depicted the reality of life behind bars but never actually set foot in such a place. Now he felt a palpable thrill at the prospect of his visit. It was one of the few perks of journalism that it allowed Jack a voyeuristic peak behind the curtain at lives very different to his own.

A week later he was sitting in the back of a black cab edging its way up the Holloway Road. He'd told Charlie he was following up with the police in Tottenham on the bogus marriage scam to see if the suspects had been charged. He knew Charlie wouldn't see any mileage left in the Lavonne story.

He peered out of the window on to the cold, grey street as they came to a stop at traffic lights. He'd always hated the Holloway Road. It was a windswept, gloomy place, a no-man's land between the wide, villagey streets of Highgate and the smart town houses of Highbury, full only of tatty, old Irish pubs and fast-food takeaways.

“You're going to the prison, you say?” asked the driver as he took the turning opposite a cinema.

“Yeah,” replied Jack and he noticed the driver eyeing him in the mirror.

Eventually, the cab pulled up outside a high wall mounted with coils of circular barbed wire.

“That'll be thirteen pounds eighty.”

“Take fifteen,” said Jack passing him a couple of notes, “Can you do me a receipt? Keep it blank if you want.”

“I shouldn't really,” replied the driver giving him a sly wink as he tore a blank receipt from his stub.

He got out and headed towards the entrance through a heavy, turnstile gate. On the other side he could make out some low-rise, red-brick buildings which he took to be the main prison itself. A middle-aged security guard inspected his V.O. papers, before asking him to raise his arms and frisking him. He was then waved on towards a visitor centre following a huddle of other visitors, a young guy in a sweatshirt and jeans with two chattering kids in tow and an elderly couple who looked like they were dressed for church, towards a windowless block to the right.

Inside, the Visitors' Centre more stony-faced prison officers were herding the new arrivals into a large, cold room with tables. There was a sickly-sweet smell of disinfectant perhaps intended to distract visitors from the undercurrent of menace in the place. He sat down at one of the small tables nearest the door and then watched as the prison officers paced around the room, their eyes regarding everyone and everything with suspicion. It all seemed so miserably regimented. Any sense of thrill about visiting the prison had now evaporated, replaced instead by a unsettling claustrophobia, an urgent desire to be back on the other side of the prison's high walls.

At just past eleven, the prisoners filed into the room under the watchful gaze of the wardens. Most were all dressed in the same prison grey uniforms but they seemed to be women of all ages, from girls who seemed barely into their twenties anxiously looking for their parents' faces to hard-faced women in their late-fifties who walked into the room like they owned the place. Some of them broke into smiles as they recognised friends and family waiting for them but the majority had ashen expressions as if they were steeling themselves for more bad news. He studied each of them as they entered trying to decode from their demeanour what crime they may have committed. Then he recognised Tracy. She looked tired and gaunt but she still had the figure of a model, the same curves and even the same long brown hair she had in the photograph and even in her grey woollen prison uniform she still had that discernible poise. He waved at her and she attempted a smile as she approached the

table.

“You found it okay, then?” she said as she sat down.

Her voice wasn't how he imagined. Not the rough London accents he could hear from the women at other tables.

“Yeah, got a cab. I don't get out enough. Good to escape to the office.”

As the words left his lips he winced at the irony of the phrase.

“Yeah, well, some of us aren't so lucky. Still, I'm hoping I might get a transfer.”

“Yes, I mean... I'm sure it's not easy.... in a place like this.”

“Look, I don't mean to be rude but we don't have long so we should get down to business. You read my letter, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“So, do you think it's a good idea then? Me writing an autobiography?”

For the first time, he noticed a sparkle in her eyes.

“Well, I think you definitely have a story to tell. It's just a case of finding the right publisher.”

“Do you know anyone who might be interested?”

Witnessing her desperation face to face, he now felt a certain degree of shame about stringing her along.

“Well, I'm a journalist and publishing... that's a whole a different business really.”

“Oh, I thought...”

He watched as her shoulders drooped and her eyes peered down at the table.

“But I have a few contacts. I could put some feelers out.”

She looked up at him, an endearing, childlike enthusiasm in her tone.

“Could you? Could you really?”

“I'll see what I can do. Listen, I wanted to ask you a few questions though.”

“I told you I can't talk about the case. My solicitor said -”

“No, it's not that. It was Kenny who gave me your name. It was Kenny who -”

“Yeah, isn't it terrible about Kenny?”

“What is?”

“There was a fire at his studio. Some dodgy electrics, apparently. My friend, Maria, told me when she visited last week. I keep thinking to myself... what a terrible way to go.”

For a moment, the news left him dumbfounded. He pictured Kenny, the terror look of terror on his face as, trapped in the upstairs office, the flames licked their way up staircase and across the narrow landing. How could he have not known? Perhaps it had made a column in the South London Press but the upcoming mayoral election had been dominating the wider London news.

“You didn't know?” said Tracy.

“No. I.. ”

He was still trying to assimilate it all, his brain already formulating a dozen questions and then the phone call came back to him. The threatening voice. The mention of 'the old man.' It must have been Kenny they'd been referring to. But what did he know? From what he'd said during that last visit it hardly seemed likely he moved in the company of gangsters or, at least, not anybody who had the capacity for murder.

“Oh, I'm sorry. It's such a tragedy. I mean Kenny was a bit of a rogue. He could be a be a real bitchy, old queen sometimes but there was no malice in him. ”

He tried to compose himself aware that their time was limited.

“Kenny said you were friends with Linda. Linda Lavonne?”

“Oh yeah. Linda... I was heart-broken when I heard about that. I never thought Linda would have killed herself. She always seemed so tough... such a survivor.. It just seemed so unlike her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hang on... Why do you want to know about this? I thought you were here to talk about my autobiography?”

“Well, it's just that Linda was a big name.”

She cocked her head, seemingly peeved at the inference.

”Look, I'm not saying she was a bigger name than yours,” Jack continued, “But your connection to her would certainly help me pitch the book.”

She paused, looking unsure about whether to continue with the topic of conversation.

“I see. Well, I know people run Linda's name down but the truth is she never had the best start in life. In the papers they said she ran away to get on the stage – I think that was something she made up later - but the truth is her dad used to... well, you know, interfere with her. In the end, she just had to get away. I suppose like a lot girls in the business her looks turned out to be a gift and a curse. But when she ran away she had to do something to get by.... so the modelling, well, I think she just fell into it really.”

“Kenny said she was involved in some other things,” whispered Jack, leaning across the table, “He said something about some parties. A house up in Hampstead... you know about that, right?”

“Look, I wasn't involved in any of that,” she added, holding the palms of her hands up in a gesture of innocence.

“I'm not saying you were. But did you know she was threatened?”

“Yeah. I heard something about that.”

“And do you know who threatened her?”

“No.”

“But you went away with her to Ibiza, didn't you?”

“Yeah. That was afterwards... She was scared. She said something had happened. Something bad. She wouldn't tell me what it was... only that some people were out to get her.”

“What people?”

She glanced away at the neighbouring table, seemingly nervous of anyone who might be eavesdropping.

“Dangerous people,” she whispered, “Gangsters, I suppose you'd call them.”

Jack could see Tracy's expression becoming increasingly irritated by the questions but he pressed on regardless.

“And did she mention any names?”

“I can't remember,” she snapped, “It was fifteen years ago and we weren't as close then. Not like the old days.”

He nodded but felt exasperated. He'd come all this way and now it seemed like a dead end.

“Maybe Diamond would know.”

“Diamond?”

“Yeah, this girl who she used to hang around with at the time. I think she was involved in all those parties. I never really knew her – she was bad news - but Linda talked about her a lot back then. I think they had some falling out.”

“Do you know where I can find her?”

“Last I heard, she was a dancer at The Windmill.”

“What? The strip club?”

“Yeah, I suppose you could call it that. I don't know if she's still there. You could speak to Oscar, he might know where to find her.”

“Oscar?”

“Oscar Owide. He runs the place. Everyone in Soho knows Oscar.”

For a moment, Jack noticed Tracy had caught him glancing at her gnawed fingernails and callused fingertips. She scrunched them into fists, apparently embarrassed by their appearance.

“What about her boyfriend?”

“What boyfriend? You mean Lewis?”

“Yeah.”

“They were a funny couple I always thought. I mean you wouldn't have put them together.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, Lewis was too much of a nice guy. Believe me, Linda and I have seen our

fair share of bad ones. Maybe it's the business we were in... I don't know. And by then... well, by then I didn't even think Linda was really into guys any more.”

“You mean she was a *lesbian*?”

The question seemed to echo loudly around the room. He watched as Tracy's eyes rolled and then noticed a butch older woman scowling at him from another table.

“Keep your voice down, will you?” she whispered as she edged across the table “What I'm saying is that by then she didn't seem to have much time for men. I think she always felt used by them... I mean, I can understand why. It's not uncommon in that world. So I was surprised when she got together with Lewis..... He seemed really straight-up and, well, maybe she felt safe around him. Maybe she thought he could take care of her. Anyway, why you asking all these questions?”

“Oh, just background, I suppose.”

He could see Tracy looked anxious, concerned that maybe she'd given too much away.

“Look, I'll have a word with some friends of mine in publishing and see if I can pitch your book to them.”

“Yeah. I'd be really grateful if you could.”

He spotted one of the prison officers out of the corner of his eye checking her watch.

“Last five minutes, please,” said the woman.

Tracy cursed under her breath and for a moment he felt the poignancy of her predicament. In ten minutes he would be taking a cab back down the Holloway Road whilst she would probably spend the rest of the day cooped up in a cell. Perhaps she had been duped. From their short time together, she didn't seem the type to consciously turn to a life of crime.

“So, you holding up alright in here then?”

She glanced back at him, biting her lip.

“Trust me, it's hard in here. You do what you have to to survive.”

He looked around at the other inmates and wondered exactly what that reply

entailed. A pretty girl like Tracy would be easy prey for these sallow-looking, hard-faced women in Holloway.

“But you're staying out of trouble, I take it?”

“What? Me? I've already made enhanced status on the IEP. The POs say I'm a model prisoner.”

He couldn't help but smile at the phrase. The Page Three model who'd finally ended up behind bars in HMP Holloway.

“*A Model Prisoner?* That's got a nice ring to it. That could be the title of your autobiography.”

“Oh yeah. You're right, you know. I'll remember that.”

She paused for a minute and then looked at him with a serious expression.

“You know something about Linda, don't you? That's what all the questions were about.”

“I don't know. I mean I can't say for certain.”

“Can't say what?”

“Well, I don't think she committed suicide, that's all. I think she knew something. Something that someone was prepared to kill her for.”

“Knew what?”

“I don't know. That's what I'm trying to find out.”

Tracy stared back at him with a worried expression. He'd thought his visit might finally bring some answers but, as with everyone he spoke to about Linda, there only ever seemed to be more questions.

“Visiting time is over now,” said one of the prison officers checking her watch for the last time.

CHAPTER 15: 'THE WINDMILL'

Greg from the Sports desk was well into this third pint and still droning on about the January transfer market when Jack decided to the leave, the Cat & Canary, the Post's usual after-work hangout. Football had never been Jack's thing. When he was a kid, there'd been a campaign to stamp out hooliganism on the terraces; nowadays, it seemed the real hooligans were playing on the pitch.

Standing outside the pub, the winter snow was turning into dirty-brown slush along the pavements but a couple of whiskeys seemed to have numbed him to the weather. He'd made out to work it was just a social drink but really he was steeling himself for what had been on his mind all that week. He took out his phone from his pocket. Tonight was as good a night as any, he'd decided.

“Jack. What's happening, mate?”

Rhys' voice at the end of the the line sounded unusually subdued.

“Listen, you up to much tonight?”

“Not really,” moaned Rhys, “I've had a day interviewing that group who won *Popstarz*. I could do with a drink after listening to all their starry-eyed shit...”

“So that Joey kid never made it to the final?”

“Yeah, a wasted talent, some might say. Anyway, what exactly did you have in mind?”

“Just a few drinks. You know The Windmill in the West End?”

“What? The strip club?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you were on the wagon and up to your eyeballs in debt. Now you want to blow a load of cash on some strippers? Has Laura left you or something?”

“No, nothing like that. Just fancied a bit of a night out.”

“You're up to something, Jack. I know you are. But if you're twisting my arm into going to a strip club then you know I'm hardly going to say no. Shall we say the Coach & Horses in Soho around half-nine?”

“Yeah. Perfect.”

An hour later Jack entered the saloon bar of the Coach & Horses pub in Soho. The old carpet felt sticky against the soles of his shoes but the air inside had a comforting, yeasty warmth. He slipped the packet of Extra Strong Mints he'd just bought from a newsagents into the inner pocket of his jacket then ordered a single scotch as he waited at the bar next to a couple of young American backpackers who were flicking through a copy of TimeOut.

At nearly ten, Rhys finally turned up looking tired and pale. Dark rings seemed to encircle his eye sockets and his face looked gaunt.

“What's up with you? You look bloody awful.”

“I'm just tired that's all. Not been sleeping too good lately.”

“Well, I told you before you should lay off that stuff for a bit.”

“No, it's not that. It's just... well, you must have heard that police enquiry has been re-opened?”

“What? The phone-hacking thing?”

“Yeah,” said Rhys, his eyes scanning the bar for any potential eavesdropper.

“So? I can't see it going anywhere. I can't see any policeman or politician who would be brave or stupid enough to take on News International.”

“Yeah but what if it spreads?”

Rhys signalled to the barman for a pint of lager.

“No. Trust me. It won't.”

“You can't know that, Jack. If the police really start investigating it then I could really be in the shit.”

“Look, I'm sure it won't come to that. Besides, I thought you said you did it all through a private investigator.”

“Yeah, but that's what I'm worried about,” added Rhys taking a sip from his pint
“The bloke I'm using has done work for all the tabloids. If he gets a tug from the cops then how do I know he'll keep my name out of it?”

After finishing their drinks, they made way down Shaftesbury Avenue. The West End seem unusually quiet. A few couples sheltered in the doorways of theatres as black cabs hovered in the wintry drizzle, their taxi lights glowing like amber lanterns in a foggy sea. As they turned onto the cobbles of Great Windmill Street, Jack could make out the glitzy neon of the Windmill Theatre. He'd never stepped inside the place before. In the sixties Paul Raymond had bought it, letting his daughter, Debbie, manage it as a venue for burlesque shows but the venture had ended in failure. The place had then changed hands numerous times before eventually being transformed into a lap-dancing club in the nineties. From what research Jack had done, the new owner, Oscar Owide, seemed an enigmatic figure: a former barber from the East End who had carved out a reputation as one of the last Soho impresarios. Yet apart from a run in with the taxman over unpaid VAT, he didn't seem to fit the mobster mould. Even so, he was now curious to put a face to the name.

At the entrance they passed an overbearing doorman dressed in a tux and a black bow-tie. The man gave them a cursory glance and then nodded them inside. After paying the entrance fee, they entered a dark, cavernous room with a stage at one end and a long brass pole at its centre. Around the walls were small, cushioned booths at which huddles of men sat with girls dressed in sequinned outfits and ugly, clear plastic shoes with over-sized heels. On the other side of the room, there was a large bar area with two young men in dark waistcoats and white shirts preparing cocktails. There was something incredibly kitsch about it all; as if a few square meters of Las Vegas had been surgically removed and transplanted into the heart of London.

They took a seat in a booth in the corner as Jack surveyed the room. It wasn't exactly lively but then he guessed it probably did most of its business late when its clientèle were sufficiently fortified with booze to overlook the outrageous prices.

“So what's all this about?” asked Rhys as picked up the drinks menu that lay on the table, “Don't tell me there isn't some ulterior motive for this. If I had to guess I'd

say you're sniffing out a story.”

Jack found himself once again feeling envious of Rhys' journalistic sixth sense. Behind the buffoonery, Rhys had a natural gift for discerning the motivations of others. It was probably the same gift that allowed him to survive amongst the savagery of the tabloid jungle.

“Nothing really. I'm just trying to get a bit of background. You remember that Linda Lavonne I talked to you about?”

“The Page 3 bird who snuffed it?”

“Yeah... I just got a funny feeling there's more to that than meets the eye.”

“What? You reckon someone topped her? I can't really see it myself.”

Jack was only half-listening. He was too absorbed in observing a short, older man who was milling around the bar. He was dressed in a tight-fitting, grey suit and chatting casually to the barmen.

“Would you like some drinks, guys?” said a young waitress who suddenly appeared at their table.

“Yes. What champagnes do you have?” asked Rhys.

“Well, we have some vintage Dom Perignon or Krug or –”

“Ignore him,” added Jack “We'll just get a couple of bottles of lager, please.”

While the waitress went off to the bar, they both surveyed the rest of the room. A couple of tables away three middle-aged men in business suits were chatting away to a blonde and another Latino-looking girl. The men were gesticulating and as the table descended into raucous laughter one of the girls beckoned to the eldest guy, a balding man with red, saggy cheeks.

“Not bad, eh?” said Rhys, leering as the girl took the man's hand and led him towards a passage at the side of the bar.

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“Come on, Jack. I mean, you would, wouldn't you?”

Jack was still staring at the small man in the suit at the bar. Was that Oscar? He looked such a small, shrunken figure. Perhaps that was what so many late nights

drinking champagne did to a man. Perhaps the high-life finally shrivelled you up.

“Hey guys!” said a woman with long blonde hair who now nestled herself into the seat by Jack, “My name is Chanel. What's yours?”

Jack looked at her. She was young, probably early twenties, with sparkling blue eyes and a small, mousey nose. Her lips were thick with gloss and she was wearing a low-cut chiffon outfit that exposed a swell of milky breast that was as carefully set out as the window of a Bond Street boutique.

“I'm Rhys and this is my friend, Jack.”

“So, you enjoying yourselves, guys?”

Jack nodded but he was still trying to keep his attention on the old man at the bar.

“First time, is it?”

“No. I go to these places all the time,” replied Rhys, “I'm the showbiz correspondent for the Sunday Exclusive actually.”

Jack turned to watch as Rhys proudly produced a card from his jacket pocket and the girl examined it.

“Oh, we get a lot of proper celebrities in here,” said the woman handing the card back to Rhys.

“You can keep it.”

“No, it's okay,” replied the girl “Yeah... we get a lot of footballers, actors and stuff. They're so interesting to talk to, you know.”

Rhys' smile hardened into a grimace.

“Yeah, I bet.”

“Oh yeah, you get to meet all sorts through this job.”

“Well, if you've ever got a good story to sell, we pay good money for kiss-and-tell.”

“Really? How much are you talking?”

“Well, depends who we're talking about.”

“Hmmm. I might have to think about that,” said the girl with a giggle “What about your friend here? He doesn't say much.”

She turned to Jack and performed a well-practised smile on him. She was pretty, her soft skin dabbled with light-brown freckles over her nose, and her long, blonde locks of hair tousled over her shoulders. She reminded him of a young Linda, the one he'd seen in that first photo.

“So, you like working here?” Jack asked, inwardly cringing at his own cliché.

“Yeah, I love it. It's good money and, like I said, I get to meet lots of interesting people.”

Lots of interesting people. The words somehow reminded him of Kenny's words. *Gangsters. Dangerous people.*

“Your friend is so serious,” laughed the girl as she turned to Rhys.

“I know,” said Rhys smiling, “I'm always telling him he needs to lighten up.”

As he turned to look at the old man at the bar again, Jack couldn't help his eyes being drawn in by the girl's breasts. They looked unnaturally large, most probably swollen by the silicon implants which were advertised everywhere these days... in newspapers, billboards, even on the tube.

“You like them?” said the girl as he she squeezed her hand on Jack's thigh, “They're not real, you know.”

He nodded. He'd already reached the same conclusion but then nothing was real about the place: the fake smiles, the neon strip lighting, the strained conversation and the ridiculous outfits. The place had an Alice-In-Wonderland feel about it. A playground for middle-aged, middle-management to indulge their fantasies.

“Would you like a dance then?”

“Go on, mate!” said Rhys from the other side of the table.

“Yeah. Why not?”

The woman took Jack's hand and guided him lazily away from the table to the corner of the bar and then down the passage where Jack had seen the other man disappear to. It was lined with smaller cubicles and she pulled him into one and gestured to a plush, cushioned seat as she drew the curtain.

“How much is a dance?”

“Thirty.”

He took out his wallet and passed the woman a couple of notes which she slipped into the top of one of her fishnet stockings.

“Don't look so nervous. I don't bite, you know.”

He nodded as the woman stepped in front of him and pulled the palms of her hands tight against her breasts.

“It's just that.... well, I was trying to find someone actually.”

“I know you were, baby. And now you've found her,” replied the girl with a smile.

“No, I don't mean that. I'm looking for, well, someone in particular.”

The girl's lip pursed into an expression of disapproval.

“Look, I'm not that sort of girl,” she said reaching for the curtain, “Perhaps you should try looking somewhere else if that's what you're after.”

“No, I don't mean that.”

“Well, what do you mean?” said the girl letting go of the curtain.

“I'm looking for a girl who I think used to work here.”

“What? I'm not good enough for you. Is that it?”

“No, it's nothing like that. I just wondered if you might know her.”

He reached into his wallet and fished out another twenty pound note. The girl cocked her head at him. He opened the wallet again and doubled it to forty.

“Who you talking about?”

“A girl called Diamond. I was told she used to work here.”

The girl snatched the two notes and laughed.

“Yeah, she used to... up until a few months ago. She was sacked.”

“How come?”

“She was a fucking, thieving junkie, that's why.”

The smile had gone now along with the soft, voice to be replaced to a harsh South London drawl.

“What do you mean?”

“She used to work on the door and she was caught stealing out the float. The boss fired her on the spot.”

“You mean, Oscar?”

“Yeah. How come you know his name?”

“No, I've just made some enquiries that's all.”

“Oi! You're not Old Bill, are you? Whatever that fucking stupid cow has been up to... It ain't nothing to do me.”

“No, it's nothing like that. I just need to find her that's all.”

The woman snorted and adjusted her chiffon outfit.

“And?”

“Well, can you help me?”

“What's it worth?”

“I've already given you forty quid.”

The woman sneered. He took out his wallet again and took another twenty note.

“And you're definitely not police?”

“No. I'm a journalist.”

“So what's all this about?”

“I can't say... it's do with a friend of Diamond's who got into some trouble. That's all. Some serious trouble.”

“I'm not exactly surprised. Diamond was trouble-in-heels.”

“So, do you know where I could find her?”

“The last I heard she was working at one of those clip joints. Live Livestick. Just round the corner from here. I don't know if it's still there. The council was trying to shut them down. They give Soho a bad name, you know.”

“What do you mean *they*?”

“It's run by Kosovans. Fucking evil bastards, they are. I'd tread carefully around them if I was you.”

The girl reached for the curtain and pulled it back.

“It's another thirty if you still want that dance,” announced the girl.

Jack shook his head and the girl brusquely grabbed his hand and escorted him back to the bar area.

Back at the table Rhys was still sipping from his bottle of a beer.

“Good, was she?”

“Yeah... okay, I suppose,” replied Jack as the girl sauntered off to another table but his mind was still thinking about Linda and, in particular, whoever it was who'd scared her enough to flee London that summer.

CHAPTER 16: 'THE MILK RUN'

That afternoon Sean had been doing the Milk Run. That's what Curtis called it when he'd first shown him the route. He had a scrap of paper with the addresses on the front seat of the Range Rover but the route had been pre-programmed into the car's sat-nav to make it easier to do the round.

The Milk Run, as Curtis had explained, consisted of pick-ups at about twenty different properties scattered across the city, from Barking in the east to Hornsey in the north. Each address a nondescript suburban house, the kind of cheap two-up-two-down that you would easily walk past without a glance, but every one, he'd learned, was part of Terry's big money machine. Each one, a suburban brothel staffed by young girls, mostly from Ukraine or the Baltic States who made their living from servicing an endless stream of eager punters.

It was genius really. It made even the drug business second-rate. Why make money from drugs and having to deal with unpredictable suppliers when you could earn enough dough from the oldest profession there was and control the whole thing? And Sean had to admit Terry seemed to have the whole thing pretty well sewn-up.

The final address was a house off Hornsey Road. A quiet street with three-storey Victorian terrace houses on either side. He took the sports bag with the rest of the takings and locked it in the boot of the Range Rover before looking for the house.

Number thirty-seven was a metal-framed door with frosted glass. The front-window had its curtains drawn but through the door he could see a light on in the passageway. He rang the doorbell and within few seconds could see a figure approaching.

As the door opened a middle-aged woman in a pink cashmere sweater and round glasses appeared and, for a moment, he wondered if he had the right address.

"I'm doing the Milk Run for Terry," he said softly, glancing over the low fence to see if anyone next door was stirring.

"Yeah... come in and wait in here."

As the door opened, he walked into a dingy hallway with peeling, flock-wallpaper on the walls whilst the woman disappeared into a room at the end of the passage. Beyond him there were some stairs with grey carpet peppered with cigarette burns and from above he could hear the sound of floorboards creaking.

After a moment, the woman returned with a supermarket carrier bag that she handed to him. Opening it, he could see inside were bundles of notes held together by rubber bands.

“There's one thousand, two hundred and eighty.”

He took out a note book from his pocket and wrote down the amount then shovelled the cash into a manilla envelope with a number written on it in marker pen. In his head he calculated he'd now taken over thirty thousand that morning. That was nearly a hundred-and-fifty grand a month, almost two million a year, and the taxman wasn't getting a sniff of any of it. It was like pulling off a decent post office job every day of the week - regular as clockwork - and, after all, noone was going to try skim Terry. No one was stupid enough for that.

He sealed the envelope and, without saying anything, left the house and headed out of the front gate to the car. He took a quick glance around the street before opening the boot and then slinging the envelope in the sports-bag with the all others then checked his watch again. Half-past three. Now he had to just drop the money off before it would be picked up again the next day and counted, and then later in the evening he'd phone the final numbers into Terry. Then his work for the day would be over.

He followed the Holloway Road up towards Highgate. The winter snow was finally melting now but the slender ash trees that lined the High Street still looked bare and lifeless. In the fading light of the afternoon the sky had turned to a gun-metal grey and as he reached the junction with Hampstead Lane and waited for the traffic lights, his gaze drifted across to a group of school kids kicking around a coke can in the long shadow of a bus shelter.

He was staring at the traffic light as it finally turned green and as it did so his foot

instinctively eased off the clutch but, as the car moved forward, it was only at the last second that he noticed something moving out of the shadows in front of him, a young woman hurrying across the road in front of the car. He stamped on the brake pedal and as the car jerked to a halt the startled woman turned and glared at him through the windscreen. She was tall and her shoulder-length blonde hair, pale skin and green eyes suddenly reminded him again. Anna. It was the same look too. The same look of shock and disgust that he'd seen on her face that morning as in the next room they heard little Andrezj's petrified screams.

Within another second, the woman had crossed the road and he was back driving along a long stretch of road that headed towards the Heath and beyond to the quiet suburbs of Finchley. He was taken aback by the grandeur of some of the properties along the streets: elegant stucco-fronted town houses with perfectly-manicured lawns discreetly screened by privet hedges and security gates. He'd heard from Curtis that Terry's place was somewhere around here. Some big mansion with a high fence to keep away prying eyes. It amused him to think the other residents, the stockbrokers and solicitors with whom he shared his street, hadn't the slightest inkling of the identity of their infamous neighbour. It seemed somehow comical that there they all were in their quiet cul-de-sacs of respectability, completely ignorant of who was living in their very midst.

After another half-an-hour he found himself on the Finchley Road where he managed to park the car outside a small parade of shops. He took the bag out of the boot and, slinging it over his shoulder, headed across the busy road towards a doorway with a discreet sign above it, Safety Deposits Hampstead.

It was Curtis had who shown him the safety deposit centre. At first, he'd thought it was stupid stashing so much cash in a safety deposit box. Most places like that asked too many questions. Besides, half of them were even on the look out for dirty cash so the staff could scoop a police reward. But Curtis had told him the owner of this firm was in on the racket. That was the point: a box could be hired at this place without identification and it was as secure as any bank. The place was a villain's

vault, every one of their steel security boxes probably filled to the brim with drugs, stolen gear, guns or bundles of dirty cash, and although the place operated its own CCTV, the owners apparently didn't seem to ask too many questions about their customers. After all, word seemed to have spread around the underworld about their services; they were making a small fortune just pretending not to see what was going on right under their noses.

He buzzed on the intercom and the heavy front door opened into a small bare office with grey carpet tiles on the floor and a doorway at the back. Two security cameras mounted from the ceiling seemed to follow him as he approached the desk on the far side of the room where a plump, middle-aged woman with glasses sat behind a computer.

“I've got something to deposit. Box 46D.”

The woman nodded, stood up and led him towards the doorway at the back before taking out a key and unlocking the heavy door that then swung open to reveal one of the vault rooms. She stood outside, arms crossed and waited, as he stepped into the small room and closed the door.

Inside he stared around at the walls of the room that were completely covered on all sides by columns of grey steel boxes mounted into a heavy steel casing. The boxes were organized vertically from A to L and each column of boxes marked in clockwise order from one to fifty. He found Terry's box on the right-hand wall and then he carefully punched in the security code Curtis had made him memorize into a small panel on the front and eased the drawer-like box out of its metal chassis. He took a quick glance up at the security camera which seemed to be observing him and then opened the bag and stuffed the envelopes of cash into the box before carefully loading the box back into the steel housing and pressing the button marked 'Lock'.

“All done?” said the woman cheerfully as Sean opened the door of the vault room and emerged back into the front office.

“Yeah. Cheers for that.”

As he crossed Finchley Road to where he'd parked the car, he wondered if the

woman had been watching him on camera afterwards. Whether she ever wondered what people kept in all those metal boxes. But then what did she care? She probably knew the whole business was crooked. After all, everyone seemed to be bent these days. Bankers, politicians, coppers. You were a mug if you weren't in on the fiddle.

It was almost five when he pulled the car back out on to the Finchley Road. The traffic heading into town would be too heavy now. It would be easier to head north and take the North Circular and hope to miss the rush hour. He switched on the radio as a few drops of rain started to fall from the darkening sky, splattering across the windscreen. From the car's speakers came a bitter-sweet lament sung over a swell of piano chords, one of those old soul records that Anna always seemed to be playing. Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye, Barry White. That was her thing. It had seemed strange that she liked soul music. He thought only his Mum still listened to old stuff like that.

On the North Circular, the rain was starting to beat down harder. After a couple of miles he could see the sign for Tottenham illuminated in the septic glow of the road lights. It seemed to beckon to him, pointing to a past he thought he'd left behind. He imagined Anna at the old flat and wondered if she was still there; after all, she still had the same mobile number. And then he realised he was thinking about her again. It seemed as if he could never quite stop himself thinking about her, wondering how things might have turned out if he hadn't got sucked into Ritchie's stupid plan. Was she living at the old place with her new bloke? Perhaps she'd got married? He couldn't bear to think that. He could sense the panic as the thought seemed to spin around his mind. If they were married then there'd be no chance they'd ever get back together but if she wasn't... well, maybe there was still a chance.

He wasn't sure what impulse tempted him to take the turning that led him off the North Circular. Perhaps it was a vague hope that tugged inside that he might just see her face again, that he might drive past as she emerged from one of the shops on the High Road or see her crossing in front of him at a zebra crossing. He didn't even know what he'd do if any of that happened but he continued all the same, as if the car

was somehow driving on autopilot. Further on, as hard rain pounded down on the roof, he reached the junction into White Hart Lane and past the Turkish supermarket where he used to get beers once the pubs had shut. Past the new hair salons and pound shops that seemed to have sprung up and older shops that seemed to have closed but still it all remained achingly familiar and with every few yards a new memory, memories of watching his first Spurs game at home as a teenager or bunking off school and hanging around the stairwells of the estates around Bruce Grove with his mates. Then past The Bricklayers pub where he'd first met Anna, and a couple of hundred yards further down on the other side of the road the police station where he'd been held that morning before being transferred to Brixton on remand. He could sense something welling up inside. A heady brew of emotions stirred by all this reminiscing.

At the turning to the flats, he pulled the car up into one of the parking bays which was tightly squeezed between two other parked cars and switched the lights off. Part of him was now telling him to turn back and head off. He felt uneasy just seeing the entrance, that familiar green door still covered with faded graffiti tags. The last time he'd seen it was when he'd been led out in handcuffs before being escorted to a waiting police car. Somehow that felt like another lifetime ago and then, as he looked up to the first floor through the driving rain, he could see the dim glow of a lamp and a silhouette of someone moving about in the lounge.

He sat waiting for a couple of minutes as the headlights of another car entering the close dazzled in the wing mirror and then he noticed the light in the room upstairs went off and after a minute or so the green entrance door to the flats opened and a couple were standing there. He strained to make out their faces through the rivulets of rainwater streaming down the windscreen. The man was carrying some kind of bag or holdall and she was carrying an umbrella shielding them both from the rain, and they were embracing and she was kissing him on the cheek.

He tried squinting at them through the deluge but he couldn't be sure if it was her. She was about the right height but her face was partly obscured by the man standing

in front of her. They seemed to be chatting and laughing. He squeezed the door handle, pushed open the door and put a foot on the wet ground but, as he tried to climb out, his foot slid against something underfoot and he knocked the door of the Range Rover against the neighbouring vehicle. Suddenly, the other car's alarm wailed itself into life. He staggered to get his footing again. They had turned to face him now and were staring at him through the rain.

“Who's there?” said the man in a thick Eastern European accent.

Sean was startled. He could see the man walking towards him and she was following a couple of paces behind. He could see her now through the rain. The hair was slightly longer than when he'd seen her last but he couldn't mistake the pale skin and those shy green eyes. For a second he thought he might be sick his heart was pounding so fast and yet now there she was – only a few feet away – and he had absolutely no idea what to say to her or how to explain his being there.

“Sean? My God... is that you, Sean?”

His mouth just hung open and he felt a couple of cold raindrops splash against his tongue. Meanwhile, the man had dropped the bag and was almost right in front of the car. He couldn't even get in and drive off with the man in front of him.

“What the fuck you do here?” he was shouting in broken English, “What you do here? Stay away from her. Understand?”

“Look, I...”

“She not want see you. Understand? She never want see you again.”

He stared at her. An expression of confusion and grief written across her face. He couldn't tell whether it was raindrops or tears that were now rolling down her cheeks.

“I just... I just wanted to say...”

The man was glaring at him, his hands clenching into fists at his side.

“I wanted to say I'm so—.”

It was no good. The man's hands were already grabbing him. Shoving him up against the side of the other car. He pushed back with all the force he could muster and the two of them rolled against the neighbouring car which was still wailing and

flashing in the darkness. Forcing one of his arms forward he managed to grab the other man by the throat. He pushed the man's head so that it thumped against the bonnet of the other car but as he tried to hold him there he could feel a hard blow to the bridge of his nose as the man swiped at him with his free hand. He edged back and then threw him back towards the road. A steady stream of blood was now dripping from his nose as he watched the man collapse into a puddle on the ground. In the confusion, a silver Lexus pulled out of one of the parking bays and for a moment they both seemed blinded by the glare of its headlights. He held his arm to his eyes to try to make out what was going on. Anna was crouched over the man checking to see if he was alright and then, as the Lexus screeched past and out on to the High Road, the other man had to quickly roll his legs out of the way.

“I'm sorry. I don't know why I came. It was mistake... I didn't mean for all this. But it was him who started to it... your boyfriend.”

“He's not my boyfriend,” she replied with a confused expression, “He's my brother. He's living with me for now. He has some building work here.”

He looked down at the figure struggling to get to his feet.

“Look, I'm sorry, mate. I didn't –” he said, offering the man his hand.

“Just stay away now, you hear?” the man spat back at him “I don't care why you come... it was mistake. Big mistake. You are criminal! You make very bad luck for my sister. Understand?”

As he got back into the car and started the ignition he could feel a lump in his throat. Her brother had been right. It was a mistake. A stupid miscalculation to think that she would still want to see him after all this time. He didn't even know why he had come back. Just some lingering fantasy that there was still a chance of them getting back together. He needed to move on and forget. He needed to try to rid himself of all those things that he'd once felt for her, to mentally steel himself for being alone like he had that moment when the judge had sentenced him. Now he was free of all that – courts, judges, prison – so why did it feel like he was still banged up? He was almost back home when it finally occurred to him. It was Anna was who

still imprisoning him; she was the world that still existed beyond that locked door.

CHAPTER 17: 'LIPSTICK MARKS'

Jack had recognised the place that same night when he'd left The Windmill with Rhys. With its gaudy, illuminated sign it was hardly inconspicuous. He'd glanced in as he passed the doorway with its silvery-ribbon curtain but its outward appearance barely disguised the nature of the place. *Live Lipstick* was one of the typical Soho clip joints that made its money from extorting foreign tourists and out-of-towners foolish enough to be tempted inside. The council had tried cracking down on the racket but it was a scam nearly as old as Soho itself, Jack had learned, dating back to the near-beer clubs which once enriched the Maltese hoods who ran Soho in the fifties. A girl would stand in the doorway of the club enticing passing men with promises of cheap strip shows and then once seated inside punters would be saddled with an astronomical bill for drinks and the company of the hostesses who served them. If the punter objected then the club's heavies would escort them to the nearest cash machine to ensure the bill was settled. Like all such scams, it played on the mark's vulnerability but there seemed no end of mugs who still fell for it.

It had taken Jack over a week to gather the courage to return to the place. All that time his own curiosity had been tugging at his sleeve, reminding him that there was something about Linda's death that made him feel more than a little uneasy with the official conclusions. His instincts convinced him now more than ever that there was a story there and if it was Diamond who held the key to unravelling it then the clip-joint was the only tangible connection he had to finding out more. In the meantime, he'd wrestled with the dilemma of what to tell Laura. He could hardly imagine her being happy about him creeping around the fleshpots of Soho. Initially he'd planned on telling her that he was interviewing a source for an investigative piece he was working on but he knew it would then be all too easy to get tripped up by a series of further lies. In the end, he settled for telling her that he was needed to pop into town to pick up a new printer cartridge. He hated himself for it all the same. He'd always prided himself on the honesty of their relationship but ever since that day he'd lied

about his return to AA he'd begun to wonder if he was feeling the corrosive effect of this seedy world he had stumbled upon.

As he emerged from the tube station at Leicester Square, the streets were already full of the usual Saturday mix of tourists and shoppers. In the square itself, a small crowd had gathered around a busker playing old Beatles songs on a badly-tuned guitar, and then, as he pressed his way past them into Chinatown, he could smell the sweet aroma from the restaurants on Gerard Street with their window racks of honey-coloured meats hanging like prizes at a fairground.

By the time he was a few feet away from the place he already could see a girl in a tight silver bikini top and gold miniskirt slouched against the entrance smoking a cigarette. Her face looked gaunt and pale and her bare, skinny arms prickled with goosebumps from the cold breeze.

“You want to see a show, honey? It's only five pounds,” she called out, managing to purse her chapped lips into a thin smile.

He found it hard not to pity her. The outfit resembled some parody of cheap glamour but the gnawed fingernails and withered skin seemed to tell a different story. He frowned as he slipped her a five pound note, reminding himself that she was as much perpetrator as victim in this scam. After all, there were no innocents in this business; to Jack it seemed that somewhere along the line everyone had become complicit.

He passed through the ribboned curtain and down a winding set of stairs lined with faded posters of women in pathetic erotic poses. At the bottom he was met by another girl with straggly red hair and thick purple lipstick.

“I'm Tanya,” said the woman as he felt her arm clasp tightly round his.

With his arm locked in hers, it felt as if he was being taken hostage. He looked around the room as his eyes gradually adjusted to the half light. In the far corner a heavysset man dressed in a black tutleneck seemed to be frowning at him from across the room. In front of him were a couple of tables and a sofa at which two other girls in miniskirts and crop-tops sat chewing gum and whispering to each other.

“Let's sit down,” said the girl as she guided him to one of the tables, “Why don't we have a little drink? You look exhausted. The show is going to start in ten minutes.”

“No, I'm fine, thanks. I'm not that thirsty.”

“Oh.. well, why don't you buy me one then?”

“I just wanted to talk,” he murmured.

Her annoyance was obvious from her snarled expression. He glanced over her shoulder at the heavy at the back of the room who seemed to be reading a newspaper.

“Look, you have to buy a drink. You can't stay here if you don't buy a drink.”

He looked at the printed menu which she pushed in front of him. At the top was bottled beer listed at fifteen pounds and further down 'Vintage Champagne' was listed at five hundred-and-fifty pounds.

“I'm looking for someone actually. A girl called Diamond. I was told she works here,” he said glancing back at the girls lounging on the sofa.

“Yeah, well, why don't you get me a glass of champagne, honey... and you can tell me all about it?”

He leaned in towards her.

“I know what this place is. I'm not stupid. I'm not here for a drink or the show. I've been told she works here... on the door.”

“Yeah? And why should I care?”

He could see the heavy at the back of room now looking up from his newspaper and glaring as the woman idly examined her fingernails at the table.

“If you've got a phone number or address then I'll pay you.”

“How much?”

“Twenty.”

The woman sniggered and continued prodding with a nail at one of her cuticles.

“Okay, forty then.”

“A hundred,” she replied with a greedy smirk.

He could see the man had folded up his newspaper and was now approaching the

table.

“I finish in an hour,” she whispered as he came within a couple of feet of them, “Be on the corner of Wardour Street.”

“Is there problem here?” said the man in a thick Russian-sounding accent.

He was leaning over the pair of them with a thunderous look on his face.

“Yes, I don't seem to have any cash on me. I thought you might take credit cards, you see?”

“There is cashpoint round the corner. Come, I take you there now.”

Jack glanced back at the woman who was giggling as he got to his feet.

“Oh, that would be very kind of you.”

The man followed him back to the doorway and he slowly made his way up the stairs. As he climbed the final steps he could almost feel the man's heavy breath on the back of his neck. His heart was now pounding in his chest and beads of sweat were snaking their way down his back. Reaching the top, he could just make out the other girl still milling around on the street outside looking for potential customers. Then, as he passed through the spangled ribbons of the curtain, he broke into a sudden sprint, pounding as fast as his legs would carry him up the street. He could hear the man shouting after him and the sound of his heavy footsteps as he continued to chase him around the corner.

Panting, he barged his way through an archway and past the old Raymond Revue Bar knocking into a group of Japanese tourists who were staring through the entrance of a sex shop; one of the men in the group slipped over on the pavement as the rest of the group suddenly swayed into him but he didn't dare look back. He still could hear the group squawking angrily at him as he rounded the corner into Berwick Street market where two policemen were talking to one of the stallholders.

“Yeah, I couldn't believe it. Couple of kids they were. Couldn't have been more than fourteen. Swiped a load of CDs right under my nose and then did a runner. Proper blatant about it too.”

Jack looked back to see the thug from the clip joint hanging around about ten

meters away and still glaring at him .

“Yeah, I think I saw them,” said Jack.

The two officers swivelled round to look at him.

“Yeah, I was walking up from this direction,” Jack continued pointing at the thug who was out of earshot, “And like the bloke says they just nicked the stuff and ran in that direction. If we go now maybe I can point them out. You can't let them just get away with it, can you?”

Jack glanced at his pursuer who had slipped himself into the crowd in the alleyway but still continued to watch intently.

“Nah, they'll be long gone now,” said the stall holder.

“Yeah maybe... but it wouldn't hurt to take a look, would it?” pleaded Jack to one of the police officers.

“Alright. Come on then.”

Jack followed the two officers up Berwick Street as they mingled in and out of the crowd, all the time pretending to peer around the street for the teenage thieves. Turning for a moment, he noticed the heavy from the clip joint had finally disappeared.

“Look, I just remembered I'm meant to be meeting someone,” he said as they neared the end of the street, “That bloke is probably right. They're probably long gone now. And I mean... I'm not so sure I would remember them now. Sorry and all that but you know how it is, don't you?”

One of the constables arched his eyebrows in an expression of exasperation and Jack shrugged.

An hour later, he was waiting around on the corner of Wardour Street still half on the look out for the club's heavy. He recognised her immediately from across the road; the girl's cherry-red hair stood out amongst a crowd from pedestrians. She looked different now in her jeans and sweatshirt, resembling any of the young girls who hung around Oxford Street on a Saturday buying clothes and make-up for the

weekend.

“I didn't think you were serious,” said the girl as she approached.

“Yeah, I am and so it seems was your colleague back there.”

“Yeah, well it's good for you he didn't catch you. Some of the others weren't so lucky.”

He felt slightly sickened by the casual nature of her reply. He'd heard the reports of the hapless punters beaten senseless by the thugs who ran the clip-joints.

“You got my money then?”

He reached into the back pocket of his jeans and showed her the wad of notes he'd taken out from the cash-dispenser.

“Give it here then.”

“No. Not here,” he replied pushing the money back into pocket.

They stood for a moment eyeing each other. It seemed a hopeless stalemate. How could he even be sure this girl wasn't just stringing him along? How could he be sure she wouldn't clip him in the same way she clipped all the other mugs who she entertained.

“The pub round the corner.”

“You going to buy me that drink then?” she added with a sly smile.

They wandered through the crowds on Old Compton Street to the Coach & Horses where he ordered a couple of drinks at the crowded bar.

“So how do you know Diamond?”

“Why do you wanna know? You Vice Squad or something?”

“Hardly. If I was do you think I'd be standing here now?”

“I suppose so. Well, like you say, she used to work at the club, didn't she?”

“Used to?”

“She got sacked a couple of weeks back. Too fucking unreliable.”

“What do you mean?”

“She's a junkie. She used to turn up all cracked-out.... if she turned up at all.”

“So where is she now?”

“Give us the money and I'll tell you,” snapped the girl.

His sweaty hand slipped into the back pocket of his jeans again and touched the wad of notes as the girl took a sip of her drink. He'd been trying to save for the holiday and here he was handing over a hundred quid to a girl who he couldn't even be sure was going to give him anything. It seemed complete madness. How could he ever justify it to Laura if she saw the bank statement? But the craving to know more seemed overwhelming; the breakthrough surely so tantalizingly close.

“So how do I know you're not just spinning me a story?”

“You don't! Look, you can take it or leave it, mister. If you wanna know then you're just going have to trust me, aren't you?”

He pulled out the wad and surreptitiously pushed it into the girl's hand.

“Go to Pepys Estate in Deptford. Ask for a bloke called Augustus.”

“Augustus?”

“Yeah, that's his name and don't say I sent you.”

“Who's that? Her boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend?” said he girl with a giggle, “I wouldn't exactly call him that.”

“So that's all you got? You don't even have an address? A flat number?”

“Oh, you won't need a flat number,” said the girl as she stuffed the wad into the pocket of her jeans “Trust me, everyone round there knows Augustus.”

With that she gulped the rest of the drink and made her way towards the door. He watched as the girl disappeared back out on to the street then he reached for his orange juice and downed the rest.

Why did any of this really matter? After all, it had nothing to do with him and his own problems. It was a world away from the kind of life he had with Laura. And maybe Kenny had been right: wasn't he just interested in scooping the details of some sleazy, tabloid scandal? Wasn't he just another eager voyeur like the string of prurient punters who got ripped off by the Soho clip joints? Even if Linda had been murdered then maybe in some way it was her own fault for becoming embroiled in this sordid industry. After the afternoon's events it was becoming difficult to determine who the

real victims were. It was all so squalid. A world in which everything had become a commodity marked up for an endless stream of gullible, gluttonous consumers. And now the infection had spread so that everything was slowly succumbing to its sickly decay.

“You want another one?” said the barman as he collected the empty glass.

He hesitated for a moment but the offer of a little something to quell the fog of depression that was beginning to envelope him was just too tempting.

“Yeah, go on,” he replied looking up at the man, “Get me a Jameson's... In fact, make it a double.”

CHAPTER 18: 'CONCRETE JUNGLE'

The traffic on The Highway, one of the main arteries feeding from the East End into the City, was barely moving. The road was a long incision through the grimmer districts of East London that had once housed the armies of dockers who had unloaded the container ships laden with cargoes from across the world but now the only businesses that thrived on the gloomy streets were scruffy mini-cab offices and cheap take-away joints. In the evening rush-hour, a solid queue of cars had formed spewing clouds of exhaust fumes into the evening rain and then, as the bus in front of him eventually heaved away from its stop, Jack finally spotted the figure of his friend emerging from a side street looking bedraggled in his rain-soaked overcoat.

“Jesus, you look like shit,” said Rhys as he opened the door and heaved himself into the passenger seat, “You had a shave today?”

Jack hadn't shaved. He hadn't washed or eaten either. Instead, he'd spent the day sitting around the house drinking coffee, smoking the occasional cigarette and wallowing in his own self-pity.

“I called in sick,” he replied as the line of traffic slowly started to edge forward, “Food poisoning. I don't reckon Charlie bought it.”

“Oh, she'll come back, mate. You've been together too long for her to walk away now. Trust me, I know how women think. She's just got the hump for a bit. Give it a week and she'll be over it.”

Somehow Jack doubted it would be that easy. He'd stayed in the pub for the rest of that Saturday afternoon and well into the evening, knocking back whiskies until the whole place evaporated into a hazy blur. He couldn't remember the latter part of the evening, only the landlord shaking him by the shoulder at closing time and waking in a sweaty panic to find himself slumped in a chair, his head nestled against the corner walls of the pub. By then he knew there'd be trouble. His mobile phone with its twelve missed calls provided it's own testimony and there would be nothing

to offer in the way of mitigation.

When he finally got back to South London well after midnight, the light in the front-room was on and as he fumbled his key into the lock Laura had come out into the passage, opening the front door with a look of utter contempt. Then came the familiar argument, the rapid-fire trading of insults, followed by a forlorn attempt to ameliorate the situation interrupted by his sudden need to throw up in the downstairs toilet. In the end, he spent the remainder of that cold, sleepless night on the sofa, feeling nauseous and cursing his own fecklessness as he huddled under a blanket.

In the sobering light of Sunday morning, she'd broken it to him. She needed some space. She was going to stay at her sisters in Sydenham for now. They'd talk about it when she'd had time to think things over.

“It's not just the drinking, Jack,” she'd said as she zipped up a sports bag in the hallway with tears welling in her eyes, “It's all the lies. You said you were just going out to run some errands but that's why you made all the excuses... you wanted it to be you and the bottle. I bet you haven't even been going to the meetings like you promised. You just can't walk away from it, can you?”

And she'd been half-right about that. And if he'd told her the rest then it wouldn't have made things any better. But it was his salary which just about covered the mortgage and household bills. As her hopes of any promotion at the insurance company had faded he knew that what she wanted more than anything was to start a family and settle into a quiet life of suburban domesticity. There was nothing particularly wrong with that. Nothing wrong with it except how incompatible it seemed with the bibulous nature of his own chosen profession. And part of him wanted that life too. There had been a time when, with genuine conviction, he'd reminded her that what he was doing he was doing for both of them. Now such clarity had receded, however, and in its place a foggy uncertainty, uncertainty about whether his choices had indeed been the right ones and unsettling doubts about the underlying desires were that were driving them.

“So, I suppose a quick sharpener is out of the question?” said Rhys as, the car eventually crawled its way across Tower Bridge towards Bermondsey.

“In there,” replied Jack, pointing to the glove compartment.

Rhys opened it and took out a half-bottle of Jack Daniels.

“So what is it with all the cloak-and-dagger stuff?” asked Rhys as he swigged a mouthful of whiskey.

“It's just a lead on that story I told you about. The Lavonne thing.”

“Don't you think you're getting a little bit carried away with this, Jack?”

“I just need to straighten a few things out. That's all.”

“Right... and you know this place we're going is well fucking dodgy?”

“Yeah. I guessed that.”

”Well, I suppose at least you look the part. If I didn't know better I'd think were strung out on something from the look of you.”

Jack didn't reply. He was too focused on the road ahead. Too busy wondering exactly what he *was* heading towards. Maybe Laura had been right about that too. Maybe that was another thing he couldn't walk away from. Not now anyway. After all, he'd come too far now to just walk away.

When they finally reached Deptford, he pulled the car up in a quiet street with the engine still running. The two of them sat staring at twin tower blocks that loomed over them like two giant fingers protruding into the evening sky in a gesture of petulant defiance.

“You sure about all this?” Rhys asked.

Jack was barely listening. He was watching a group of half a dozen white youths in baggy jeans and hooded sweatshirts sitting in a huddle around a low wall that led up to the entrance of one of the towers. They were only in their mid to late teens but they had that carnivorous look about them like ravenous animals waiting for something to prey upon.

“Get in the driver's side and keep the engine running. If I'm not out in twenty

minutes then –”

He couldn't finish the rest of his instruction; he hadn't figured out any viable contingency measures if things did get nasty. Realistically, what could Rhys do if he wasn't back by then? Call the police? He didn't even have an address. He only knew that somewhere in this concrete maze was someone called Augustus who he guessed was one of the estate's more notorious residents. And what would the police do anyway? If he got himself into trouble somewhere up there, in one of those flats twenty floors above the street, then he was on his own. After all, this was the kind of place the cops had no interest in policing. There was only one law that operated here, a social Darwinism of the purest form.

He quietly got out of the car and began to approach the group of youths trying to expand his chest as he did so in the vain hope that he might somehow increase his physical presence. As he got within a couple of feet of them, one of them turned and cocked a suspicious glance at him before turning to the rest of the group and whispering something that Jack couldn't quite manage to overhear.

“What you want, man?” said the eldest of the group, slouching against the wall, his facial features obscured in the shadows.

“I'm looking for someone.”

“Yeah? What? You got a warrant or something?”

He could hear one of the other younger youths making a snorting pig-like noise as some of the others in the group sniggered like monkeys in a zoo.

“No, I'm looking for Augustus. You know him?”

“Nah, man. I ain't heard of no Augustus. Not in these ends.”

A couple of the other youths began to encircle him. He sensed one of them was already behind him and he could feel his heart beating so fast he felt like he wanted to take a sudden gulp of air.

“You're a fucking fed, ain't you?” snarled one of the younger youths with an insolent look.

He'd never heard the word before except in Hollywood films. Now it seemed the

kids of London's council estates had been reared on a diet of American cop shows and rap lyrics to the point where their own language mimicked the slum-speak of the South Bronx, the project-parlance of Brooklyn. All identity had been washed away; all sense of difference extinguished. Now there were just identikit hoodlums, all inhabitants of some globalized ghetto.

“Shut up, yeah?” said the eldest youth to the younger kids, “Just tell me what you're after, man.”

He sensed the older youth was cagey. He'd never tried to score on the street. In fact, he'd only ever bought a bit of hashish from friends of friends in his student days and this was a world away from the lawns of the university campus where he'd first got stoned listening to The Stone Roses on his walkman.

“I'm looking to score,” he whispered trying his best to imitate a desperate grimace.

“White or brown?”

“Look, I..” he started to say but he could sense a couple of the kids now milling about menacingly behind him.

“Come 'ere,” said the eldest youth as they stepped a few feet away from the group, “I'll get you whatever you want, mate. Give us the money and I'll get it for you.”

Jack saw straight through it. The kids on the estate probably survived by ripping off a few desperate buyers who came to score. Even so, he was sure he was lying about not knowing Augustus. If the girl at the clip joint was right then everyone on the estate knew Augustus.

“No, I got to see Augustus personally,” he said, thinking on his feet, “I need to speak to him about something but his phone is off.”

The youth said nothing but eyed him suspiciously.

“Look, I've been there before,” he continued, “but I can't remember what flat it is. They all look the fucking same, don't they...these tower blocks?”

The youth still remained silent so Jack reached in his back pocket and pulled out a

folded twenty pound note.

“You can have this,” he said, flashing the youth the note, “You know... if you can jog my memory.”

The youth went to swipe the note but Jack crumpled it in his fist.

“ The address.”

“Flat 358,” said the youth, gesturing with his thumb at one of the towers.

On the landing of the twenty-eighth floor, the lift halted and the graffiti-covered doors shuddered open. He stepped out into a landing, finally glad to be away from the lift's nauseous urine stench. A fluorescent strip light flickered in a hallway littered with beer cans and take-away wrappers. Half the front-doors to the flats on the floor had been replaced with steel shutters which Jack presumed had been installed to prevent them being squatted although a couple already looked as if someone had tried to prise them off with a crowbar. He couldn't imagine trying to survive in such squalor; it was hardly surprising these places soon became overrun with junkies and drug dealers. Perhaps that was even the plan, to gather all London's low-life and dump them here like human refuse left to rot.

Arriving at three-hundred-and-fifty-eight, the front door with its heavy, steel security-grille looked more like the entrance to a fortress. A letterbox had been fitted but at head height so that Jack suspected it was used by the occupants to peer out on to the landing at prospective visitors. As he stood there nervously contemplating the occupant's need for such heavy security, he could hear the door's latch being opened from inside and a thin, pale-faced man appeared. His bloodshot pupils peered out from under heavy eyelids and he was swaying on his feet like a drunk. Jack could smell the scent of stale body odour on him as the man fumbled to unbolt the outer grille.

“ Augustus?”

The man stared at him in confusion as the grille swung open.

“Nah, you're too late, mate. All sold out,” he mumbled, his jaw quivering like it

was made of gelatine, “He's gone to reload. He'll be back in a bit.”

The man then staggered out of the doorway, stumbling into Jack who had to lean his entire weight against him in order to stop himself being knocked to the ground.

“Ain't nothing left right now, geezer.”

Then he tottered off towards the lifts mumbling to himself as Jack noticed in his stupor the junkie had left the door of the flat ajar. Cautiously, he pushed the door open with the tip of his toe. Inside the place stank of some sickly-sweet odour that burned in Jack's throat. The hallway itself was dark and he fumbled for the light switch but it did nothing. Further inside, he could make out a flickering shadow from a room at the end of the passage. With his heart thumping in his chest, he crept slowly towards the source of the light.

After a few feet he came into a sparsely furnished room. At the far end two smeared window panes stared into a coal black sky whilst the distant city lights three thousand feet below glowed like the embers of a dying fire. From across the other side of the room, a TV-set flickering in the corner, threw eerie shadows against the walls and opposite it he could make out in the shadows a woman laying comatose on a sofa.

“He's not back ,” the woman groaned, hardly stirring as he entered.

He could hear her heavy breath and a hollow rasping sound in her throat. One of her arms was draped over the edge of the settee almost touching the floor which was littered with burned tin foil and empty cigarette boxes.

“Diamond?”

The woman squinted at him in confusion. She was small but skinny and dressed in a faded t-shirt and ripped jeans which were blotched with stains. Her face looked ghost-like, her pale skin stretched tight over her jaw and bony cheeks, and her streaked hair was tangled in a wiry bird's nest.

A faint smile spread across her pale lips as her eyes closed and her breathing slowed before petering out altogether. He reached out to her on the sofa and shook her. She coughed as a stream of yellowy saliva slithered out of the side of her mouth

but her eyelids struggled to open and once again her breathing ceased.

“Hey, come on... wake up! Listen to me.”

Her body was lifeless and he shook her again, this time more vigorously until she moaned.

“Can you hear me?”

She seemed to stir a little, teetering on the brink of consciousness. He reached out and pressed his thumb gently to her neck. He could just about feel a pulse but it was so slow and so faint that he feared any second she might slip away and then from down the hallway he could hear suddenly the lift opening again. Panicking, he picked up an empty vodka bottle he spotted next to the sofa, clasp its neck in his hand. In all his adult life he'd never faced a physical confrontation but with the adrenaline pumping he figured if it came down to it he'd have little choice but to defend himself. He darted back down the hallway and was relieved to hear the footsteps moving further away down the landing. Peeking around the doorway he could see a woman pushing an elderly man in a wheelchair and he stopped for a moment to catch his breath before dashing back to where he'd left the woman on the couch.

“Listen to me. Listen to me carefully... You need to come with me. I'm going to take you to hospital. I want you to try to stay awake. Whatever you do, don't go to sleep.”

Gently he hauled her limp body up off the sofa. She felt light, her body brittle, as he pulled one of her arms across his shoulders. She coughed again, spluttering as her choked lungs gasped for air. He needed to get her to the car and he needed to do it quickly before she gave up the struggle to stay conscious or before Augustus returned to find them both. He panicked again at the thought: Augustus could be in the lift on the way up at this very second. He needed to get them out and get them out fast.

Struggling, he managed to make his way out of the flat and drag the woman out on to the landing, her bare feet dragging against the ground, as she coughed and spluttered. As he glanced down the corridor he noticed the wheelchair had been left outside one of the flats at the far end. Leaving her slumped on the floor he raced

down and grabbed it, wheeling it furiously up the corridor, telling himself all the time that right now his need was greater. Then panting for breath, he scooped her up into the chair and hammered the button for the lift. He felt a small sense of relief when it finally arrived and the doors shuddered open. As he wheeled the chair inside and the lift doors closed, he reached inside his pocket for his phone.

“Rhys, listen... we got to go to A&E.”

“You okay, mate? I told you –“

“It's not me. I'm fine. I'm with someone. We're coming down now... just have the engine running. We haven't got much time.”

As the lifts doors opened on the ground floor, he heaved the wheelchair towards the main entrance and then, as he opened the door to the tower, he could see the same youths huddled in the porch. They were surrounding him now and the eldest was in the middle of them, a scarf wrapped around the lower part of his face so only his glaring eyes were visible.

“Give us it,” the youth demanded.

“What?”

“Give us whatever you got. Just give it us!”

Jack froze in panic.

“Look, I ain't messing about,” continued the youth and from his jacket he pulled a short-bladed lock knife, “Fucking-give-it-us-now.”

He could feel a dry lump in his throat, his body trembling as he stared at the tip of the silver blade the youth was pointing at his chin.

“I got a wallet. That's all”

He could already feel the hands of one of the other youths now ransacking his pockets but there was nothing he could do. Within a couple of seconds they had turned and scattered deep into the passageways of the estate. Still shaking, he finally managed to push the wheelchair down the path and back to the car.

“What's going on ?” said Rhys, open-mouthed as Jack opened the passenger door, “What the hell are you doing? And who the fuck is she?”

“Just help me get her in the back. I'll explain later. Right now we got to get her to a hospital.”

“Fucking hell, Jack. Are you mad? Are we running an ambulance service now?”

“I haven't got time for this, Rhys,” said Jack heaving the woman's body into the passenger seat, “Just get us to the hospital, will you?”

CHAPTER 19: 'BACK FROM THE BRINK'

It was almost ten'o'clock by the time they managed to reach the Accident & Emergency department of Lewisham Hospital. Jack offered a garbled explanation of events to the woman at the admissions desk as his semi-conscious companion was rushed into a cubicle in a treatment area where a couple of paramedics immediately attended to her.

As he hung on for further news in the waiting area, Jack told Rhys about his close call with the youths on the estate.

“It's fucking madness. So go on... tell me, what's this all about? You haven't even told me who this bird is!”

“Like I said, it's do with that story I'm working on. I'll tell you all about it soon but not tonight.”

Rhys looked at him incredulously.

“You know what? I'm thinking maybe Laura's right. Maybe you are losing the plot. I mean you nearly get yourself stabbed by some ASBO kids over some no hope story? And what you going to do if they fix her up? She's a fucking junkie, mate. Are you going to pay for the bus fare to take her back to the estate? I don't know why you're even getting involved?”

In the chaotic rush to get her to the hospital, he hadn't even had time to consider the aftermath. Rhys was right. Now he was left lumbered the burden of moral obligation. Yet, equally, he knew he couldn't have just left her overdosed on the sofa. You couldn't just leave people in that kind of state. But perhaps what unsettled him most was the suspicion that it was something other than altruism that had led him to want to save her; an overwhelming compulsion to discover the truth about Linda and the knowledge that the woman being resuscitated by the paramedics a few meters away was the only tangible link he had to discovering it.

After another half-an-hour one of the doctors, a tall, Asian man dressed in green scrubs, came out to speak to Jack. By then Rhys had left the hospital, the tension

between them still unresolved. The doctor explained he had administered a shot of adrenaline. She had been lucky, he explained, they saw a steady stream of heroin overdoses and many arrived too late. He told Jack that she would be kept in overnight for observation but that she would be discharged tomorrow. The hospital was short of beds and it was out of his hands and then, with well-practised discretion, he enquired about the exact nature of Jack's relationship with the patient.

“I'm a friend of a friend, I suppose.”

“So do you know any family we can contact?”

“No... not really”

The man hesitated for a second, biting his lip.

“It's just if we discharge her then our worry is that she'll be prone to start using again – especially when the withdrawal kicks in - and physically she's very weak. We could look into a perhaps a residential detox programme if she's willing to try it but in my experience the waiting time could be a few weeks or longer.”

He paused before glancing away at the receptionist and then continued.

“Unless, of course, she could perhaps stay with you in the meantime?”

Rhys' words echoed in Jack's mind. Laura had only just left him and here he was being asked to take care of a drug addict until a treatment programme could be found for her. Part of him was telling him to walk away now. That's what Laura would have told him. He could hear her saying as much as the doctor stood staring at him, already anticipating his refusal. And that would be the reasonable course of action. After all, rationally he had no moral obligation to help this woman now, he told himself. Hadn't she been the architect of her own demise? But he also knew what it meant to be caught in that downward spiral. He'd struggled enough over the years with the booze. Was it really so naive to think that everyone deserved a second chance?

The next day he called in sick again. To his surprise, Charlie seemed unconcerned. He'd been half expecting an angry call and then he remembered Rhys mentioning his own meeting with the legal department at the Sunday Exclusive where the paper's lawyers were becoming increasingly nervous about the newly-

launched police investigation. Given his previous stint as news editor at the Exclusive, Jack wondered if perhaps Charlie now had bigger worries on his mind.

In the afternoon, he drove to Lewisham Hospital again and after asking at reception finally located Diamond in one of the wards. She still looked gaunt and frail but appeared to recognise Jack as he approached her bed.

“I suppose I should say thanks,” she said sitting up in the bed.

“Yeah, well, you had me worried for a bit there.”

“I don't even know your name.”

“My name is Jack Clarke. I suppose you could say I'm a friend of a friend. It was Tracy Kirby who gave me your name.”

“Oh.. her. You're not police are you?” she said with an anxious look.

“No, nothing like that. I'm a journalist.”

“A journalist?”

She flashed him a curious look. He still hadn't shaved after the previous night's drama and after two sleepless nights his face was drained of colour.

“You don't look like a journalist,” she continued, “I thought you were at the flat because you were after some gear.”

He reached into his pocket and passed her his business card.

“The Evening Post,” she said she squinting at the card “So I don't get it.... if it wasn't gear then what did you come for?”

“I wanted to speak to you.”

“To *me*?”

“Yeah. I wanted to speak to you about Linda... Linda Lavonne.”

She took a sharp intake of breath and winced with pain.

“Look, maybe we can talk about it later. I told the doctor you can stay at mine if you want. He's going to try to get you on a detox programme. I mean you can stay with me... if you want to, that is. If I can then I'd like to help you, Diamond.”

“Diamond?” she said, almost breaking into a smile, “No one calls me that any more. My name is Debbie.”

It was during the car journey home that he decided to broach the subject.

“So, I suppose you heard about Linda?”

“Heard what?”

“She committed suicide.”

She glanced up at with a confused expression.

“What? Linda?”

“Yeah. Well, that's the official version. Personally, I'm not so sure,” he said as they came to a stop at a traffic light.

“Maybe she'd just had enough,” she replied with a shrug, “I wouldn't blame her. Although out of all people who wouldn't have thought her.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It's just.... well, Linda was tough. Ruthless at times. I think maybe she *had* to be.”

“I spoke to Kenny, you know. He told me about it all... the parties at the house in Hampstead and the threats.”

“You spoke to Kenny?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Kenny's a creep. He's no better than the ones who were threatening her. I reckoned he was the one who told them where to find her.”

“Where to find who?”

“Where to find Linda. They came round to her flat and that's why she had to go on the run. I mean, how he could do that knowing what they'd done to Charmaine?”

“Charmaine?”

“Linda's girlfriend.”

“Oh yeah. Charmaine.”

The traffic light changed and he pulled away. He remembered Tracy saying something about Linda liking girls. So Linda had a girlfriend but what did Debbie mean when she said Kenny knew what they'd done to her?

“So what happened to Charmaine?” he said as they crossed the junction.

There was a long pause and then, as he turned to glance at her in the passenger seat, he could see Debbie anxiously biting her lip.

“I thought you said Kenny had told you everything.”

“He told me he had.”

“Look, I don't wanna talk about it. Go and ask Kenny. Ask him what happened.”

“I can't do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because Kenny's dead.”

A long uncomfortable silence followed; a void of dead air that hung between them.

“I need to know,” Jack said eventually, “If you're staying with me then can't you see that I need to know? I can't protect you if I don't know the full story.”

“You can't protect me anyway. Not from animals like that.”

“Look, I know Kenny said they were heavy people.”

He could hear her sniffing in the seat next to him and he opened the glove compartment and passed her a pack of tissues.

“Thanks,” she said, her voice quivering as she took a tissue and wiped her nose, “All I know is something happened at one of the parties.”

“What do you mean something happened?”

“Well, I don't know exactly. I wasn't there the night it happened and Linda never talked about it. But there were these blokes who would go to the parties – rich guys they were - and they could... well, it could get it a bit nasty, you know?”

“Nasty?”

“You know, they were into a bit of rough stuff. Sadism, I suppose you'd call it. Anyway, after that Charmaine went missing and Linda got a visit from this bloke. Proper scary bloke. Told her that if she spoke to the Old Bill then she'd end up like Charmaine. Told her he could make people disappear. And then a couple of weeks later, we heard. It was in the papers. A body... dumped in a bin liner somewhere out on some marshland. It had all been chopped up and the foxes had started to.... Well, it

was just –”

They both fell silent for a moment, both privately imagining the horror of some random dog-walker stumbling upon the scene one morning.

“It was just fucking sick. Just some *really* fucking sick shit.”

“But how did you know it was Charmaine?”

“She had a tattoo, didn't she? The design was in the paper alongside some number to call. You know, Crimestoppers type thing.”

“And so did Linda go to the police?”

“What do you think? You think they're going to help you? No. She got out of London, didn't she? Went off to Ibiza with Tracy to get away from everything. They stayed there for whole of July and August. Up in this village in the mountains. She showed me a photo once of the place when she got back... looked really pretty. I remember it had this big swimming pool in the shape of a heart.”

“And what about the bloke who threatened her?”

“When she came back Linda told me she'd sorted it.”

“How?”

“I don't know! What is it with all the questions? To be honest, I didn't want to know. She said the blokes wouldn't be coming back but she was stopping the parties. And I know she didn't say anything to the police. I mean, she wasn't that stupid.”

Nothing was said between them as Jack parked the car outside the house although from the corner of his eye he noticed how she was was shivering in the seat next to him.

“How come you're so sure then she didn't kill herself?”

“I don't know,” said Jack with a shrug, “Why? Are you?”

“I dunno. It's just there always comes a point... a point where all the money's dried up and you got nothing left to sell. Maybe it was just that.”

He nodded. The description didn't sound unfamiliar.

“You okay? You're shivering.”

“Yeah. I'm fine,” she replied looking weary, “Freezing in here, ain't it?”

An hour later Jack had shown Debbie around the house and sorted out some bedding from the attic. He turned the thermostat up but she continued to grumble about the cold and then they sat in the front-room watching the evening news and sipping tea.

“So just one more thing I wanted to ask you... do you remember the names of any of these guys who attended the parties? The ones you said were into the rough stuff?”

“Look, you're talking about fifteen years ago. I don't remember...”

She looked pallid and restless and he guessed the withdrawal was starting to kick in.

“What about something to eat?” he asked, “I meant to do some shopping. I don't really have much in.”

“What's that?”

“Food. Do you want something to eat?”

She glanced at him with an agitated look.

“I could go out and get some Chinese or a pizza if you fancy?”

Debbie nodded, before pulling one of the blankets Jack had brought down tighter around her.

“Right then. I'll get some Chinese. I'll only be fifteen minutes. There's some DVDs over there if you want to stick a film on.”

“Yeah, okay,” she sniffed.

“By the way, just have a think about what we were talking about... If you remember any of the guys' names then write them down,” he said gesturing towards a notepad on the table.

The Lotus House on the High Road was unusually busy for a Thursday evening. It took him almost half-an-hour before he was back in the car heading back to the house. When he got home he carried the plastic bag into the kitchen and spooned out the greasy contents of the foil containers onto two plates from the dishwasher.

“Come and get it,” he yelled up the hallway where he could still hear the sound of the TV in the front room.

There was no reply. Moaning to himself, he clutched a bottle of soy sauce and cutlery and then balancing the two plates of food on his arms he made his way towards to the front-room. When he got there she was gone. He scanned the room: the DVD player was missing and so was his iPod that he'd left on the table along with a twenty pound note and some loose change. He groaned to himself as he put the plates down on the table before he noticed something scribbled on the pad. A single word scrawled in spidery biro ink. It took him a second to decipher the first letter as a 'P'. He squinted at the word again and finally was able to decode it. *Piers*. For a moment, he felt strangely elated. At last, he had a name.

CHAPTER 20: 'PLAN B'

In the late-afternoon Sean found himself wandering up from the tube station at Highgate and along a long, leafy stretch of road that headed towards Hampstead Heath. He'd scribbled some directions he'd been given him over the phone for the meeting but the area was unfamiliar to him. Even so, he was excited about the prospect of finally seeing the place for himself. He'd heard Curtis mention the house, a million pound mansion Terry had bought in the mid-nineties when he'd made his first moves into the waste disposal business. It must have been worth double that now, he reckoned.

After a few hundred yards he came to a turning into a quiet residential street. The house number he had scribbled down, he discovered, belonged to a property shielded by a high security wall and a large black reinforced gate with an intercom. Buzzing the intercom, he was relieved to hear Terry's voice and as the giant gate slowly swung open he stepped into a front garden of willow trees which were beginning to sprout light green buds and a long, rolling lawn. A gravel drive lined one side of the garden where it eventually met a double garage connected to the side of the house and, to the left of this, a path led to a small set of grey stone steps flanked on either side by white ornamental lions guarding the front entrance. The house itself was a large red-brick mansion on three floors and covered on one side with a clutch of thick, green ivy. He felt giddy at the sheer scale of it. It looked like the kind of house that belonged to a retired rock star or successful City stockbroker. Whoever said crime didn't pay had obviously never paid a visit to Terry's gaff.

As he stood admiring the property he could hear the the front porch open and Terry appeared, dressed in grey jogging gear with Curtis following behind.

“Me and Curtis are going to pick up the bloke. Stay in the house and keep an eye on Natalie for me, yeah?”

On entering the house and kicking off his trainers, the first thing Sean noticed was the Persian-style rug covering the parquet flooring and the pastel blue wall-paper

which covered the walls. It was all surprisingly tasteful; not at all how he'd imagined it. Against the far wall was an antique wooden writing bureau that looked like it wouldn't have been out of place in a Sotheby's auction room and above it an oil painting of a some funny-looking bird in a canary-yellow dress holding a fan.

He walked down the hallway past a large walnut grandfather clock and into the front room of the house where a plasma television mounted on the wall was showing pop videos. Lying on a leather sofa on the far side of the room was Natalie. She was dressed more casually than the day he'd first met her at the golf club, wearing a pair of tight-fitting dark jeans and a low-cut v-neck sweater.

"Alright, Sean," she said as he entered the room, "I was wondering when I'd bump into you again. How's things?"

Once again he noticed that huskiness in her voice that gave off the impression of being older than her years.

"So you're working for my dad now?" she continued, stretching her long legs across the sofa.

"Yeah. That's right."

He couldn't help staring at her legs; the fitting of the jeans clung to her sculpted thighs and calf muscles.

"And how's that working out?"

"Yeah, all good. Can't grumble."

He stood in silence for a moment staring at the pop video playing on the TV, feeling slightly awkward with the smalltalk.

"So it's just you and your Dad here, is it?"

"Yeah, now it is. Mum died a couple of years back."

"Oh right. Sorry to hear that."

"Don't be," she replied coldly, "The fucking bitch drank a bottle of vodka and then swallowed a load of pills."

Callousness, Sean noted, had obviously been a trait inherited from her father.

"So did my Dad say how long until he'd be back ?" she asked, running the tip of

her finger along the length of her heavily-glossed bottom lip.

“No, not really.”

“Well, why don't you relax here. I'm going out to meet a friend in a bit. I suppose I should be getting myself ready.”

He made himself comfortable on the sofa as he could hear Natalie making her way upstairs then picking up the control he tried to change the TV channel. He couldn't get to grips with these new digibox things. He'd never even seen one before he got out of prison. He tried one of the buttons but now a menu appeared on the screen of recorded programmes. It just seemed to be an endless list of episodes of The Antiques Roadshow. In the end he gave up and just switched the television off.

He'd been sitting on the sofa for a few minutes waiting for Terry to return when he heard Natalie's voice calling from the upstairs landing.

“Sean? You couldn't give me a hand with something upstairs here, could you? There's something I can't quite reach.”

“Yeah, sure, “ he replied, making his way back out into the hallway and up the thickly-carpeted staircase.

“Yeah, I'm just in the room at the end.”

He followed the upstairs landing to a doorway at the end and then knocked politely. Something told him he was intruding on personal space.

“Yeah, it's okay... come in.”

He turned the brass handle nervously and then froze as the door swung open. In front of him was Natalie dressed in a silky black bra and panties, a leopard-print silk robe draped off her shoulders. She was staring straight at him, a coquettish grin spread across her glossed lips.

“You couldn't give me a hand with these, could you?” she purred as she loosened her bra fastening at the back which then drooped away to expose her naked breasts.

For a couple of seconds he just stood there, his gaze tracing the soft curves of Natalie's body. He could feel a stirring in his jeans as suddenly the blood raced down the capillaries of his swelling cock as if some huge dam of lust had suddenly been

breached. Standing there she looked like some centrefold goddess. He wanted to have her. The craving was almost overwhelming. He hadn't been with a woman in so long. He wanted to reach out with his hands and hold those tanned breasts of her; he wanted to run his fingers down her midriff and grab her but something in his brain held him back. And then it smacked him like a vicious uppercut: this was Terry's daughter, his "little princess". What the fuck was he thinking?

It was at that second he heard the key in the front-door. Bounding down the staircase he managed to get into the hallway just in time as the door opened and he stood breathless, pretending to examine the oil painting of the woman with the fan.

"You like it?" said Terry as he entered the house with another man in a dark suit in tow, "That's an original Modigliani that is. Worth a few quid and all. I didn't know you was into art, Sean?"

"Well," he said, struggling to recover his breath, "I'm wouldn't say I'm an expert but I know what I like when I see it."

His mind raced back to the image of Natalie's tanned breasts. He could still feel the swell of his erection in his jeans.

"So the rest of the family alright?" said the other man as he and Terry strolled into the hallway.

"Yeah, yeah. My brother is up for parole this year. Natalie's still a bit of a handful but you know what girls her age are like 'cause you got two of your own."

"Yeah, Kelly and Lorraine are out until all hours with their boyfriends these days. I can't say I like it, Tel. It's enough to put years on you, ain't it?"

"You got to lay down the law, mate. I'll tell you, Keith, any bloke who tries doing the old fandango with my Natalie is going to live to fucking regret it. You can bet good money on that."

Sean nervously followed the two men into the front room.

"Oh sorry," said Terry, "I haven't introduced you two. Sean meet Keith Andrews... or should I say, DS Andrews."

"Detective Inspector now actually," said the man.

Sean felt confused. Terry was inviting some serving copper into his house?

“Me and Keith here go way back, don't we?” continued Terry.

The man nodded.

“And he helps us out occasionally. Smoothing out a few little legal problems... that sort of thing. Keith meet Sean. He's one of the new lads on the firm but has come to me highly recommended.”

They shook hands as Curtis' swaggered into the room from the hallway.

“Sit down, mate, and we can get straight down to business.”

Curtis pulled up a giltwood chair from the dining table at the far end of the room and was about to rest his huge arse into it when Terry suddenly leapt to his feet.

“Not on the fucking Bellange! That's ten grand's worth of fucking chair, you clueless cunt.”

Curtis grunted an apology and then shuffled over to the sofa, nestling himself between Sean and Terry's other guest.

“Right,” announced Terry, “So Rafiq has called me and it looks like we still got this prick journalist digging around. He's trying a bit of gentle persuasion on him but if that don't work then it looks like we might have to prepare for Plan B.”

“What? We need to liven him up a bit?” asked Curtis.

“I'm thinking a little bit more than that. I'm saying we might have to off the geezer.”

Keith look troubled.

“It's all getting a bit messy, ain't it? I mean we sorted out the bird and then you had boyfriend done and now you want to rub someone else out? For what? Let him have a dig about. What's he going to find?”

“No. Can't be done, mate. Too much at stake. Besides we got to keep Rafiq sweet and he's prepared to bung us fifty large for the job.”

“Can't you just scare this bloke off?”

“We're trying, mate. But if he don't back off then I reckon we got no choice. We're going to have to have him sorted out good and proper.”

To Sean it seemed bizarre: here they were in the immaculate front-room of a multi-million pound mansion in a quiet North London street coolly discussing murder with a serving copper but yet there was also something distinctly gratifying about it. This was premier-league villainy alright.

“So, where you thinking then?” asked Curtis.

“The bloke lives south of the river - Forest Hill area - but he works at Canary Wharf. I reckon the security is a bit on top there so I'd say we do him down south.”

“Problem is,” continued Andrews, “that's a bit out of my patch. I'm not saying it can't be done. I mean, there are some boys down at East Dulwich who are on the level but my main bloke down there has retired to Spain now so it's got a bit tricky. And it's got to be done properly... you know, zero chance of it getting back?”

“You want me to take care of it?” asked Curtis.

“No, no,” said Terry, “We're putting this one out to the Kosovans. Get them to use that kid of theirs. I've agreed with them that he's fucking disposable. Once he's done the job then we can take him out the equation. No loose ends, right?”

“Good. Because I'm going to have to assure the boys south of the river that there'll be no comeback,” said Andrews “And, of course, they'll want a drink out of it. Just a little something for the Christmas Box, you know?”

Terry nodded.

“So what about Izzet's firm?” asked Curtis, “When we moving against that lot?”

“What? You're going to take on the Kosovans?” said Andrews glancing at Terry with a look of apprehension, “You're going to have to be careful there, Tel. Izzet and his brother are running things in the West End right now. You start some war with them and you're going to have SOCA and all sorts on your back.”

“Yeah, but that's just it, Keith. They're too strong. I can't have it. Sooner or later they're going to start causing me problems. I reckon we use them for this job but after that.... well, they got to go.”

Sean sat in silence, half-listening to the conversation, but he was still staring at the Bellange at the other end of the room and his mind was preoccupied with one

single overwhelming thought: *Who in their right mind shelled out ten grand for a fucking chair?*

CHAPTER 21: 'ORIENTALISM'

It was the next week when Jack returned to the office that he received the telephone call. The Post's main switchboard put the woman through who had asked to speak to him personally.

“Am I speaking to Jack Clarke?”

The woman's accent was a mannered transatlantic with a cool air of authority.

“I'm calling on behalf of Mr Rafiq Khouri of Millennium Partners. He would like to arrange a meeting with you.”

The name meant nothing to him and for a moment he dismissed it as some cold-caller trying to sell office equipment.

“I'm sorry but what's this regarding?”

“Mr Khouri would like to pass on some information which he thinks would be of interest to you.”

“Well, do you want to just put him through?”

“He would prefer to meet you personally, sir, if that's agreeable to you?”

“Information about what exactly?”

“He didn't elaborate, I'm afraid.”

Now Jack wondered if it was a whistleblower connected to the tendering of refuse collection at one of the London authorities. He'd been investigating a lead on a potential bribery scandal and trying to make a few contacts but the name Millennium Partners was unfamiliar. Non-descript and perhaps deliberately so.

“He suggests you meet at the bar of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel tonight at 8pm. Would you be able to make that, sir?”

The invitation caught him off-guard. In the past he'd had the occasional anonymous tip-off from business owners and public workers but he'd never received an invitation to meet a stranger in the bar of a swanky Knightsbridge hotel.

“Okay. And how will I recognise Mr Khouri?” he replied, straightening up in his chair.

“Oh don't worry about that, Mr Clarke. Mr Khouri is fully aware of what you look like.”

At that the caller hung up and Jack's excitement was replaced with a growing sense of unease. How did this Khouri know what he looked like and what did he have to say that was so important that he insisted on meeting face-to-face? Even so, he'd already decided there was only one way to satisfy his curiosity.

At just after eight'o'clock Jack sat nursing a mineral water at a table in the bar of the Mandarin Oriental. Before leaving the office he'd looked at the website of Millennium Partners but it had seemed innocuous enough. When he combed the Post's cuttings library, however, he found one thing of interest. Khouri had been on the board of another investment vehicle, Oriense. The offshore company had been investigated by the Serious Fraud Office over allegations of money-laundering in the mid-nineties. In the end, the case had been thrown out by the judge for lack of evidence but in Jack's mind there was a whiff of something distinctly dodgy about the whole thing.

The long bar of the hotel was a mix of luxurious white marble and illuminated glass. At the far end were polished, chrome shelves laden with bottles of luxury brand spirits and liqueurs, and below a number of silver chilling cabinets stacked full with champagne. The place was almost empty except for two tall blonde women who sat at the bar chatting to a couple of middle-aged American businessmen and Jack watched as a number of men in smart suits meandered through the lobby of the hotel, trying to work out which of them was his contact.

Khouri, the man's name, sounded Indian or possibly Pakistani so he was surprised when a Mediterranean-looking man finally introduced himself with a firm handshake. He was middle-aged but trim and dressed in a serge two-piece suit with a white shirt open at the neck exposing his olive skin and a neatly trimmed beard that reached up to meet his sideburns.

“Good evening, Mr. Clarke. A pleasure to meet you at last. I do apologise for

being slightly late I was caught up with a business call from New York. Could I perhaps get you something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine thank you."

"You're sure? They have an excellent range of single malts here."

"No, as I said, I'm fine.... really."

The man signalled to the barman before taking the seat opposite Jack.

"Then I suppose you're wondering why I've asked you here and I hope I'm not putting you to any inconvenience but I felt it was a matter which was perhaps best discussed on a more personal level," continued the man, "Let me perhaps start by telling you a little about myself. As my assistant probably told you, I'm the managing partner of Millennium Partners. We're essentially an asset management business servicing the needs of a few select clients. On the whole it's middle-eastern investors but some high net worth individuals in Europe too."

"I see. And you've invited me here this evening to discuss an issue relating to your business?"

"Not quite. Before we come to that, let me just say that I have taken the liberty of doing a little research on you, Mr Clarke. I must admit I was surprised by our own similarities. I too studied history at university and, like yourself, I was the first graduate in my family. And then you pursued a Masters in Journalism at the London School of Printing if I'm not mistaken?"

Jack nodded and took a sip of water.

"And before The Evening Post, I understand you worked at The Sunday Exclusive too?"

The man paused for a moment before continuing: "Actually that may have been a very fortuitous move, if you don't mind me saying. As I understand it, the Exclusive may be about to face some serious legal difficulties. But then I suppose the newspaper industry has always seen its fair amount of controversy. Your father would know all about that, of course. He was a shop steward in one of the print unions in the eighties, wasn't he?"

The man's intrusive line of questioning was now beginning to take on a distinctly creepy dimension.

“My father is dead,” Jack replied.

“Yes, so I understand. I'm very sorry. A couple of years ago, wasn't it?”

“Yes. That's correct. Now perhaps we can get to the point of why you asked me here?”

“Of course, please understand that I didn't mean to upset you. It was merely that I wanted to point out that in many ways our personal stories are very similar. I too have had to work my way up in the world. Like you, Mr Clarke, I was not born into a life of privilege. In fact, I was forced to leave my country of birth at a young age and I too lost my father in the conflict which went on to engulf my country.”

The man paused as a waitress brought him a tumbler of whisky, placing it in on a napkin.

”Believe me, Mr Clarke, when I say that the history of my country, Lebanon, is on a par with any of the great tragedies of Shakespeare. We have found ourselves colonized by the Phoenicians, the Turks, then later still by the French and now the Syrians who constantly meddle in the affairs of my homeland. One consequence of this is that I believe us Levantines to be natural pessimists. It is almost as if it has become encoded in our very DNA to think about the world like this. Actually, I think 'realist' may be a more appropriate description. After all, a realist, I would say, is someone who appreciates the natural entropy between the way the world ought to be and the way the world actually is. Wouldn't you agree, Mr Clarke?”

“Look, Mr Khouri, whilst I appreciate the history lesson and the philosophical musings I don't think this is why you invited me here this evening.”

“No, of course,” said the man taking a small gulp of whisky, “The reason I wanted to speak to you is that I understand you are investigating a matter of some sensitivity. A matter which, let us say, has the potential to cause needless embarrassment to certain persons of influence.”

“You're referring to the refuse collection contracts?”

“No, no,” replied Khouri with a chuckle, “Who collects the city's refuse is of no concern to me and, believe me, I have no commercial interests in that particular sector.”

Jack was confused. He thought this was what Khouri had been leading up to; he'd assumed Khouri had summoned him to defend the behaviour of one of the companies involved in the tendering process.

“No, actually I'm referring to the Lavonne case.”

The words felt like someone had run an icecube along the length of Jack's spine.

“You mean Linda Lavonne?”

“Yes. I understand you were investigating her recent suicide. A very tragic matter, of course.”

“Oh, I vaguely remember doing a small piece about that. You've asked me all this way to talk about that?”

Khouri smiled and traced his finger around the rim of the whisky glass before continuing.

“I understand you've made certain *other* enquiries, Mr Clarke.”

Jack took a gulp of water from his glass. He was beginning to wonder how Khouri managed to acquire all this knowledge about his activities.

“And how did you come to this *understanding*?”

“Through some of my contacts. Over the year I've developed a very wide circle of friends and acquaintances.”

“So what exactly are you proposing?”

“Oh, I'm not proposing anything. I'm only suggesting that there is nothing of any worth in the story and some acquaintances of mine would be grateful if stopped pursuing it in order to spare any potential embarrassment.”

“I see. And who are these acquaintances of yours?”

“As a journalist, I'm sure you understand that one must protect one's sources,” said the man smiling, “But let me say, they would regard it as a favour and these are people who could certainly assist you in many ways.”

“Really?” asked Jack, “And in what ways could they assist me?”

“I'm sure they could find you other stories worthy of publication.”

“That's very thoughtful but I have plenty of stories worth chasing.”

He glared at Khouri for a moment but the man continued to smile back.

“Well, perhaps they could assist you in a promotion at work? Or perhaps assist you in some financial matters? I understand that you – like so many others in these difficult times - have some personal debt which could easily be dealt with. No doubt that would ease some burdens at home for you.”

Jack was slightly taken aback at the man's brazenness. He'd never been offered a bribe before. It felt unsettling and he could feel his hand trembling as again he reached for his glass of mineral water to quench his dry throat.

“And what if I don't accept this kind offer of yours?”

“Mr. Clarke, I hope you see that I'm only trying to persuade you as to the reality of the situation. I think it is important – perhaps rational is a better choice of word - to accept that there are certain things in life for which your labours will never bear fruit. Someone who pursues such ends is wasting both his time and his effort. It is far better to work with the universe than against it, wouldn't you say?”

“I'm not sure I follow you.”

“Mr Clarke, let me tell you a story. When I was twelve years old my homeland of Lebanon was invaded by the Israeli Defence Force. I can still remember that day as clearly as I perceive sitting in this hotel bar with you now. At that time my father was member of the Phalange, one of the main political parties, and a friend and prominent supporter of the politician Bachir Gemayel. During that long, hot summer my mother urged him to leave Beirut. It was clear to everyone at that time that Lebanon was being slowly dragged into a bitter civil war. My father, however, was a stubborn man and he stayed loyal to the party and to Gemayel who in August of that year was elected president. His presidency lasted just three weeks. My father along with our newly-elected president and twenty-five others were murdered by a bomb which ripped through the party's headquarters in mid September.”

He paused to take a sip of whisky.

“Even at that young age my father's death taught me a valuable lesson, Mr Clarke, and that is that there is no glory in lost causes. However unpalatable we may find it, we must sometimes accept that the forces against us are too great to be overcome.”

“Are you threatening me, Mr Khouri?”

The man shook his head.

“Come now! I hope you don't perceive it like that, Mr Clarke. I'm merely pointing out what is in your own interest. Tell me, you are an educated man, are you familiar with the writings of Edward Said?”

“I've heard the name.”

“I highly recommend you should read his book, *Orientalism*. An excellent piece of scholarship. What really impressed me was his point that the West's perception of the Middle East is not so much based in historical fact but rather more grounded in your own archetypes. In your eyes, we are all terrorists or oil sheiks, are we not? Or rather this is what you want to believe but, of course the truth is a little more... mundane? Perhaps you are making a similar mistake in this matter, Mr Clarke? After all, we all cherish stories we'd love to believe were true. The reality in this case, however, is that the woman is dead and nothing will bring her back.”

The man reached into the inside of his jacket pocket and handed Jack a business card.

“It's been a pleasure meeting with you,” said the man as he gulped the last mouthful of whisky, “As I said, my acquaintances would owe you a debt of considerable gratitude for your co-operation. Give me a call in the next couple of days and we can discuss it further. Now you'll have to excuse me as I have a dinner with a business associate to attend.”

Jack stared at the card and then when he looked up, in the same ghostly way that he had first appeared, the man had gone. What had he meant when he said “in a couple of days”, pondered Jack. Was he issuing some kind of ultimatum? He placed

the card in his wallet. Still, he had no intention of being told his job by some businessman who'd never stepped foot into a newsroom and, besides, if he'd learned anything from the meeting, it was that he was making progress in fitting the pieces of the puzzle together. Enough progress to be causing a nuisance to someone somewhere.

CHAPTER 22: 'GETTING PAID'

Donnell opened the door to Dečani Social Club. The anonymous-looking entrance was to the side of a Turkish grocers on a road just off Turnpike Lane, a bus ride away from Hackney. Inside a steep set of wooden stairs led up to a large room above the shop. It was this strange, smoke-filled room which had been the location for Donnell's first meeting with Izzet and all their meetings since. It was a weird place though. One of maybe a hundred social clubs that seemed to sprout overnight like fungus along Green Lanes and beyond. Donnell had never figured out why they called it a 'social club' either. All the middle-aged men who sat around inside, all rubbing their rough stubbled chins as they played cards, never seemed to say that much. In fact, from what he could make out all they seemed to do all day was drink gallons of thick black coffee and smoke endless rank-smelling cigarettes. They were hardly sociable to visitors either. Whenever he walked through the door he was always met by ten hostile faces ready to leap from their tables until Izzet stood up and muttered something in his own language and they'd all back off, returning to their card games and whispered conversations.

This evening was no different except that by now some of them seemed to recognise Donnell's face, giving him the briefest of glances as he sauntered in from the landing. As always, Izzet silently beckoned him over to a small table at the back of the room where he was sitting with his brother, the two men sipping from small cups of black coffee.

“You want coca cola?” he asked as Donnell sank into the chair opposite.

Donnell nodded and as Izzet went to a counter at the back of the club, Donnell stared around. What a shithole of a place: the peeling wallpaper, the chipped formica tables and the weird framed photographs they had on the walls with all these blokes in combat gear posing on what looked like some stony mountainside. He looked at it more closely. It had some weird red and black eagle motif with UÇK in a bold type at the bottom. Maybe it was a poster for some film or computer game or something,

Donnell wondered, as Izzet returned with his can of coke.

“We have new job for you,” said Izzet as Donnell cracked open the can and took a thirsty glug.

He watched as Izzet reached into the inside pocket of his sheepskin coat and produced a photograph. Donnell looked at it. It was a bit smudged, like one of those photographs of celebrities in the papers that looked like it had been taken from miles away but he could make out the face okay: a skinny white bloke with shortish brown hair and a goatee beard.

“We have address for you too,” continued Izzet cupping a scrap of paper with his hand and pushing it across the table to Donnell, “But can be no mistake here. No fuck up. Understand?”

The tone of the instruction was enough to rankle Donnell. Had he ever fucked up any of the jobs in the past? Hadn't he done exactly what he was asked to do when he'd done the driver of that BMW in the pub car park? And even when he'd been asked to torch that photographer's studio. He'd been hoping Izzet would be beginning to see him as a solid member of the outfit, not some mug who could pull the odd trigger for him. Hadn't he proved himself already? He felt he was at least owed a bit of a promotion by now.

“Alright. And what about the hardware?” asked Donnell, looking up from the photograph.

Izzet nodded and under the table Donnell could hear the man's foot sliding something across the floor. He peered down to see a small blue rucksack which he pulled up on to the chair next to him.

“Careful,” grunted Izzet as Donnell unzipped the bag and peered in.

What he saw inside made his heart rate quicken. A long black tube of cold, hard metal and nestled against it a thin, steel magazine filled with ammunition. It was the kind of weapon he'd only dreamed of holding in his hands. The kind of full compact automatic he'd seen carried by gangsters in movies and praised by his favourite rappers in their lyrics. He couldn't wait to hold it, to pose with it but most of all to

feel the rush as his finger finally squeezed the trigger.

“You fire gun like this before?” whispered Izzet.

“Yeah, yeah... of course.”

“Agram you hold with both hands,” Izzet continued in a hushed voice, “And is set to automatic mode so will fire ten rounds a second. Trigger very sensitive. Understand?”

Donnell was only half listening. He couldn't get the image of him with the weapon out of his mind, imagining the exhilarating buzz as he felt the bullets spray out of the weapon. No one fucked with you if you carried one of these. This was some badman business alright.

“You listening?”

Izzet's brother's insistent tone suddenly grabbed Donnell's attention back.

“Yeah, man. I'm listening. Chill out, will ya?”

“No fucking chill out,” snapped Izzet, “You listen! Must be done tonight. You understand?”

“Tonight? Nah, man. I'm chilling with my girl tonight.”

The muscles in Izzet's faces suddenly tightened as he grabbed Donnell's arm and, squeezing it tightly, leaned over the table until his face was almost touching Donnell's. The whole room seemed to tense as in that moment Donnell stared at the man's yellow teeth that were now bared like wolf's fangs.

“You do job tonight, understand? No fucking chill! No fucking stupid bitch girl! Understand?”

The excitement Donnell had been feeling only moments ago at the contents of the rucksack suddenly evaporated as he cowered in Izzet's shadow.

“Yeah, okay, okay... it's cool. I'll do it tonight.”

“You go to address. He come home around nine. Make sure is *him*. Wait for him to reach door. Understand?”

“Yeah right. No sweat, man.”

Izzet released his grip on Donnell's arm and leaned back into his chair.

“And no fuck up, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Cool,” replied Donnell zipping up the bag again.

There was an awkward silence for a moment as Izzet and his brother sipped on their coffees and then said something between them in their own language. It always unnerved Donnell that he didn't know what they were saying to each other but then he told himself it was really nothing. It was probably just the joint he'd smoked earlier making him feel a little paranoid about the situation, he thought to himself, as Izzet stood up and took out a roll of twenty pound notes from his pocket.

“Here,” he said counting out ten notes in front of Donnell, “Half now and half when job is done.”

“I thought we agreed it was five hundred now.”

Izzet grunted something which Donnell took to be some curse in his own tongue.

“Okay. I pay you rest when job is finished.”

Donnell shrugged then picked up the banknotes and folded them gently before pushing them into the backpocket of his jeans.

“I'll text you after it's done,” he said picking up the rucksack, before finally glancing back at Izzet who just sat there staring at him as he sipped his coffee.

As he sat on the busy overground train heading to South London, Donnell couldn't help looking at the faces of the commuters crammed into the carriage. Their solemn faces appeared creased with worry as they scanned the pages of the Evening Post reading the news about random acts of violence, the stories of street-corner stabbings or pedestrians caught in the crossfire of gang shootings. And here he was now gripping his rucksack and what would they think if they knew what was inside? The irony of it all amused him the more he thought about it. How perhaps they looked at him and just thought he was on his way back from a day at college. Still, what did he care? He probably cared no more about his job than these people really cared about whatever they did for a living. Yeah, maybe there was a certain amount of what he'd heard others refer to as 'professional pride' but really it had become a job

like any other. The first time he'd seen someone shot – when as a kid he'd seen these older youths arguing out on the estate - it had shocked him, even given him nightmares, but now it was nothing. Now it was just work. And when it came down to it, what did it really matter what you did for work? After all, everyone was really only interested in one thing; at the end of it all, everyone just wanted to get paid.

As the train reached the suburbs of South London and the carriage started to thin out Donnell walked to the toilet at the end of the carriage and locked the door. Placing the bag on top of the toilet lid, he carefully opened the bag and took out the submachine gun. Holding it in his hands it wasn't as heavy as he thought it would be. He twisted it, examining every detail, admiring the dark beauty of the thing in the buzzing overhead light of the toilet cubicle. Guns had always fascinated him. From the bullet-ridden movies he'd watched at home as a kid to that day he'd first seen a real handgun drawn by one of the elders on the estate. There was something about the magnetic attraction of a gun; the invisible power that you suddenly felt when you held it in your palm. He loved that giddy, queasy sensation. It was as alluring and as addictive as any drug. After you'd felt it once you craved to feel it again. And then, after a while, you couldn't live without the buzz.

Reaching into the bag he took out the magazine and clicked it into the open slot of the weapon wondering for a moment how many other hands had held this thing before him and then, as he felt the train slowing as it came into station, he quickly checked the safety catch of the gun before placing the assembled weapon carefully back into the bag.

From the station, it didn't take long to find the road. The streets out here were wider than Donnell's native Hackney. These were the tree-lined streets of South London suburbia with their rows of cosy semis and neat front gardens with freshly-painted gates. The roads were cluttered with shiny Volkswagens and Audis. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this far from home. He stared at the houses as he walked up the steep incline of the road wondering if these were the homes in which the miserable commuters he'd seen on the train were now cocooned, probably

moaning to their husbands or wives about their day at the office as they watched TV in the comfort of their sitting rooms. And then he came to the house number.

He stopped and glanced around the property trying to work out a place where he could wait without being seen. The lights in the house were off but just below the roof he could see a burglar alarm with a blinking green light. He checked his watch. It was just after half eight. It was beginning to occur to him that the job was going to be slightly trickier than he'd anticipated. There weren't many people about but he was worried that by hanging around on the street he'd draw too much attention. Perhaps one of the residents would think he was trying to burgle a house or steal a car? And these areas probably all had their nosy Neighbourhood Watch groups; everyone suspicious about an unfamiliar, black face in the area. It wasn't like the estates of Hackney where you could breeze through doing whatever you liked and no one said anything because no one wanted the aggro.

After a minute or so's consideration he realised he had little choice but to walk further along the road. The best option available to him was to keep moving so as to avoid suspicion from any of the curtain-twitchers. He'd have to keep circling the house, walking up the road to the next junction before dawdling back towards the house and then past it again and on to the next road junction before swinging back on himself. This way he reckoned the house was never out of sight for more than two minutes which was probably not enough time for his target to get home, unlock the door and deactivate the burglar alarm. At best, he'd try to hit the target at or approaching his front door but if he missed him by a minute then he reckoned he should be able to surprise him in the hallway of the house.

He'd completed the circuit a couple of times when turning towards the house again he noticed a car approaching slowly from further up the hill. As it came within twenty yards of him he realised it was a police patrol car and he began to panic. The thought now flashed through his mind that perhaps he should dump the rucksack in one of the front gardens but, as it made the slight turn in the road, the car's headlights were beamed right down on him. It was too late. If he dumped the bag now it would

look bait and they'd be bound to stop him. He could feel his throat tighten, his heart thumping manically in his chest as the distance between them closed. It was too late to run now. Too late for anything but to stay cool and hold his nerve.

As the car slowed in front of him, he was desperately fighting the urge to sprint off. He knew they'd noticed him and as he quickly glanced at the car as it pulled up alongside him he could see a young police officer wearing the familiar black bullet-proof vest squinting at him through the window. Donnell just kept walking, slowly but purposefully, and then as he heard the police car pull away behind he finally exhaled and paused for a second to consider just how close a call it had been.

He checked his watch again. It was a few minutes after nine now. Where the fuck was his target? This job was making him nervous. What if the geezer wasn't even going to come back tonight? How long could he hang around on the street carrying this thing in his bag? He'd already had one close shave and that was enough. Fuck it! He'd give the guy another ten minutes and if he didn't show then he'd bail and run the risk of pissing off Izzet. Besides, surely Izzet would understand that it was better for him not to risk it and be able to try again than get pulled red-handed? And it was while he was contemplating all of this that Donnell noticed the figure of a man coming up the road towards him, a man who looked not unlike the one in the picture Izzet had shown him, a man with a goatee beard and who had a grey messenger bag slung over his shoulder.

Donnell crossed to the other side of the road slowing as he approached the house he'd been circling. The man on the other side of the street continued walking but then he could see his hand reach into the pocket of his raincoat and at the last minute he turned outside the front gate to the property and undid the latch.

Quickly, Donnell slid the rucksack off his shoulder and unzipped it. Reaching inside he tried to find the safety catch in the faint streetlight. As he flicked the catch off and looked up he could see his target was almost at the door but from further up the hill to his right another car was coming towards him. Fuck it! Why hadn't Izzet planned this one out better? There was such a small window of opportunity. He had

to act fast. He crouched behind one of the parked cars, slid the gun out of the rucksack and, holding it with one hand, poked the muzzle up over the bonnet of the car.

The target was now putting the key into the lock of the front-door. He glanced up the hill again and to check the position of the approaching car. It was about a hundred-and-fifty yards away. If he was going to do it it had to be now. He turned back and crouched lower attempting to roughly line up the target with his gun but as he did so something slipped out of his pocket and hit the pavement at his feet with an ominous-sounding crack. He looked down. Fuck it! He'd dropped his Blackberry and the screen had cracked. His left hand lurched out instinctively to pick it up but as he did so his right index finger must have just grazed the trigger of the gun and it suddenly let out a loud, short burst of fire as the Agram jerked violently in his right hand.

All at once there was the sound of breaking glass and a second later the ear-splitting wail of a nearby police siren. Glancing up the hill he could see the approaching car now bathed in blue strobe light.

Shit! It was a fucking patrol car. Maybe even the same fucking patrol car that had clocked him before. His heart was now pumping so fast he thought he felt sick. They must have been doing exactly what he was doing, circling the area to see what he was up to. This was turning into a fucking nightmare! Stuffing the Agram back into the rucksack he took one final glance at the house, its front bay window completely shattered as on the pathway leading to the door he could see the man desperately trying to take cover, then he turned and took off back down the road in the direction of the station.

The pale street light gave him an advantage. If he could criss-cross a couple of streets and duck into a park or some woodland he could dump the weapon and shake off the cops. The densely parked streets would make any high speed pursuit difficult and he needed to find a narrow alley so that they'd be forced to dump the vehicle and follow him on foot.

At the corner of the next junction, with the sound of the siren ringing ever closer in his ears, he turned and scrambled along the pavement. Panicking, he scanned the street either side of him for the entrance to an alleyway but there was nothing - nothing but rows of neat terrace houses – and then as he looked ahead it finally dawned on him that the road ended in a block of maisonettes. He couldn't believe it: he'd run right into a fucking cul-de-sac. He could feel the sweat running down his back now as his eyes scoured the area for any means of escape. Behind him, he could make out the growling of the car's engine about to make the corner. He headed towards the flats, trampling across the flowerbeds of the gardens, and then around to the back of the properties where there was a small yard containing a couple of wheelie bins and a large cylindrical waste container screened by a high wooden fence.

Fuck! This couldn't be happening! He'd found himself in a complete dead end and the only obvious way out was the very route he'd taken in here and back on to the close. He looked at the fence again. One way or another he would have to get himself over it.

Desperately, he dragged one of the wheelie bins next to the tall steel container then clambered on to the slippery lid of the bin and tried heave himself up against the fence using the high metal handle of the container. He could already hear the wail of the siren out on the road and a car door opening. With one final desperate strain of muscle, he managed to lever himself up and get a foothold on the top of the fence and then, with the stench of rotting refuse in his nostrils, he tried to haul his other leg up. His foot was dragging against the wooden fence until it suddenly became wedged between the dumpster and the fence. He tugged with his leg but as he did so his loosened sneaker slipped off and dropped to the ground below. He could see the shoe's silvery logo reflecting in the moonlight but there was no time to rescue it. Instead, he crouched on top of the fence and jumped into the back garden of a neighbouring house. Landing with a gentle thud in some shrubbery, he scrambled through the garden and alongside the side passage of the house until he was back out

on a neighbouring street.

Within a few minutes he was half a mile away and making his way back into the station, and then, as a train slowed into the platform, he looked up to see a police helicopter hovering in the night sky above, the beam of its searchlight scouring the surrounding streets. He knew who they were hunting for but as he boarded the northbound train, still clutching the blue rucksack in his hand, he was certain they'd never find him.

CHAPTER 23: 'IBIZAN NIGHTS'

Throughout the night Jack only slept in snatches. An hour or two at most and then once again he'd wake in a panic. With his heart spasming inside his chest and his body writhing on the damp sheets of the bed, he stared up in confusion at the overhead fan whirring in the darkness, wondering all the time where he was until he could feel Laura stirring next to him, her arms clutching him in a tight embrace.

“Shhhh... it's okay,” she whispered, “Go back to sleep. It's all over now.”

He took a long breath and tried to relax with his mind still spinning like the wheel of an abandoned bicycle.

Around ten in the morning they finally got up and walked from the hotel around the base of the Dalt Vila picking up an English newspaper at one of the shops before stopping at a café for coffee and croissants. They sat outside in the small square admiring the colonial architecture with its pastel stucco walls and brightly-painted window shutters as a few locals chattered under the branches of old almond trees with their pink sprays of fresh blossom. The calm of the place was disorientating. London somehow felt like it belonged to another world.

He heard Laura's voice as his eyes continued to comb the pages of newsprint.

“Whatever made you choose Ibiza?”

He closed the newspaper and looked up at her curious expression.

“Somewhere sunny, you said.”

She smiled.

“Yeah, but don't you think we're a bit old for this?”

“Yeah.... maybe. I can't really see us going clubbing until four in the morning, can you?”

“Not really. It's a nice hotel though. Pity, you didn't choose somewhere with a pool.”

“Why would I book a place with a pool? You know I don't swim.”

“Yes but I do,” she replied before looking around the square, “I wouldn't have minded a swim before breakfast.”

“Quiet, isn't it? I read somewhere this is the best time to come.... in the Spring before all the crowds arrive.”

“You mean the best time for middle-aged people like us?”

“Speak for yourself. I'm thirty-three. I'm still in my prime.”

She giggled and he watched her as she stared into at the brown foam at the bottom of her coffee cup. She was still an attractive woman, he thought, looking at the soft nape of her neck, the long hazelnut curls that stopped just short of her shoulder and the rose-coloured lips that had drawn him to her on that first night they'd met a friend's housewarming in New Cross. Then her expression changed and the lips seemed to turn at the corner of her mouth.

“When you first told me about... well, it made me think,” she said looking up at him, “It made me think how easily I could have lost you... well, how easily we could have lost each other. I know we've had our problems recently but all I want is for us to be there for each other.”

She swallowed before continuing, her eyes welling up as she gazed down at the table.

“And sometimes all I want is for you to let me in, Jack. It seems crazy how we needed something like this to bring us back together... to make us realise how easily all this could have been taken away from us, don't you think?”

He nodded and she smiled before tilting her head to look up at the old castle on the hillside.

“And the police haven't said any more about it?” she continued, “I mean you hear about people caught in the crossfire of these shootings but you never really think it will happen to you. You could have so easily been killed, you know?”

Jack was busy trying to get the attention of the young waitress.

“Jack! Are you listening to me?”

“Yeah, I'm listening. I'm just trying to get the bill. What's the word for bill

again?”

“*La cuenta.*”

“Oh yeah.”

“I asked you if the police have contacted you.”

“No. I haven't even spoken to them since we left London.”

“And you didn't see anyone else on the street that night?”

“No. You already asked me that.”

“It's just so random. I suppose you're right... it *must* be mistaken identity. Maybe we've got some major criminal living only a few doors from us? And where do these people even get these guns from? It scares me to death thinking there's people walking around like that.”

“I don't know,” replied Jack as he finally got the waitress' attention “Look, we're on holiday. I just don't want to think about it any more.”

But he was thinking about it. He hadn't stopped thinking about it since the night it happened. And he knew from that moment he took cover in the doorway that there was nothing random about the events of that night.

For the rest of the morning they wandered around the centre of town and while Laura admired the window displays of the expensive boutiques on the Vara de Rey Jack found himself drawn to the windows of real estate agents. At around midday they found a fish restaurant by the harbour where they stopped for lunch.

“If you fancy then I was thinking this afternoon we could drive up into the mountains,” said Jack once the waiter had taken their orders.

“Yeah. I don't mind. Is there anything to see up there?”

“I don't know. I thought we could just have a look around. It's the highest peak on the island. It's supposed to have great views apparently.”

Then as they watched the gulls swooping across the harbour and the waiter returned with a bottle of mineral water, the mobile phone in Jack's pocket buzzed into life. It was the office in London. He picked up the call to find Charlie's P.A. on the

other end wanting to put him through.

“Jack!” came Charlie's distant voice, “How's things?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“Over the shock of it all then?”

“Yeah, well, I'm still not sleeping so—”

“Look, I wanted to run something past you,” said Charlie before Jack had a chance to finish, “We're thinking we could actually use this shooting thing as part of a campaign. You know, one of the Post's reporters nearly killed by the rising tide of gun crime in the capital. That kind of thing. I think it's got some real potential. Put some political pressure on the subject.”

“I see.”

“Yeah. I've talked to the managing editor and we're even thinking about a reward for information. We're going to offer twenty grand.”

“I'm not sure I—”

“Look, I don't want to spoil your holiday, Jack, but we're running a piece this evening. An interview with yourself and I've got Lauren on the newsdesk to provide the quotes from your side of things. We're going to fax through the story to your hotel so if you can check it before we go to press just to make sure it's accurate.”

“I don't think—”

“Jack, I've got a call coming through from the fucking suits upstairs on line two. I'm sure you can handle it. Anyway, you'll be glad to hear your contract renewal has been finalised so I'll look forward to catching up when you're back from holiday.”

The line at the other end went dead and he placed his phone on the table.

“Who was that?” asked Laura looking perturbed.

“Who do you think?” groaned Jack, “Charlie at the office. Fucking wanker.”

“He's not that bad. At least, he's given you compassionate leave. You needed a break, Jack. You need to time to really relax after what you've been through.”

“He says The Post is going to offer a reward. You know... for any information.”

“Well, that's good isn't it? Maybe someone will come forward.”

“I don't know. If it was Charlie's idea then there's some ulterior motive at work.”

“What do you mean?”

“No, nothing.... Anyway, forget it. We're on holiday, right?”

In the afternoon, after they had returned to the hotel and Jack had checked the fax from London they took the hire car out on the road out of town. Along the quiet highway the roadside bars that catered to the summer party crowds were deserted, closed until the start of the summer season, and with the windows rolled down, the breeze wafted the scent of the pine trees which lined the route. After twenty minutes of driving they came into a small village nestled in the rocky hills where Jack pulled the car up outside a terrace of small shops.

“You want to stop here?” asked Laura looking puzzled, “It's like a ghost town.”

“Well, let's just get out and stretch our legs.”

They wandered along the terrace past a quiet cafe, a shop selling landscape paintings by local artists in oils and then a real-estate office where he glanced at the photos of the villas. It was an image at the bottom of the window that caught his attention; a wide shot of an outside terrace, the white-washed walls of its balcony over-looking a swimming pool in the shape of a love heart. He froze for a moment, just staring at it. How many villas in the mountains could there be with such a feature? It had to be the same villa Diamond had talked about, the place where Linda had gone with Tracy when she'd left London to lie low.

“Why don't you get us a couple of coffees? I'm just going to ask about one of these villas.”

“A villa? Christ, Jack... we're only just able to afford the mortgage on what we've got now. I don't think we're in the market for a holiday home.”

“Hey, I can dream, can't I? Anyway, I'm just curious about prices.”

“Ok. Just don't be too long. I'll see you in the café.”

Inside the office a man in a white-shirt rolled up to the sleeves sat at desk behind a computer screen. He smiled as Jack entered.

“Cómo puedo ayudarte?”

“Sorry... I dont –“

“Ahh... you are English? Please...how can I help?”

“You have a villa advertised in the window.”

“We have many. What kind of budget do you have, señor?”

“No, I'm interested in that particular one. It has a pool... a pool in the shape of a heart.”

“Ahh yes. Are you looking to rent in this area?”

“The villa is in this area?”

“Yes. It is in San Jose... only a short walk from here and very reasonable at two thousand euros a month.”

“I see. Would it possible to arrange a viewing?”

“A viewing?”

“Yes. To see it for myself?”

“Ahh... it is not available at the moment, señor. Normally the villas here are only rented in the summer months and this time of year – March and April – the owners make repairs so we do not hold the keys.”

The man must have discerned the disappointment from his expression as he quickly added, “But it is available from the start of the season.”

“The start of the season?”

“Yes... from the first of June.”

“Of course,” continued the man “I could try to contact the owners and collect the keys and perhaps we could arrange something for later in the week?”

He considered it for a moment but concluded it would have led to too many awkward questions from Laura.

“No, I don't think that will be possible.”

“Well, please take this,” said the man handing him a business card, “We have a website with more photos of the property and if you want to make a reservation then you have my contact details.”

He thanked the man and slipped the card into his wallet. When he met Laura back

at the café the waitress had just arrived with their espressos as a couple of rose-coloured butterflies danced around terrace bathed in the golden light of the late afternoon.

“Put down a deposit on a holiday villa have you?”

“No. I was just curious what they go for, that's all. It's a nice thought though.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” said Laura staring at the craggy grey peaks of the mountain on the horizon, “It would make a great little hideaway, wouldn't it?”

In the evening, they ate at a restaurant in the old town where the tables were laid out on the cobbled courtyard and their waiter flattered Laura in his pidgin English. For the length of their meal, Jack managed to forget about life back in London and for the first time in weeks he and Laura talked and laughed together like they had when they first met. She didn't even object when he asked the waiter for another bottle of Rioja.

It was past midnight by the time the bill was paid and they were stumbling their way back to the hotel. A few streets away they passed a bar where an eighties synth-pop soundtrack was playing to a half-empty dancefloor.

“Shall we go in?” asked Jack, “Come on! We *are* on holiday!”

“Really, Jack?”

On the dance floor, the multi-coloured disco lights seemed dazzling. It was ages since Jack could remember being in a nightclub. At the far end of the bar he could see the DJ watching the crowd as he began to mix in the next record. There was something familiar in the pulsating synth bassline as those around him raised their hands in a show of appreciation and the whoosh from a nearby smoke-machine suddenly enveloped the floor with in a cloud of dry-ice. As the smoke began to clear he could see an attractive blonde in front of him who had turned to face him. Her eyes looked slightly dilated and she was wearing a tight black lycra top that clung tightly to her figure exposing a tempting glimpse of cleavage. He tried to pretend for

a moment he wasn't staring back at her but she was looking right at him, mouthing the lyrics of the song as she swooned sensuously to the music:

*“Some of them want to use you,
Some of them want to abuse you,
Some of them want to be abused.”*

And then he noticed another woman behind her, her hands wrapped around the blonde's midriff as her hands gradually reached up to cup the woman's breasts. And now they were both looking back him. Both appearing to tease him, both apparently inviting him to join them in their embrace. And now... now he seemed to recognise her - the lips and the mouth seemed so familiar to him – and he could feel himself moving. Moving irresistibly towards the pair of them.

“Jack!”

He woke with a start to Laura's voice. The bedside light was on and she was sat up in bed glaring down at him.

“Are you having an affair?” she demanded angrily, “Tell me the truth! Tell me! I want to know.”

The question left him baffled as he strained to accustom his eyes to the harsh light.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I want to know if you're seeing someone else... if that's why you've been acting so weird lately.”

He wiped his eyes for a second trying to gather his thoughts.

“Wherever did you get that idea?”

“Well, who the hell is Linda then? You've been saying her name over and over in your sleep.”

CHAPTER 24: 'LADY LUCK'

At around midday in a quiet street in North London Sean was nervously sitting on the edge of the leather sofa in the front lounge of Terry's townhouse trying to mentally compose himself after another sleepless night. Ironically, sleep had never previously been a problem back in jail apart from the odd occasion when one of the wing's new arrivals would pound their fists against the door of their cell in a fit of frustration. But for the last month, even with the comfort of a decent mattress and a warm quilt, he'd suffered from this irritating insomnia that was sapping all his energy. At first he'd thought it was perhaps the temperature of room and had tried decamping to sleep on the sofa in the lounge but that didn't seem to quell the gloomy introspection that set in as soon as he switched his light off. All these swirling thoughts about the past, about Anna, about his mum, about prison. He'd even tried getting some sleeping pills from chemist but it was no good. It was same every night now; the thoughts twisting around his head, keeping him awake into the early hours as he wriggled restlessly under the duvet.

Now he tried not to yawn as he watched Terry staring at the inside of that day's edition of the Evening Post with a furrowed brow and a look of intense concentration. Curtis, meanwhile, was sitting in the other chair on the other side of the coffee table, the pair of them apparently pretending not to notice Terry's fat fingers trembling as his eyes scanned the newsprint.

“I don't fucking believe this,” muttered Terry before finally folding the copy of the Post and placing it back on the coffee table.

“Yeah... it's not good, is it?” mumbled Curtis as he bent over and rubbed his palms across the prickly pate of his head.

“Not good? Are you 'aving a laugh? Trust me, to call this a disaster is like calling the Titanic a fucking boating accident”

Sean said nothing. He'd learned by now silence was always the best policy in these situations. He'd seen Terry angry before, like that very first day at the golf

course. He'd even heard him fly into an uncontrollable rage on the phone over quite trivial misunderstandings, firing volleys of poisonous put-downs. But what he hadn't seen before was this quiet, bubbling rage that he was witnessing now. Somehow this seemed more sinister, as if the tectonic plates of Terry's psychopathy were beginning to slowly twist and buckle such that any moment now there might be an explosive eruption of violence and obscenity.

Terry stretched back on the sofa and the three of them sat in silence for a minute or two. Meanwhile Sean gazed at the muted television screen on which a TV presenter was hosting a debate with an assembly studio audience with a captioned graphic at the bottom of the screen posing the question *Is Britain becoming a less caring society?*

“Yeah, we're going to have to fucking whack him,” said Terry after some consideration.

“You mean Izzet?” asked Curtis with a look of confusion.

“No. The fucking kid, I mean. If we whack Izzet then the kid's still walking about, ain't he? And from where I'm standing, he's the fucking weak link in the chain.”

“Well, why don't the Kosovans sort it out? I mean it's their problem.”

“Yeah but think about.... if the kid grasses then pretty soon it'll be our problem. You think Izzet and his brother are going take the rap? This has to be sorted out properly and, besides, I told Andrews there'd be no comeback. He's probably going ballistic with this fucking press thing”

“So what's the plan, boss?” asked Curtis.

“I'll give the Kosovans a call and I want you to go over to the West End to speak to 'em. Find out where this kid lives or how we can track him down. Don't tell 'em we're going to whack the little fucker. We'll even pay them for the job. Meanwhile, Sean will do the Milk Run in your place.”

“So, we still going to do Izzet?”

“Yeah but for now it's business as usual. We'll pay them to keep them thinking

it's all sweet. And one last thing..... no fucks up from either of you, you get that?"

Sean was momentarily resting his eyes. Now he blinked them open to discover Terry glaring at him.

"Yeah, yeah. I heard. No fuck ups, Terry."

A couple of hours later Sean had completed the first half of the collections on the Milk Run and was heading towards the houses in the north of the city. The traffic everywhere seemed to have slowed to a thin trickle due to groups of men who seemed to be at every junction with pneumatic drills digging up swathes of tarmac. He watched one of the workmen – a guy probably his own age in a donkey jacket standing around the temporary traffic light sipping from a polystyrene cup. In the afternoon drizzle he looked thoroughly pissed-off. Perhaps that was the nature of all work – the tedium of daily routine. He'd been working for Terry for three months now and even that novelty was beginning to wear off. Not that he was thinking of packing it in. After all, the money was good and the hours cushy but the work itself was more mundane than he'd anticipated. There was plenty of driving and picking up money or messages and then the odd day when he'd accompany Terry to meet another business associate but, apart from one occasion when he'd threatened to spark out some traffic warden for trying to give Terry a ticket, it still lacked the kind of adrenaline that he'd associated with the life of a top-notch London gangster.

Sean was still musing over this minor disappointment in life by the time he reached the traffic lights at Highbury. He checked his watch. He was already running an hour late. At this rate, the Safety Deposit Centre would be closed by the time he finally got there and then there'd be the inevitable bollocking off Terry to follow. On top of all that, he could now distinctly feel his energy fading. As he waited for the lights to change he closed his eyes again and found himself snoozing off only to be awoken suddenly by the blaring of car horns behind him. He jerked into life, his foot reaching for the accelerator, as he noticed the light had changed to green. With a screech of tyres, the Ranger Rover pulled away just as another silver Ford Orion

suddenly swung in front of him. He lurched for the brake pedal and brought the car to a halt within a couple of inches of the overtaking car. Fuck! What was up with all these wankers on the road today?

“What the fuck you playing at, you prick?” he shouted, rolling down the driver's side window.

And then just as he was about to pull away he could see the doors of the other vehicle open and inside two men in dark clothing. It was only as they stepped out that he noticed the uniform. *Bollocks!* It had only turned out to be an unmarked police car. What were the fucking chances of that? And had they been tailing him all along? Did they know about the collections? He began panicking as he thought about all the money stashed in the boot. He must have collected about fifteen grand so far. All of it bundled up and tossed into a sportsbag. How was he going to explain where that little lot came from? He tried to tell himself to remain calm as his mind scrambled for some sort of explanation.

“Is this your car, sir?” said the older officer as he approached the window of the Range.

“No, it belongs to a friend of mine.”

“I see... then can you perhaps tell me the registration of the vehicle?”

He tried to picture the number plate in his mind but now he couldn't remember. He hesitated and then looked up at the officer shaking his head.

“To be honest, I can't remember it right now.”

“Okay... would you mind stepping out of the vehicle a moment, sir?”

He could see the other younger officer already on his radio calling in the registration and as he climbed out of the driver's seat he knew they were going to give him the full going over: licence, insurance documents, the works.

It took over ten minutes before they checked the documents out. His licence was clean but he'd never bothered to ask Terry about the insurance and then he remembered some papers he'd seen in the glove compartment. When the police headquarters finally radioed back he was relieved to hear that his name was included

on the policy. By then the two officers had set about inspecting the car's headlights and tyres. He knew they were looking for anything now. Why hadn't he just kept his gob shut? Any moment they'd ask him quite politely to open the boot of the car and when they looked inside the bag then what could he say? It would be a night down the nick with a duty solicitor replying 'No comment' to a thousand questions.

“Right,” said the older officer finally putting his notebook back into his pocket and stroking his beard, “Looks like everything is in order but perhaps in future you'd just take a little more care and consideration of other motorists?”

The patronising tone was enough to make Sean want to belt the bloke. *Care and consideration?* It was them that had jumped the light but as he watched the younger officer approach the back of the Range he was suddenly more worried about having to explain the contents of the boot.

“You carrying anything in the back of the vehicle, sir?”

“Yeah... just my gym bag.”

The officer nodded and Sean glanced at his watch, biting his lip. He could feel it coming now. Any second now he'd ask in that ever-so-polite and reasonable Hendon tone if Sean could just open up the boot and then it would all come out.

“Would you mind,” the younger man continued, “if—”

He could feel the muscles in his throat tightening, his mouth suddenly all dry and sticky.

“Steve. It's fine,” interrupted the older officer “The vehicle's clean. I'm not doing a whole Section 60 on this. Our shift is up in half an hour.”

The younger man smiled sulkily at his colleague.

“Just bear in mind, what my colleague said about consideration for other road users, sir.”

“Yeah. Will do. Sorry and all that.”

He watched from the driver's seat as they got back into the unmarked car and pulled away. His hands were still quivering as he clutched the steering wheel then he exhaled a long breath, his heart still thumping away in his chest. As he saw the tail

lights of the car disappear around a corner he couldn't help but chuckle to himself. Lady Luck was smiling on him today. On the way home he'd buy a lottery ticket or maybe a couple of scratchcards from the petrol station. Even if he didn't win he felt it was a kind of payback, a small offering to the gods of chance, then he started the ignition, switched the sat-nav back on and hurried on to the next address.

By the time he reached the final house in Hornsey Road he had barely half an hour before the Safety Deposit Centre closed for business. As he pulled up in the quiet street he decided to give Terry a call.

“Well, how come it's taken you so fucking long?” demanded Terry.

He explained about the run in with the police. The document check and how near he'd come to a vehicle search.

“Right, well, if SDH is closed then you'll have to bring it to the house and me or Curtis will drop it up there tomorrow. The accountant ain't gonna pick it up 'til the day after so it ain't really a big deal. But give Curtis a call. His mobile seems to be off. I ain't heard from him all day and I want that other thing we talked about sorted.”

He hung up the phone and took out the notebook in which he'd listed the takings for each collection then scanned the figures and mentally calculated the day's takings so far. Seventeen-and-a-half grand. Not as good as the other weeks he'd done the run but still a healthy racket by anyone's standards and that was just one of the tentacles of Terry's operation. In addition to the string of saunas and brothels, he had the strip club in Shoreditch, the golf club, the waste management business out in Dagenham and probably a whole bunch of other earners that Sean didn't even know about. He could see now why Terry was a *face*; if there were any equivalent to titles in criminal circles then Terry would surely have earned a knighthood for his services to villainy.

Outside the door of the terrace house he reached for the doorbell and squinted through the frosted glass. As usual, the light was on in the passageway. It was the final collection of the day and he was now looking forward to getting home after all the stress with the Old Bill. The door opened a crack and the same woman was standing there dressed in her cardigan and round glasses.

“Just one sec, I've got to make a quick call,” she said and then pushed the door closed again.

Sean cursed under his breath. What the fuck was it with all the hold-ups today? He felt completely knackered now and the last thing he wanted was to be standing on the doorstep while this silly cow made some personal phone call. Why couldn't she just let him in and make him wait in the hallway like last time?

In a minute she came back to open the front door.

“Sorry about that. My daughter's just locked herself out,” she said ushering him into the passageway.

“Fucking kids, eh?” he grunted, closing the door behind him.

“There's two-thousand-three-hundred there,” she said and handed him a plastic supermarket bag containing the cash.

He took the bag and noted the amount in the book then nodded at the the woman. She seemed edgier than usual like she wanted him out the way but maybe that was because she needed to chip off home to let her careless brat in. Still, if the traffic wasn't too bad there was still a chance he'd make the safety deposit place, he thought to himself, as he squeezed the plastic bag into the pocket of his coat and turned to leave. Outside on the road, he let out a long yawn as he opened up the boot of the car. That was the last of the collections and once he'd got the cash safely stashed he could get home and finally relax with a spliff in front of the telly.

He slotted the key in the boot, unzipped the sports bag and tossed the plastic bag of cash in with the others and then just as he was about to shut the boot he felt it. Something as cold as an ice-cube pushed up against the base of his neck.

“Don't move or I'll blow your fucking head off.”

He didn't move. He didn't even flinch. He knew the deal. He'd done the same that day he'd done the job with Ritchie except that on that occasion he'd been on the other end of the barrel.

“Keep your hands where I can see 'em, pal” said the voice behind behind him and he could feel the muzzle of a handgun rubbing against his lower neck as out of the

corner of his eye he could see another man in a black balaclava reach inside the boot for the bag.

It was the pure helplessness of his situation that infuriated him. Perhaps it wasn't even a real gun, he thought. Perhaps it was a replica or perhaps it wasn't loaded or the safety was still on but right now it would seem madness to call that bluff. Play it wrong now and in a split second his brains would be splattered all over the boot of the Range. Instead, he stood perfectly still as the other man seized the bag and lifted it delicately out of the boot.

“You're making a big mistake, mate You don't know who –”

“Yeah, yeah. You just stay there now. Nice and easy. That's it... keep your hands just there and don't move or you're a fucking dead man, understand?”

He could hear their slow movement behind him and then in another second he could hear the sound of feet pounding the pavement as he turned and saw the two of them, two figures clad in boiler suits and balaclavas and one of them tightly clutching the sportsbag, reach the corner of the street and disappear around the corner.

He sprinted after them but all the time knowing it was pointless. By the time he reached the Hornsey Road he could only stare in disbelief as a blue Audi screeched away, jumping the traffic lights and speeding out of sight. He could do nothing as he watched it disappear into the distance.

Breathless, he bent over and tried to compose himself. His whole body felt as if he'd just walked out of an industrial deep freeze and then, as he shivered alone on the street with the traffic still jostling its way along the carriageway, he tried to figure out how he was going to explain it. He'd just been robbed of twenty grand, he kept telling himself. Twenty grand of his boss' money swiped by two seemingly professional blaggers. How exactly was he going to tell Terry that? Sooner or later he'd have to tell him though and the very thought of that phone call already filled him with dread.

CHAPTER 25: 'NO COMMENT'

As a message vibrated his Blackberry into life, Donnell peered out from his bedroom window on the sixth floor and could see the two white boys hanging around the entrance to the estate. He couldn't remember their names. Two guys, probably fifteen or sixteen, who always had those same weird haircuts and skinny jeans that all the art school kids wore. Donnell had first met them at the same music festival where he'd met Chantelle and where he'd sold one of them a ten pound bag of weed for twenty quid.

“Hey, that doesn't look like twenty pounds' worth,” whispered the taller one of the two as Donnell flashed them the green buds in the palm of his hand as they mingled amongst the crowd.

“Yeah, well, twenty it is... take it or leave it, bruv. I'll give you my number if you want some more in future then I'll do you a nice price.”

Really he didn't even want to sell the weed. He'd just done it to impress Chantelle, to prove to her his story that he made a good living from hustling, and as he'd tucked the twenty into his pocket she'd given him that naughty smile of hers. Then he'd given the two boys his Blackberry BBN and ever since that day they'd messaged him every couple of weeks to pick up weed for themselves and their friends. He didn't exactly make a lot of money off of it but at least they were always on time which is more than Donnell could say for his own friends.

Snatching a handful of twenty-pound bags from his sock drawer and stuffing them into the pocket of his jacket he headed for the door of his flat. Out in the kitchen he could smell his Mum cooking stewed chicken like she always prepared for lunch on Saturday.

“Donnell, where are you going? I just put the rice on now. Food will be ready in ten minutes. I don't want you rushing off anywhere, you hear?”

“Yeah, I'll be back in a minute, mum. I just gotta go shop innit.”

He sauntered through the car park of the estate and over to the entrance where he

could see the two teenagers nervously waiting. He told them not to go into the estate. He'd told them it wasn't safe there. Really he just didn't want other people seeing his business done in the car park there. His mum knew a couple of women on the estate with kids and he knew that if they clocked what he was up to then there was bound to be drama.

By the gate, he nodded towards the boys and took a short walk down the street with them before reaching deep into his pocket and scrunching the bags into his fist.

“Alright, bruv,” he said bumping fists with the older boy and then pushed the bags into the boy's palm.

Across the street Donnell noticed a broad-chested black guy with a shaved head and wearing a long black leather coat who seemed to be hanging around on the street. He was fairly sure he didn't live on Kingshold and there was something unnerving about the way he was standing there just watching him. He turned towards the younger kid who was getting out his wallet and brazenly taking out two twenty pound notes as if he were paying a cashier at a supermarket checkout.

“Fuckin' hell, man. Keep it down, yeah?” whispered Donnell sucking his teeth in disapproval.

“Oh sorry,” said the kid looking around furtively.

Donnell remembered now why he hated dealing with the pair of them. They were so fucking clueless about everything as if they lived on another planet. What were they doing flashing their cash around on road like that?

The younger one passed the two folded notes.

“That's forty there,” said Donnell, “Where's the rest then?”

“We only wanted two bags.”

Donnell sighed. They were really fucking him about now. He was sure they'd said they wanted four bags in the text but he'd left his Blackberry at home.

“Well, I gave you four, man. Give me two back,” he said taking a sideways glance at the big black geezer across the road who was still watching them.

The older boy reached into his coat and took out two bags which Donnell grabbed

and put back in his pocket and then suddenly there was the sound of footsteps from behind and Donnell could feel himself being forced up against the wall of the estate and his arm twisted behind his back.

He looked around to see the other boys next to him being pushed against the wall by a bearded policeman, both of their faces gripped in expressions of shock and disgust as if they had just been violated in the most outrageous manner.

“Right, keep your hands out your pockets. All of you!”

Donnell could feel the hands of the man holding him now patting his pockets.

“What we got here then?”

He could feel the bloke's hand in the pocket of his jacket grabbing for the two small plastic bags.

“Looks like two bags of cannabis on him, Trev.”

“Yep, two on this one too.”

“Right, anyone going to tell me what's going on here?”

Donnell was glaring at the boys who were still pressed against the wall looking completely stunned by this unexpected turn of events. One of them was sniffing like he was about to burst into tears any second.

“No?” replied the officer when no answer was forthcoming, “Okay then the three of you are nicked and we'll sort this out at the station.”

It was over three-and-a-half hours since the Custody Sergeant had processed Donnell and then, after asking his name and address and going through the usual search, mouth swab and removal of shoelaces, placed him into a holding cell at Bethnal Green police station.

He knew his mum would be going mad about it. He couldn't figure out why it was all taking so long. They weren't going to charge him over a quarter ounce of weed, were they? Surely, it would be the usual: a caution and a stern warning from the Duty Sergeant that “next time it would be serious”. It was all bullshit really... no-one really

went to court for possession these days. The jails were overflowing as it was; if they started sending people to jail for the odd spliff then half the country would end up behind bars. Besides, even if the other boys grassed – and he was confident they weren't that stupid – then they still couldn't really nick him for intent-to-supply. No, he told himself, surely they weren't thinking of going down that road?

At that moment, Donnell's thoughts were disturbed by the sound of the cell being unlocked. As the heavy door swung open, he stared angrily at the Custody Sergeant and another older man standing next to him dressed in a dark grey suit.

“Why aren't you letting me go, man? Just gimme my caution, innit. Why all this pissing about just for a bit of weed?”

“Sure,” said the older man “We'd just like to have a little talk with you first.”

“About what?”

“Why don't we go to an interview room? I've got a colleague of mine waiting for you there.”

Donnell didn't like the sound of that. What was there to talk about? Now he had a horrible suspicion the white boys been chatting some shit to the cops about him.

He followed the Custody Sergeant and the man in the suit away from the holding cells up a flight of stairs then down a corridor with worn brown carpet tiles before the man stopped, turned and opened a door gesturing for Donnell to enter. He looked at the Custody Sergeant who nodded silently at his colleague before turning to make his way back to the custody suite.

Inside the room, Donnell started to feel a little edgy as he sat down opposite another slightly overweight man in a suit who was sitting at a table reading papers held in a manilla file.

“So, Donnell,” said the man who had led him from the cells, “My name is DS David Collins and I'm part of Bethnal Green CI and we've got a few questions we'd like to ask you if that's alright with you? ”

“CID... what you going on about? I had a bit of weed on me, man. What's the big fucking deal?”

“Donnell, I should inform you that at approximately ten past three this afternoon officers from Bethnal Green police station conducted a search of your mother's property on the Kingshold estate.”

“You what?” snapped Donnell, “You can't fucking search without a warrant.”

“Actually, your mother consented. We told her we could get a warrant if we needed to. We had had reason to believe that you were in possession with to intent supply a class B controlled substance.”

“What?! All over a bit of weed? This is fucking bullshit, man!” protested Donnell.

“I'd like to now hand over to a colleague of mine,” continued the man calmly, “This is DCI Raymond Beech from Operation Trident who'd like to ask you some more specifically about an item which was retrieved during the search of the property.”

What was this bloke yapping about? Operation Trident? And then there was a horrible realisation that seemed to descend on him like a dark shadow.

“Yes, Donnell,” said the other detective who now looked up from his file, “I just wanted to have a chat with you about *this*.”

And with that he lifted a plastic evidence bag containing a single shiny black Nike trainer.

“We have reason to believe this may belong to you.”

Donnell froze. He should have thrown it away like he'd been meaning to. It was stupid keeping one trainer anyway. It was no use to him. But then he hadn't got around to it and, besides, he remembered now it had got kicked under his bed the morning after that night so it had just laid there out of sight.

He looked at the bag for a second then, with his hands slightly trembling, he clasped his palms over his eyes and said nothing.

“It's best you talk to us, Donnell. We just want to clear up if it's yours or not.... that way we can rule you out of our investigation. I mean we could send it away. Do all the DNA testing against the sample we took from you today or, then again, you

could save us all the bother.”

There was a long silence during which Donnell could seem to hear his own heart thumping in his ear drum.

“Just look at the the shoe, Donnell. Surely you know if it yours? You mum seemed to think it was yours.”

He didn't want to peel his palms away from his face. He wanted to believe that for as long as he could keep them there then this wasn't happening.

“Come on, why don't you just take a look?” continued the man.

It was winding him up now. He felt like that rat which he'd seen his mum corner in the kitchen when he was a kid; the horrible cowering, furry creature realising it had nowhere to run before his mum threw the contents of a boiling kettle over it and it squealed in agony.

“Look, I ain't saying nothing,” he said eventually pulling away his sweaty palms from his face and staring up at the pair of them, “And I want a solicitor. I want a solicitor here now. I ain't saying nothing without a solicitor.”

He didn't exactly know why he needed a solicitor. It was just something he'd seen people on TV ask for but as he said it he noticed the older man looked at his colleague and Donnell seemed to discern an ever-so-faint trace of a smile as the man's younger colleague nodded back at him.

“Ok, if that's the way you want to play it. We'll take you back to your cell while we get you a solicitor and then when he arrives, we'll all have a nice cup of tea and a chat. How about that?”

It was nearly eight'o'clock in the evening by the time the duty solicitor had arrived and taken Donnell into another consultation room. He was grey-haired man probably in his late fifties with a weary look about him. He spent five minutes silently reading some paperwork and then occasionally glancing up at Donnell with a worried expression.

“What they going on about?” asked Donnell eventually tiring of the silence.

“My advice to you right now is not say anything which may incriminate you.”

“Yeah but I ain't done nothing.”

“Which is why I'm advising you to say nothing. For now, your best course of action is to reply 'No comment' to any questions until we know more about the case against you.”

“What case against me?” demanded Donnell.

“Look, if you don't say anything then at least that way you can't harm any future defence when it comes to court.”

He was led back to the interview room by the Custody Sergeant with his solicitor in tow. He felt confused, unsettled by his solicitor's mention of court. So what if they'd found the other trainer he'd dropped by the bins! What did that prove? They couldn't pin anything on him on a lost trainer. In his mind, he'd already begun concocting an alibi about being chased down the street by members of a South London gang who'd found him straying into their ends.

When he got to the interview room again he sat himself down and glared at the detectives. It was hot and stuffy in the small windowless room and he watched silently as one of them switched on a video camera which had had been mounted on a tripod in the corner.

“This interview is being conducted at Bethnal Green Police Station. The time is now ten minutes past eight in the evening on Saturday April 11th 2011,” said the older man, “For the benefit of the tape, present are myself, DCI Raymond Beech, of Operation Trident and DS David Collins of Bethnal Green CID along with the suspect, Donnell Johnson of Kingshold Estate, Hackney who has a solicitor present. So.... perhaps I can start by asking you, Donnell, about your movements on the night of Friday 25th March 2011?”

Donnell glanced at the solicitor sitting next to him. He could feel his body sticky with perspiration, his thin cotton t-shirt clinging to his moist back.

“No comment.”

“Donnell, in a search of your bedroom this afternoon by officers from this police

station a black Nike sports shoe was recovered,” continued the older man lifting the plastic bag containing the trainer again, “For the purpose of the tape I'm showing the suspect exhibit C141. Can you confirm that this trainer belongs to you?”

“No comment,” replied Donnell, his voice beginning to sound strained.

“A matching trainer was recovered in the vicinity of Averley Crescent in Forest Hill, the site of of an incident involving a firearm. After forensic examination, traces of gunshot residue were found on the fabric of that training shoe. Donnell, can you tell me if you currently possess, have ever possessed or have ever discharged any sort of firearm?”

Donnell could now feel a tiny stream of sweat trickling down the valley of his spine.

“No comment.”

The man nodded and then from the pocket of his jacket he removed something wrapped in a plastic bag. As he placed it on the desk in front of them, Donnell realised it was his Blackberry with the cracked screen that he'd left on his bedside table.

“We haven't had a look at your phone yet, Donnell,” said the man, “But we will do. So, tell me....what do you think we'll find when go through your messages?”

The words made the blood suddenly rush to his head and in the stifling warmth of the room he felt for a moment like he might pass out. He looked at the man who seemed to be gloating. They had him right where they wanted him now but he wasn't going to say anything. After all, he was no fucking snitch.

“Donnell... I think it's time you did some explaining, don't you?”

“No comment.”

CHAPTER 26: 'PAID IN FULL'

As arranged, the cab dropped Sean off around eight o'clock on an industrial estate just off the A13, a short distance from where the rusting dockyards of Dagenham met the grey, gloomy waters of the Thames. Deserted roads cut through rows of dilapidated industrial units, breakers yards and scrap metal dealers. It felt like a ghost town: the eerie static of the evening rain only disturbed by the revving of a car engine somewhere in the distance. Eventually he found himself walking towards a set of black iron gates next to a car park which was empty except for Terry's black Range Rover glistening in the rain.

As he approached, he stared through the railings at the enclosure inside. Three haulage lorries with 'Francis Waste Management' on front of their cabs were parked inside with massive skips fitted to their trailers and next to them he could make out other machinery, some sort of bulldozer with a huge crane arm that hung in the air in a contorted pose like a bird with a broken wing and an enormous metal machine with an open mouth that Sean took to be some kind of machine for crushing waste. Beyond, giant mounds of broken brick and concrete loomed against the horizon, an alien mountain range from which bits of twisted metal occasionally protruded like the branches of felled trees.

He pushed the unlocked gate open and walked slowly towards a Portacabin. From its window he could see a pale yellow light and as he got closer he could hear Terry's voice from inside.

“I told you already, Natalie. I don't mind paying for you to go on holiday but you ain't going away with any fellas. You're too young for all that, sweetheart.... So what about that new phone you've been going on about? I don't mind –”

Terry looked up awkwardly from the phone call as Sean entered the cabin.

“Look I've got to go. I got some business to take care of.... Yeah, you can go on all you like, Princess, but that's my decision and it's final.”

Then he hung up the call and placed the mobile phone on the desk cluttered with

paperwork and shook his head before looking up at Sean with a grave expression. He looked like he was dressed for a funeral with his dark suit and camel-coloured Crombie overcoat. The atmosphere of the room was subdued as if the small prefab was playing host to a hastily arranged funeral wake.

He gave Terry a nod of acknowledgement but Terry just sighed and clasped his hands in his lap as he reclined in a director's chair. With the dazzling light of a floor lamp directed at the door Sean had to squint but behind Terry, in the far corner of the cabin, he could see Curtis dressed in his black leather trench coat sitting on a stool and staring at him intently.

“Sean... Sit yourself down, sunshine,” said Terry motioning to a plastic chair in front of the desk, “I think it's time me and you had a little chat, don't you?”

To Sean it felt like the time when he'd been called to the headmaster's office just before he'd been expelled for a playground fight in which he'd stamped on the head of some kid who'd protested about being shaken down for his dinner money. His mum had been there that morning, her thick foundation barely disguising the paleness of her face as the headmaster had muttered something about 'school policy'. He'd known then it was all over. His mum knew it too. They were just going through the motions. After that it was the Pupil Referral Unit where the teachers were little more than bystanders in a series of vicious classroom scraps. In the end, he only stuck it out for a couple of months. School, he'd decided by then, wasn't really his thing.

“You ain't been to this place before have you?” asked Terry gesturing to the space around them.

“No.”

He watched as Terry peered out of the window at the lorries in the yard.

“Yeah.. waste disposal. Big money in it these days. You know... throwaway society and all that... See everyone's got stuff they want to get rid of... And that's what we do here... we dispose of stuff for our clients.”

Sean could feel himself squirming in his seat. He knew when Terry had phoned him about the meeting that it wasn't going to be comfortable but the tone of Terry's

little talk was now beginning to worry him.

“And you'd be amazed of what comes through those gates. Yeah, we just won a contract for that new shopping centre. Hundred-and-fifty grand we got for that job. See, someone's got to take all that crap away they don't want and stick it somewhere and that's when they come to us. And you know *why* they come to us?”

Sean shook his head.

“Reputation. This firm here has a reputation. A reputation to get the fucking job done. And that's what you were supposed to have... a reputation. That's what your mate, Lennie Newland, told me. I mean that's why I took you on.”

“Yeah but –“

“I'll let you have your say in a minute,” interrupted Terry, “The fact of the matter is you've made me look a right cunt here, Sean.”

He snorted before continuing: “I mean it's twenty grand and to be honest twenty grand in the bigger scheme... well, it ain't fuck all to me really. But the fact of the matter is that it's *my* fucking twenty grand. That money had my name on it. You understand me?”

Sean nodded, his eyes focused on the the quivering flesh of Terry's throat.

“In the business world, that's what they call *reputational* risk and right now you're causing me some serious fucking reputational risk. You think I can have some wanker having me over for twenty grand?”

Sean shivered.

“No, Terry.”

“Too fucking right I can't,” thundered Terry as he slammed a clenched fist down on the desk, “And you know what? Don't think that it hasn't crossed my mind that that wanker who nicked it isn't sitting right in front of me now!”

Surely, Terry didn't think he'd be stupid enough to nick the Milk Run money? On the phone he'd explained the circumstances of the robbery. There was nothing he could have done. Not with a fucking gun pointed at his head. Whoever had pulled it off weren't some amateur outfit; they must have had some tip-off about when and

where. Maybe even that frumpy bird who managed the house was in on it although on the phone he didn't want to start slinging accusations around. But here he was now standing in the dock of some kangaroo court facing the full force of Terry's fury.

“I swear to God, Terry. I swear I never –“

“Yeah, well, I believe you,” continued Terry appearing to regain some composure, “I mean I reckoned if you had nicked it you wouldn't have the front to turn up here tonight. You're not that fucking stupid, I reckon. And, trust me, I don't need to tell you that if you hadn't turned up here then I wouldn't have rated your chances of seeing the sun come up tomorrow but even so.... we still got a big fucking problem, ain't we?”

“Yeah. I suppose so,” replied Sean and out the corner of his eye he could see Curtis smiling. That big gold tooth of his gleaming in the dim light. He was loving this. Loving see someone else deep in the shit. Such much for any firm loyalty.

“I like you, Sean,” said Terry rubbing his palms together, “Up until all this happened I felt like you were a valuable member of the team but I suppose the question here is 'How much do I like you?’”

He paused for a moment to wipe his lips with the back of his hand.

“And I've got to ask myself: 'Do I like you to the tune of twenty grand?' And I'll be honest with you here.... apart from Natalie there ain't a human being walking this earth who I like that much. So this is what's going to happen - you're going to give me my twenty grand...”

“But Terry –“

“No, listen to me,” continued Terry, “I'm a reasonable man, Sean. I'm not saying you have to give it to me right now but let me make it very fucking clear you that you *will* give it me.”

“But where the fuck am I –“

“I said 'Shut up.' What I'm telling you is that you'll get me my twenty grand because if you don't then you know what's going to happen but given that I am reasonable man I'm going to give you two weeks. So starting from today you got

fourteen days to get me my money.”

“Terry, I can't –“

Sean could feel the skin on his neck and back becoming prickly with sweat.

“Shut your mouth! I don't want to hear excuses. You should know by now that I don't like people who come to me with excuses. Look at it like this... I gave you a task to do. A simple task. All you had to do is collect my money - the money that people gave you to *pay me* and believe me, Sean, when I tell you that I always get paid. Paid-in-fucking-full.”

Sean could feel a churning sensation in the pit of his stomach and a shortness of breath like he'd been winded by a sucker punch. His brain was still trying to comprehend the demand. Where did Terry expect him to find twenty grand from in two weeks? He didn't have that sort of money lying around. He had about two grand stashed in the shoebox in the wardrobe at home but that left him eighteen grand short. He sat for a moment feeling stunned, gazing blankly at the piles of papers on the desk.

“Fourteen days,” said Terry leaning over the desk, “And I want the full twenty grand in cash or you're going to wish you'd never fucking clapped eyes on me.”

He looked up at Terry's face, his dark eyes staring out from thick, bushy eyebrows. The leathery skin of his face resembled a waxwork in the Chamber of Horrors, his gaze emotionless just like that very first day on the golf course. It felt like there was something else standing in front of him: not a man, not a human being, but something infernal... something distinctly inhuman.

“You understand what I'm telling you?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Well, just in case you don't,” said Terry turning to Curtis sitting behind him, “Let me show you something which might focus your mind a little bit. Call it an *intervention* on my part.”

Curtis passed Terry a phone from the inside pocket of his coat.

“How do you work this thing? You know, I can't get my get round all this new

technology,” said Terry, his fat fingers fumbling with the buttons of the phone, “Oh yeah, I got it now.”

He passed the phone to Sean. A video was playing on the phone's small screen but the camera-work was so shaky Sean could hardly make it out and then gradually he could see someone in a room sitting on a chair, a girl with her hands behind her back. It was Anna. The camera zoomed in clumsily on her, her head hung low, and Sean could hear her sobbing as she looked up to stare into the camera

“Yeah.. she's a nice-looking, bird,” continued Terry matter-of-factly, “You've done alright there. You know, our Kosovan friends who are looking after her said the same. They reckon they know people who will pay decent money for a pretty thing like that.”

He passed the phone back to Terry feeling queasy. Until now Terry's coldness hadn't bothered him - perhaps he'd even admired it – but now it repulsed him. He was beginning to realise it was that same heartlessness that had propelled Terry to the top of the underworld, that same inability of his to distinguish between things and people. After all, to Terry, it was all the same.

“Don't worry. Nothing is going to happen to her. That is, if you give me what's owed to me,” said Terry with a vicious little smirk, “Now you'll have to excuse me. I'm taking Natalie out for her birthday. Curtis is driving me so you'll have to make your own way home or there's a cab office about half a mile up that road.”

With that he followed Terry and Curtis out of the portacabin and across the yard back to the gates through which he'd come. The wind from the estuary was now blowing the rain across Sean's face as he heard the gate clanking behind him and the sound of a chain rattling as Terry locked the place up. He stood on the spot for a moment gazing down the deserted street that led out of the industrial estate and watched as Terry walked towards the car park with Curtis in tow.

“I'll be in touch,” shouted Terry, opening the passenger door as the engine of the Range growled into life.

With a screech of tyres they pulled out of the car park and sped off up the road

until they disappeared out of sight.

As he headed slowly up the road he could feel his whole body shivering although somehow he felt numb to the cold. His mind was a whirlpool of questions. How had they got to Anna? And where were they holding her? He'd only seen her that one night since he'd been released. He found himself once again revisiting her brother's words. He'd been right: he'd only ever brought her misery. It was laughable to think he could ever have really been anything to her. With his lifestyle how could he ever have provided the stable family life for her and little Andrezej? And then there was the money. There was what was stashed in the shoebox at the flat but that left him well short. How would he even begin to make up the shortfall? He stared up at the night sky, at the pale moon partially obscured by a clump of cotton-wool cloud. The world now seemed so very small. Where was there to run to? He couldn't even do a bunk abroad without a passport and he if left London, if he decided to head up north or just try and lie low somewhere out in the country, then he was sure it would only be a matter of time before Terry would catch up with him and in the meantime he couldn't bear to think what those bastards would do to Anna.

CHAPTER 27: 'THE STUFF OF NIGHTMARES'

It had been two weeks since Jack had returned from Ibiza and, in the meantime, he'd managed to coax Laura into moving back into the house as they continued to work at a rapprochement. On his return to the office hardly anyone bothered to ask about the shooting that had led to his two week break from work and as he waded through the emails in his inbox on his first day all the chatter on the newsdesk had been about the police investigation into tabloid phone-hacking that had been making the news in his absence.

As he worked his way through the list of unread emails, he discovered there was one from a university friend who worked in publishing saying his company was interested in Tracey's memoir and then as he scrolled down he was surprised to see that Charlie had sent out an email to all the reporting staff marked "Operation Weeting." He clicked on it with curiosity:

"Given the current police investigation into allegations of phone-hacking at The News of The World, I would like to draw your attention to the PCC Code of Practise which I know you are all familiar with. I'm very confident that everyone at The Evening Post maintains the highest ethical standards and I would like to assure you that the management would refute any suggestion that any of our editorial or reporting staff have been involved in any unethical or criminal activity."

He noticed how Charlie had CC'd a number of the Post's senior executives. It was then it occurred to him: perhaps Charlie was trying to distance himself from rumours which were now perhaps beginning to surface in the boardroom two floors above. He smiled to himself as he took a sip from his coffee – if Charlie hadn't decided on a career in journalism then he could have probably carved out a successful career for himself in politics. His talent for spin certainly didn't confine itself to what was printed within the pages of the Post.

After the tranquility of Ibiza, his first week back passed painfully slowly. He'd half expected to hear from the police for a full witness statement but he'd only picked up a voicemail from one of the detectives on the case saying that enquiries were continuing and that they'd be in touch. In the meantime he'd filed a couple of stories about spending cuts in the capital's hospitals whilst busying himself with the continuing investigation into the waste disposal contracts awarded by City Hall. By Thursday his Freedom of Information request on the matter had finally been granted and that morning a thick wodge of assembly meeting minutes had appeared on his desk in a Jiffy bag.

By lunchtime he'd been worked his way through half of the documents when the call came through from the main switchboard. A caller who'd ask to speak to him personally.

"Is that Jack Clarke?" came a muffled voice from the other end of the line.

"Yeah.. speaking."

"I need to speak to you.... it's about the shooting."

Jack could suddenly feel the muscles in his neck and shoulders tense.

"Who am I speaking to?"

"I ain't giving a name but you're offering a reward, yeah?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Then I got some information."

"Okay."

He suddenly distinctly uncomfortable as if the caller was putting him on the spot.

"So, you wanna meet then or what?"

He could feel the the clamminess of the receiver in his hand as he hesitated, trying to assess whether it was bravery or bravado that was spurring him on.

"Okay. Where exactly are you proposing?"

"I don't care," replied the man, his voice almost drowned out by the sound of street traffic, "Anywhere... but I wanna meet soon... like tonight if you can."

"Well, it would have to be somewhere public," Jack replied, conscious that

whatever the man was proposing could easily be an ambush.

“Yeah.... alright. You know London Fields?”

“The park in Hackney?”

“Yeah, that's the one. There's a bench at the end of the Fields. Opposite the pub. Meet me there at half seven. Come alone, you understand?”

“Yeah. I understand. Half seven. London Fields.”

He placed the receiver down and could see one his colleagues across the desk giving him a curious glance. He smiled back but as his gaze drifted back to his desk he noticed the clammy print of his palm left on receiver. Something was warning him he could easily be walking into a trap. Still, he calculated that with the heat of the Post's publicity campaign nobody would be stupid enough to gun him down in full public view. For now he, just hoped that his calculation was correct.

* * *

In the telephone booth at the corner of Old Street roundabout, Sean hung up the phone and glanced around at the groups of office workers carrying their paper sandwich bags back to their offices. He had a horrible feeling he was being watched everywhere he went, a morbid paranoia that was beginning to eat away at him. He'd made the call now though. It was done.

He'd spent the last three days going over and over every avenue open to him always conscious that time was continually ticking away. He could try robbing the money: passing the parcel of bad fortune to someone else. That might have been possible if he'd been looking for five grand, even ten, but twenty? He'd be lucky to get ten holding up a building society and he'd have to turn over two or even three bookies to get his hands on that kind of cash. That was stretching his luck to breaking point and he'd heard stories of people getting lifed off for that kind of robbing spree.

But it was the image of Anna's face on the video that continually haunted him, the memory of that wild-eyed look on her face as the camera moved ever closer, taunting

her. There had been a time – before his last spell inside - when somehow he thought she might save him, save him from going back inside at least. Now it seemed fate had reversed their roles. Now she needed him and the weight of that obligation felt like it was crushing him, squeezing the very breath out of him. He couldn't just leave her. He'd done that once before. And then, finally, he'd seen the appeal in the paper. Twenty grand, it said they were offering.

The previous night he'd been over and over it in his mind when he'd been unable to sleep. The thought of being a grass still didn't sit right but was it really grassing if you talked to some bloke from a newspaper? Surely, it wasn't the same as being a proper snitch? And anyway what the fuck did it really matter? What was the point of observing some bullshit code of the underworld if he was going to end up dead under a pile of broken concrete at Terry's waste yard? Besides, he'd heard those rumours about Lennie Newland back in prison. Lennie had done favours for the police. He'd been a Mason (so someone in Swaleside had told him.) He'd done the funny handshake with the top brass. After all, Lennie wasn't stupid – he'd always played both sides of the game.

In the late afternoon he sank a couple of pints outside a pub just off the Hackney Road killing time until he watched the sun slipping into hazy dusk. It seemed insane all this hanging about. Now he was measuring out his time in cigarette stubs as gulping the last dregs of his lager he returned to his ruminations. *Where was she? What they were doing to her?* Seconds ticking away into minutes, minutes into hours, like a gameshow countdown to an impending catastrophe.

Checking his watch for the final time, he made his way through the market where the high rises seemed to huddle around the open space of the Fields as if gasping for air. As he approached the end of the street he could see a crowd of drinkers outside the pub on the corner, smoking and laughing, unphased by the onset of evening. And then he recognised him from a few yards away, sitting on the bench where they'd arranged to meet. A thin guy with a goatee beard, his eyes nervously scanning the pavement around him.

With their brief introductions out of the way, they took a stroll along the path that led into the park, under the spindly branches of Ash trees just coming into bud, as an elderly couple walking their dog stopped to let the animal relieve itself against a tree.

“So,” asked the man gruffly when the couple finally passed, “What is it with this reward thing?”

“Well, the paper is offering twenty thousand for information... if it leads to a successful conviction, of course.”

“A conviction?”

“Yeah. I mean that's fairly standard, isn't it?”

Sean could feel a sickening sinking feeling in his stomach. He'd had too little sleep to be thinking straight. Of course, they weren't just going to front up the cash for a fucking name. It would have to go to court and that would take months.

“Look, this is a waste of time,” he said turning to head back the way he'd come.

Then as he walked in the shadows of the trees, he could feel his body heavy with fatigue.

“Let's at least talk about this. Don't tell me you've come all this way not to even talk.”

The man was alongside him, clutching Sean's arm.

“No, you don't understand. I need that money. I need twenty grand *today*.”

He shrugged off the man's grasp and kept on walking.

“Say I can get you the money... what do I get for it? What *exactly* are you offering?”

The man was beside him again. He seemed relentless.

“The kid who tried to kill you... I'll give you the name of the guy who paid him.”

“You mean Rafiq?”

Sean turned and stared at the man. How did he know that name? Even Sean had only heard the name in passing, the contact who was paying Terry to put out the hit. Perhaps he'd underestimated this newspaper bloke. Worse still, perhaps he didn't even

have anything to trade.

“Nah... not him. Someone else.”

“Who?”

“I'm not giving up a name without the money. What is this? You think I'm some fucking mug?”

“Well, how can I corroborate what you're saying?”

“You what?”

“Well, say I could get you the money then I'd need evidence... No-one's going to pay a reward for just a name, are they?”

“Evidence? How am I gonna get you evidence? It don't work like that, mate.”

“Well, you know this person, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And so you could arrange a meeting with them?”

“Yeah, I suppose.... Hang on, I ain't wearing no fucking tape recorder if that's where you're going with this. Are you fucking mad? Nah, look, forget it.”

He started to walk away again, gripped by feelings of hopelessness. It had been a stupid idea this meeting. He should have known. He hadn't thought any of this out and, on top of that, he felt totally exhausted. He needed to sleep, to clear his head so he could come up with a proper plan of action.

“Look,” said the man catching up with him again, “Take this.”

He offered him a business card with his telephone number.

“If you change your mind then you know where to reach me.”

Back at the flat, Sean stubbed out the remainder of a spliff and checked his watch. Ten'o'clock. He needed an early night. He felt physically exhausted but his mind was still racing like he'd necked a load of speed. He undressed, tossing his clothes on the carpet and then stared at the rumpled sheet and duvet. He was dreading trying to sleep. How had it come to this? How could he have forgotten how to do something which usually came so naturally?

He climbed into bed and pulled the duvet over him and switched off the light. For the next hour his brain continued to spin through the various options open to him.

He could do a runner. He could pack a bag and leave London tonight. Get a train from King's Cross. But going where exactly? Manchester maybe. Stay in a B&B somewhere. But how long would that last before the money ran out? And then what?

He could go out robbing. A burglary perhaps? One of those big houses up on Bishops Avenue. No! Noone kept that kind of cash in the house and if they did then they'd have a safe and the security on the place would be like Fort Knox. Even if he could steal something... something valuable – jewellery or antiques – then he'd need to pass it to a fence and you needed the right kind of contacts for that kind of thing. You couldn't mug someone off in Cash Converters with some stolen heirloom; they weren't that fucking clueless.

He tried hunching himself into a foetal position, closed his eyes and tried to count backwards from a thousand. He so needed to sleep; he couldn't function without getting any rest. Why couldn't he just drop off? Back to the counting... nine-hundred-and-eighty-one, nine-hundred-and-eighty... then after a minute or two he thought he heard something. Footsteps. A door being swung open. Fuck! Terry still had the key. He'd said he'd be in touch. What if he was trying to catch him having a kip? What if he suddenly wanted to have a chat about the money?

He got up, switched on the light again and tiptoed out to the hall but there was no-one there. Only the sound of the TV being turned off in the neighbouring flat.

He paced around the lounge for a bit considering whether to roll another joint then went into the kitchen and stared vacantly into an empty fridge. He needed something to take his mind off things. Any distraction would do. The silence of the flat was too much. It was driving him mental.

Finally, he decided to head back to the bedroom and climb back into bed but it was the same deal. His mind wouldn't give up. It was like his brain and his body were dug in their opposing trenches fighting a futile war of attrition. He fidgeted, pushing the duvet to one side and trying various positions until he finally felt himself slipping

away.

He woke up with a start drenched in sweat. The room was dark but on the bedside table he could just make out the red glow of his digital alarm clock. It was just after two'o'clock in the morning. He'd only managed two hours sleep.

He crawled to the side of the bed, still exhausted and wiped the sweat from his face with the corner of the quilt. Although breathless he felt the sudden need to smoke to calm his nerves and groped about on the floor for his jeans. Finding them, he reached inside the pocket for his cigarettes but they weren't there. Instead there was something else amongst the loose change. He pulled it out and stared at it as his eyes adjusted to the light. It was the card the guy from the newspaper had given him.

He lay back on the bed and tried breathing deeply as the whole weight of the room seemed to press down on him. He had just a few days to get the money now. He wasn't sure it could be done but he knew one thing: he had to make sure nothing happened to Anna. In the morning, he decided, he would make the call.

CHAPTER 28: 'APHRODITE'S'

Jack glanced at Sean in the seat next to him as he pulled the car up into a quiet side street in Shoreditch. He switched the engine off and then for a moment they both stared at the entrance to the club further down the street. It was a small, discreet place with a sign, *Aphrodite's*, in curly, green, neon lettering above a set of double-doors in front of which two doorman in grey overcoats stood in the drizzle waiting for the evening's punters to arrive. He'd never done this kind of thing before, not any covert stuff, and now he felt the frisson of excitement which Rhys had once described when he'd taken part in a sting surrounding a snooker player exposed in a match-fixing scandal.

“So you're going to have this chat in the club or is he just meeting you there?”

“How should I know?” said Sean with a shrug, “I ain't even been to the place before.”

“It's just you've got to make sure it's somewhere quiet. If there's lots of background noise then we won't hear anything on the tape. Remember, the mic is taped just inside here,” said Jack, leaning over to press a finger to Sean's shirt just above the breast bone, “Anything within a meter or a meter-and-a-half should be enough.”

“You done this type of thing before then?”

Jack hesitated for a moment. He'd managed to blag the equipment from Rhys, telling him he wanted to record a meeting with a dodgy businessman involved in the refuse collection contracts

“Yeah, all the time. Don't worry... I checked all the gear earlier. You might as well switch it on now.”

Jack watched as Sean reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and clicked the red button on the small digital recorder as he'd shown him before they set off.

“Just keep him talking – that's the main thing.”

“And what about the reward? You said you'd speak to your bloke.”

Jack glanced away. The deceit still didn't sit easily with him. He could justify it to himself with Laura - it was a way of protecting her from things he reckoned she'd rather not know - but the reward...well, the reward was just part of Charlie's spin machine. In reality, the Post wasn't planning to pay out twenty grand to anyone let alone some criminal who was mixed up in all sorts. Even so, he was anxious to satisfy his own curiosity about whether the man really knew anything about whoever had been behind the shooting.

“Like I said, if we can get some evidence then we'll see what we can sort out.”

The man grunted something and then Jack watched as he stepped out on to the pavement, zipped up his bomber jacket and made his way up the street towards the entrance of the club.

As he approached the door, Sean could still feel the tingling buzz of the couple of lines of coke he'd done before he'd set out. With his chaotic sleep patterns and the anticipation of the meeting, he'd needed something to sharpen him up but right now it was only succeeding in making him feel more agitated.

“I'm here to see Terry,” he said as he approached one of the club's doormen.

The man looked at him and for a second he sensed the man was about to frisk him but then nodding he simply stepped to one side and swung open one of the heavy doors.

Inside he was met with the thumping beat of house music from the club's overbearing sound system. At the far end of the club was the empty stage area with its polished steel pole that reflected the colours of the swirling ceiling lights. On his left a couple of barmen stood behind a long bar stacking the fridges with bottled beers. It was still early – too early for the crowds of City boys who were probably still finishing up at their desks - and the place was empty except for a group of young guys in suits chatting to two blondes in gold-sequinned bikinis who giggled obligingly at their drunken conversation.

“Can I get you a drink?” said one of the barmen as Sean approached the bar.

“No, I'm here to see the manager.”

“He knows you're coming?” asked the man.

“Yeah. I got an appointment. Tell him it's Sean.”

“He's in the office right now,” said the barman pointing to a door marked 'Private' at the far end of the bar, “I'll just see if he's available.”

The man picked up a phone on the wall as Sean lingered a few feet away. Under his jacket, he could feel his shirt sticking to his sweaty back and shoulders but he couldn't risk taking the jacket off; the wire from the tiny microphone ran from under his shirt into the inside pocket where Jack had told him to hide the recording device. He needed the meeting to be in the office. If their conversation was conducted at the bar then, given what Jack had told him, he'd be lucky to pick up a single word on the tape. He was beginning to realise how risky the whole enterprise was when, glancing back at the door of the office, he could see Terry beckoning him in.

Inside the office, Terry sat down at a desk piled high with invoices.

“What's all this about then?” he asked looking up from his mountain of paperwork “You got my money for me?”

“No. I got another week, right?”

“You got five days. Why? How much you got so far?”

“I don't know,” said Sean as he wiped the sweat that was beginning to form on his brow, “About half of it, I reckon.”

He took out a tissue from the pocket of jeans and wiped his nose.

“What's up with you?”

“Yeah, got a bit of flu. That's all.”

“Well, have a sit down if you're not feeling too good.”

He felt slightly taken aback at the generosity of the offer. Sitting down in one of the chairs opposite the desk, he wondered whether Terry had calmed since their last meeting or whether he was just reassured to hear he'd be getting his money. That was thing with Terry: how quickly his mood could turn from sympathetic to psychotic.

“Look...” said Terry finally pushing the pile of invoices to one side “Like I said

before, I don't want to fall out over this. Up until now I reckoned everything was ticking along just fine but I can't have people taking fucking liberties, can I? In this game you're only as good as your name and you don't get to where I am by tolerating any piss-takers. Know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, of course."

"And don't worry about your little friend, nothing's happened to her. I told our Kosovan friends I didn't want a finger laid on her so you can take it from me that she's alright. I know it seems out-of-order but you got to see it from my point of view. I mean, you owed me so I had to take a little bit of collateral, didn't I? I mean I can't exactly have you swanning off somewhere and owing me twenty large, can I?"

Sean tried his best to squeeze a smile. If Terry was in one of his more reasonable moods then perhaps now was the time to try and get an extension on the deadline. At the very least, it would buy him some time to try to work something out.

"The thing is," he started, "I might not have all the money by Friday."

He watched nervously as Terry sunk back in his chair. He was clasping his hands again, that little habit of his that Sean had witnessed back at the Portacabin.

"I see."

"Well, I was wondering if I could get an extension?"

"An extension?"

"Yeah, just a few days... a week at most?"

Terry yawned and rolled his shoulders like a bear waking from its winter hibernation.

"Fucking hell, I must be going soft in my old age. "

Sean felt himself grasping the seat of his chair with relief. He couldn't believe Terry had rolled over so easily. It felt like his own sense of gravity had evaporated and his body felt weightless as if any second he might float away like a helium balloon.

"Yeah, alright," continued Terry, "But you'll bring what you you got so far for me on Friday and, in return this act of generosity on my part, I'll need a little favour from

you. Only fair really.”

Now he suddenly felt like he'd thumped back down to earth. His thoughts returned to the device still recording in his pocket. As Jack had told him, he needed to keep Terry talking. Without the extension, he'd need the newspaper money.

“What? You want me to help out with that other business?”

“What other business?”

“The kid. I mean Izzet's kid... the one who –”

“Yeah, I *know* the kid you mean.”

“I was just wondering if Curtis had caught up with him? You said he had to go, right? I mean... I don't mind helping out on that score.”

Terry glanced at him suspiciously.

“A bit fucking keen, ain't you?”

“No, I just got a bit of making up to do, that's all.”

Terry shook his head and then standing up walked over to a drinks cabinet at the back of the room where he reached for a crystal decanter.

“Yeah. We got a little problem there. The little prick's been nicked so it makes things complicated. The bloke who paid me to do it ain't exactly happy either as we still got this other fucking geezer sniffing about and he's got to be taken care of, ain't he?” continued Terry pouring himself a scotch, “You want a drink?”

Sean nodded then went to stand up. He needed to get closer to Terry. The mic was useless with him gassing away at the back of the room.

“It's alright, mate. You sit yourself down.”

He sat down again, frustrated as Terry poured another glass and brought them back to the table.

“Yeah, that's the trouble with all these kids today. They're all doing each other over other for peanuts and fucking postcodes. Know what I mean? It don't make any sense to me... you know, kids carrying guns as fucking fashion accessories and all that. Killing each other for street cred! What's all that about, eh? I blame the fucking parents. Everyone's gone soft on the younger generation nowadays. See, back in my

day, it was all proper professional. Clean guns and ringed motors and you had to put the graft in. Work your way up in the game. Nowadays, well, it's like fucking amateur hour, ain't it? ”

“Yeah right. So what about this Rafiq bloke? I don't get it. What's he so worried about this geezer finding out?”

“Long story,” snorted Terry, “Let's just say, our mate, Rafiq, has some friends in high places. Believe it or not, one of his best pals is –”

At that moment a scratchy ringtone interrupted the conversation.

“Sorry, mate. I got to take this,” said Terry reaching in his pocket for his phone.

Glancing at the incoming number he stood up from his chair and walked towards the far corner of the room. Sean gnawed on his thumbnail straining to overhear the conversation.

“Yeah. I'm sorting it out,” he could hear Terry whisper “I going to put my main bloke on the case. I'm talking to him about it tonight. Don't worry... it'll be taken care of but I can't talk right now. I'll give you a call back in a bit.”

Terry hung up the call and, putting the phone back in his pocket, strolled back to the desk.

“Talk of the devil. Yeah, so going back to what I was saying, I've had to make other plans and that's where you come in,” he continued, opening one of the drawers of the desk, “I reckon the time has come to deal with our Kosovan pals.”

Sean watched as Terry reached into the desk and pulled out something wrapped in a yellow cloth before placing it on the desk. As it was unwrapped, the sight of the strangely angular handgun was enough make him feel queazy.

“That's clean, is it?”

“Yeah. 'Course. Bring it back after the job's done. These Glocks ain't no two bob shooters.”

Sean hesitated for a moment before picking it up.

“What's up? You ain't got a problem with doing it?”

“No. No problem.”

His eyes stayed on Terry as he nervously picked up the handgun and stuck it in the waistband of his jeans and then zipped up his jacket.

“You see, I've set up a little business meeting with Izzet and his brother in Rainham on Sunday,” continued Terry, “On the way back, I'm planning to show them around the yard in Dagenham. It's nice and quiet there. We can kill two birds with one stone, as they say.”

“Right... and what about Anna?”

“What? Your little ladyfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you'll have the money for me by then, won't you? So our Kosovan friends will have let her go. It's all in hand, mate. Don't worry about it. Now you'll have to excuse me. I've got a few calls to make.”

Sean nodded but as he got up to leave he could feel a churning in his stomach. He'd come to the meeting half hoping for a remedy to his problems but now it seemed he was leaving with double the trouble.

Back in the car, Sean could still feel his heart racing.

“How did it go?”

“I don't know. I got him talking but I don't know if I got it all on tape.”

“What do you mean? I told you got to keep the mic close.”

“Yeah, well, it ain't that easy,” snapped Sean, “I ain't fucking Jeremy Paxman, am I? Look, let's just get the fuck out of here.”

As the key in the ignition turned and the engine started, Sean glanced back at the entrance to the club as a silver Lexus pulled up outside.

“Hold on, one sec.”

He stared at the vehicle as it came to a stop and the driver put on its hazard lights.

“What? What is it?”

“Just give us a minute.”

And then he watched as the large figure of the driver emerged from the car. It was

Curtis. He hadn't seen Curtis driving a Lexus before but somehow the car still seemed familiar. And then it dawned on him: there had been another car on that night, a silver Lexus that had nearly run him over when he'd been wrestling with Anna's brother and he'd had to lurch out of it's way to avoid being run over. It must have been Curtis behind the wheel that night. He'd followed him. That's how they'd known where to find Anna. Maybe it was him who'd set up the robbery too. After all, it was Curtis who'd had it in for him right from the start.

CHAPTER 29: 'NASTY SURPRISES'

As they sat in the car Jack pressed the headphones tight to his ears, his hand fumbling as he hit play on the digital recorder. After the seemingly endless wait in the car he was eager to hear what was on the tape but as he listened he could barely hear anything other than a couple of muffled voices overwhelmed by the sound of booming music. He hit fast-forward as out of the corner of his eye he watched his passenger scanning the car park of the housing estate where they'd pulled over to review the recording.

If the guy was genuine then he could understand him being anxious before the meeting – he'd felt anxious enough himself just waiting in the car – but now he seemed even more unsettled than when they had met earlier in the evening. He couldn't work the guy out. Earlier, when he'd tentatively broached the subject of his relationship to the man he was meeting, he'd described him as an “associate.” What did that mean? The thought had been nagging at him that the guy was simply concocting an elaborate story in the hope of somehow bagging the Post's reward. It would hardly have been the first time. Who knew what went on in the heads of these people? In journalism there was rarely a shortage of crackpots and time-wasters to deal with.

He hit play again and the background noise seemed to have disappeared. He could make out two voices, muffled but still intelligible. He listened intently as his passenger continued to fidget in the seat next to him.

“So what do you reckon?”

“I don't know,” said Jack pausing the recorder, “He's just talking about some debt you owe him. And who's this bloke Izzet he's talking about?”

“Like I told you, he's the one who paid the kid. Listen to the next bit... he says the kid's been nicked.”

Jack replaced the headphones and hit play again on the recorder. He could make out the man referring to a 'little problem' but then the sound seemed to trail off again.

There was a faint voice for a few seconds which he couldn't quite make out followed by what sounded like the clinking of glasses and then the other man's voice seemed to return again with some rant about youth delinquency. It was useless. There was nothing on the recording of any substance. Certainly nothing that Charlie would be prepared to cough-up money for and then just as he was about to switch off he caught it.

“*..our mate, Rafiq....*”

He hit stop and rewound the recording. He couldn't quite make out what was being said. What followed seemed to be distorted by some digital interference, as if a mobile phone frequency had interfered with the operation of the device.

“He mentions Rafiq,” Jack said stopping the recording “But then it's all distorted.”

“Yeah.”

“Well? What did he say?”

“I can't remember. I think he just said this Rafiq geezer has friends.... like friends in high places or something. I don't know. I don't even know who the geezer is.”

“What friends?”

“I don't know! He didn't say.”

“Did he mention someone called Piers?”

“No. I don't know. I don't think so or he didn't say 'cause his phone went off.”

He replaced the headphones and listened to the rest of the recording. There was some muffled talk about a business deal but no further mention of Rafiq and nothing that would come close to piquing Charlie's interest. The tape was worthless. He wasn't even sure that the whole episode wasn't just some sort of hoax. After all, hadn't he put the name of Rafiq to him that first time they'd met at the park?

“So what about the reward? When do you reckon you can get the money?”

The man was giving him this intense glassy stare.

“Well, there's not much there. I mean... not much to take to my editor.”

“What do you mean?”

He could sense an increasing level of agitation in the man now that was beginning to worry him. He should probably try to get rid of the guy, he decided. Even if the bloke did know something he hardly seemed a credible source.

“Listen, I'll play it to my editor tomorrow,” said Jack as he started the car's ignition, “And we'll take it from there.”

The man didn't move and then in the next moment Jack felt the man's arm pinning him tightly to the seat.

“No, you fucking listen, mate... I need that money. I did what you wanted and you told me there was a reward.”

The speed and strength of the man's reaction had caught Jack quite off guard. He felt a sudden need to try to regain command of the situation but the weight of the man's arm on his chest was almost crushing his windpipe.

“Yeah and I said I needed evidence.”

“What do you think that is?” said the man nodding at the recorder in Jack's lap, “You think I'm fucking about here? Do you even have a clue who you're dealing with?”

“Look, I'm a journalist,” said Jack, managing to slightly weaken the man's grip on him, “I can't follow a story without real any evidence.”

“A *story*? Do you think that's what I'm giving you? You think I'm fucking making this shit up?”

Jack could see flecks of spittle at the corners of the man's mouth. He seemed to have worked himself into a steaming rage, incredulous that the recording wasn't going to earn him an instant payoff.

“I'll show you what's fucking real,” snapped the man unzipping his jacket and pulling out a black handgun from the waistband of his jeans, “See from where I'm sitting you're not *following* a story any more. You're part of the fucking story. And you and me... well we're both in it.”

Instinctively, Jack lurched away at the sight of the weapon. He'd never seen a gun before. Every instinct in his body was screaming to get out of the car and run but the

weight of the man's arm and his own fear left him paralysed.

“For fuck's sake, put that thing away,” he said, gasping for air, “I believe you. Just put that fucking gun away.”

The man slid the weapon back into his jeans and pulled his arm away before rubbing his face with the palms of his hands. For a minute or so, they both sat in silence until the uneasy peace was broken by a distant police siren.

“Look,” said the man finally, “I'm sorry and all that but it's just... if I don't pay this bloke his money then...”

His voice trailed off but to Jack the inference was obvious.

“And, see, it's not just me,” he continued, gazing up at one of the towerblocks on the estate, “They got someone else. A girl I used to be with. I mean, what do you think he means when he's talking about collateral? And I don't wanna think about what they'll do to her if I don't have their money.”

The man took out a packet of cigarettes before turning to Jack.

“You mind if I smoke? I need a fag right now.”

Jack nodded. He was puzzled to find himself feeling a strange sympathy for the guy. He should have been afraid. After all, the man had just been waving a gun about for Christ's sake and yet the man's own fear was palpable enough. At work when he'd covered crime stories he'd always sided with the victims, always sticking rigidly to the line that those in the criminal fraternity were parasites, exerting control through the omnipresent threat of violence. Except that the guy sitting next to him didn't seem any more in control of events than he was. And he'd been right about what he'd said. They were both in it now. Both of them in it right up to their necks.

“So how much do you owe the owner of this club?”

“Twenty-grand,” said the man lighting a cigarette and taking a long drag, “But he's said he'll knock it down to ten if I do this job for him.”

“What job?”

“Fucking hell! Didn't you listen to the tape? He wants me to kill Izzet, doesn't he? Why the fuck do you think he gave me the gun?”

Jack felt queasy again. How could someone talk so casually about murder? Even so, he was still trying to make sense of it all.

“So how did you end up owing the money?”

“I got robbed, didn't I?”

“Robbed?”

“Look, I collect money for this bloke, Terry. The bloke who owns the club. That's one of the jobs I do for him. Collecting money from people and then when I've collected it all, I go and stash it somewhere safe.”

“What? Like a bank?”

“Not a bank. Fucking 'ell... you ever tried depositing twenty grand in cash in a fucking bank?”

“No.”

“Well, go and try it. I think you'll find you'll get a tug before you've even got out the door. I mean the source of this money... it ain't exactly legit so it goes in a safety deposit box until they launder it or whatever.”

“But aren't they suspicious if you're depositing that kind of cash?”

“No, look, they're fucking in on it, right? They've been in business for years. You pay for a box number, choose a six-digit code and that's it. No questions asked. I mean they ain't cheap but anyone who's stashing dirty cash knows SDH because they don't ask questions. ”

“SDH?”

“Safety Deposits Hampstead. That's what the place is called... Anyway, the point is I've already got a pretty good idea who nicked the money but I can't fucking prove it. That's why I need the reward the money and if I don't give him the money... well, then –”

“What do you mean they've got her?”

“They've taken her. Kidnapped her.”

“What?”

“Yeah... well, not them. The Kosovans done it for him.”

“Sorry, I'm lost... who are these Kosovans?”

“Yeah, this geezer, Izzet, and his brother are Kosovan-Albanians. Fought in some war or something... I don't know. They're holding her. I mean they're trying to get in with Terry. Maybe they did it as a favour to him. Maybe he's paying them. I don't know”

“But I thought you said he wants you to kill this Izzet guy?”

“Yeah... well, you heard it. It's on the tape, right? I mean that's the last thing he said to me.”

Jack grabbed the headphones, fast-forwarded to the end of the recording and listened again. “*I've set up a little business meeting with him and his brother in Rainham a week on Sunday*” the man was saying “*On the way back, I'm planning to show them around the yard in Dagenham. It's nice and quiet there. We can kill two birds with one stone, as they say.*” The first time he'd heard it he hadn't comprehended what the man was saying but now it was all starting to add up.

“So, you know where you can reach this Izzet guy?”

“Yeah, I heard he runs some clip joint.”

“And you know where?”

“Soho. It can't be too hard to find.”

“Play the tape to Izzet. I mean, that's your evidence. If you can convince him of what Terry's planning then why is he going to hang on to your girl?”

Jack watched as the man took a drag on his cigarette and then exhaled, his eye blinking erratically in the haze of smoke.

“Yeah... and how do I know he'll believe me?”

“Well, you convinced me, didn't you?”

“I suppose,” said the man chewing the tip of his thumbnail, “Yeah.... I mean I ain't exactly got much to lose, have I?”

“I would think not.”

“Do us a favour then... drive us up the West End.”

“Us?”

“Well, it's your thing, ain't it? The recorder, I mean.”

Jack bristled at the idea. Did the man really expect him to sit down at a meeting with the very man who only recently had plotted to have him killed? The prospect of it terrified him. And yet there was also tantalizing curiosity, a perverse desire to discover the human face behind it for himself.

“Look, I don't think... I mean... I don't really fancy the idea of—”

“No, mate, you got to be there,” said the man, his jaw quivering as he looked up at Jack with an intense, glassy stare, “You're the fucking brains, ain't you? So you're coming. End of.”

“But, according to you, this is the same person who —“

His sentence trailed off as he glanced down at the bulge in the man's jacket. From where he was sitting, Jack wasn't sure if he really had a choice in the matter.

“Yeah. Don't worry about all that, mate,” continued the man, “Like you said before, we'll do it somewhere public so there ain't gonna be any *nasty* surprises.”

CHAPTER 30 : 'THE GREEN ZONE'

The narrow streets of Soho were already cluttered with groups of noisy drinkers and couples scrambling to get to dinner reservations by the time the pair of them had managed to find a parking space. As he squeezed the handbrake, Jack could feel his palms greasy with sweat. Somehow he couldn't quite comprehend how he'd managed to get embroiled in all of this. All journalists had a relentless curiosity but then there was that other breed – war-reporters and investigative journalists - who seemed to thrive on sheer recklessness. Until now he'd taken a dim view of such behaviour but here he was in the company of an armed criminal and about to attempt to cut a deal with a Kosovan gangster. This wasn't just beyond his comfort-zone, this felt more like being in Baghdad's Green Zone with a thousand angry insurgents massing just beyond its perimeter walls.

“So how are going to work this?” asked Jack.

“Well, we got to find the place first. I reckon it's somewhere around Brewer Street. That's where all those strip joints are, right?”

“Yeah. It's on a street round the corner from The Windmill.”

“What? You mean you've been there before?”

Sean looked perplexed.

“Not exactly.”

“Right, well, let's go then.”

“I'm not going in there.”

“What? For fuck's sake I thought we agreed—”

“Look, I'll wait outside. If your man is there we'll go somewhere else. One of those cafés on Greek Street. I reckon we'll be safe enough there.”

Sean grumbled but Jack remained adamant. There was no need for another run in with the strip joint's security, he'd decided. It was just too risky that they'd recognise him from the previous fiasco.

Five minutes later he watched from a distance as Sean chatted to the same scrawny girl who worked the door and then proceeded inside through the cheap ribboned curtain. There was a sharp coldness in the night air. He stood shivering from across the street as a couple of drunken guys in football shirts passed, slurring obscenities at each other. He was fighting the growing urge to go back to the car and get the hell out of Soho, convinced that any moment events would take a seriously nasty turn, when he saw Sean emerge from the door with a heavy-set man in a sheepskin coat. They were heading towards him, walking with a purposeful stride.

“Izzet, this is the bloke I told you about,” said Sean, “He's got something we reckon you'll be interested in.”

The man said nothing but just glanced at him blankly and nodded. There was a relief that neither of them appeared to recognize each other but Jack resisted the temptation to make eye contact. Even so, he couldn't help but notice the outline of a long purple scar at the base of the man's neck.

“Let's take a walk, yeah?” continued Sean, “We'll go Bar Italia and I'll show you what I'm talking about.”

Jack brought over a couple of coffees from the counter as Izzet and Sean took a small table right at the back of the coffee bar. He still hadn't heard the man say anything. It hasn't escaped Jack's attention how apprehensive Sean was looking, nervously rubbing his nose with the back of his hand as they waited at the table. If he was nervous and he had a gun concealed on him then what did that mean for their chances of cutting a deal with this Balkan psychopath. Meanwhile, the café's other patrons were happily chatting and enjoying their lattes completely ignorant of the showdown taking place in their midst.

“Give him the thing then,” said Sean as Jack placed the coffees on the table.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the recorder along with the earbuds still tangled around its case. The Kosovan snatched it out of his hands and pushed one of

the buds into his ear and then switched on the device.

The period that followed felt like an eternity. He tried taking a sip from his coffee but his hand was quivering so much that the cup rattled against the saucer forcing a look of irritation from the Kosovan who was straining to listen to the recording.

“What it means *kill birds with stone?*” said the man stopping the tape.

Sean glanced at Jack.

“Erm, well, it means...” said Jack, his voice struggling to compose an answer, “It means when you sort out two problems at the same time but I think... well, I think he might mean it in a more literal sense.”

“But two problems?”

“He means gonna do you *and* your brother,” added Sean.

The Kosovan cleared his throat with with a grunt. There seemed to an anger burning in his eyes now that was making Jack feel increasingly uncomfortable.

“I think Terry not know you are here. So why you tell me this? I thought you work for Terry,” he said turning to Sean.

“Yeah, well, let's say we had a bit of business dispute.”

“Really? Or maybe you try to trick me, no?”

Jack flinched. The Kosovan wasn't buying it. Perhaps he even thought the pair of them were trying to set him up. He glanced nervously at Sean as if to cajole him into getting a little more persuasive.

“Look, you heard the tape. He tells me he wants me to sort you out, right? And then he gives me something. You wanna see what he gave me?”

Before Jack could even stop him Sean stood up and unzipped his jacket with his back to the rest of the bar. Jack and the Kosovan both stared warily at the black handle of the Glock that protruded from the waistband of the the man's jeans.

“I don't think he gave me that to go fucking pigeon-shooting, do you?”

“I see,” said the man and took a slow sip of espresso.

“You know, I think Terry and I do good business together,” he continued, gently putting the cup down, “But I hear many bad things about your boss. I hear he is not to

be trusted. Not a man of honour. Maybe this time he need a lesson from us in how we do business.”

“I just thought you should know, Izzet. Maybe you need to do a little bit of preparation before you turn up to this meeting on Sunday.”

“Yes. Maybe you are right. So then.... tell me, why you come to *me* with this?”

“Well, you're holding the girl for him, aren't you?”

“What girl? I don't know what you talk about.”

Sean snorted and surged across the table almost spilling Jack's coffee.

“Don't fuck me about, Izzet. Remember, If I wanted to I could do you right now.”

The man nodded and licked his chapped lips seemingly unconcerned by the threat.

“You tell me the truth and I tell you the truth. I not know about this girl you talk about. We are not holding her. If I have I would tell you.”

Sean turned to Jack with a crushed expression. Their trip to Soho had clearly been a wasted journey.

“Listen,” said Izzet after a few moments' thought, “This money you owe. How much you need?”

“What? How much do I owe Terry?”

The Kosovan nodded.

“Yes.”

“Twenty grand. Ball-park figure.”

“Okay.... so if what you say true then I lend you money. You pay Terry and he give you your girl. This way he suspect nothing. I give you whole year to pay me back. And if what you say is not true then I will find you and, believe me, you will have way more than money to worry about, my friend.”

“Yeah but I need it by tomorrow.”

“No problem. You tell me place. I send my brother with it.”

Sean nodded and went off to the counter to borrow a pen from one of the barristas as Jack sat alone at the table with the Kosovan. His enormous sense of relief at Sean's

remarkable turnaround, however, was still outweighed by the thought that, only weeks ago, the man sitting next to him had ordered an attempt of his life. An attempt which had only just narrowly failed.

“Is nice, no?” said the man after a few moments of quiet reflection.

“I'm sorry?”

For the first time, their eyes met across the table.

“The café,” replied the Kosovan with a nicotine-stained smile “Is nice. Good coffee. I think most coffee in London very bad, no?”

Jack nodded. His evening was beginning to take on a slightly surreal quality.

In the car on the way back, with the evening breeze blowing through the open window, there was an unspoken elation between the pair that their audacious poker move had paid off. Even in retrospect, it still seemed an incredible feat they'd achieved and, for Jack, no small relief that the two of them could finally part company.

“There's something I should tell you,” said Sean, his tone serious as he slipped another cigarette out of the packet..

“What's that?”

“The bit on the tape.. the bit that didn't come out properly.”

“Yeah? What about it?”

“He's was talking about you. They haven't given up on sorting you out.”

The shock of the disclosure caused Jack to momentarily lose his concentration. The car swerved across the road narrowly missing a black taxi which screeched its horn in anger.

“Cool it! I'm not saying tonight but they won't just give up. You should get away for a bit. Maybe even ask the Old Bill for a bit protection if you think you can get it.”

“Right,” said Jack trying to refocus on the road ahead. He'd suspected that whoever it was who had tried to have him killed that evening hadn't just given up on the plan but hearing it confirmed from another mouth only made the threat all the

more tangible. It was sensible advice too. He needed get himself and Laura out of London whilst he formulated some sort of plan, he decided.

”And what about your thing?” he asked, “You reckon it's all sorted now?”

Jack glanced at Sean lighting a cigarette in the seat next to him.

“Well, put it this way... things look a little bit better than they did this morning.”

“So what will happen at this meeting?”

“Fuck knows.”

“And what about Izzet and his brother?”

“What about him?”

“You said they fought in Kosovo?”

“Yeah.”

“What? In the KLA?”

“Yeah, something like that. I dunno. Not really interested in all that bollocks.”

He was trying to make a mental note of it all. If he needed to go the police then he wanted to know as much as possible about whoever he was dealing with.

“And what about Terry? What does he do apart from running this club?”

“He's got other businesses. Legit stuff but he's big on the brothels and saunas. Serious money in all that these days.”

“And drugs?”

“Nah, too risky these days, he reckons. Besides, he made a killing out of all that in the nineties bringing in big shipments of pills from Holland. If you went to a rave back then there's a pretty good chance that it was Terry's gear doing the rounds. That's how he really got into the big time.”

Jack's mind drifted back to the news cutting he'd found about Khouri and the offshore company and suddenly something sparked inside his head. *That's how the two men knew each other.* Khouri was the money man. After all, Terry would have needed a conduit, someone smart enough and capable enough of laundering such piles of dirty cash. If that was indeed how Khouri had *worked his way up in the world*, now it all made perfect sense.

“Did he ever mention a woman by the name of Linda?”

“Nah.”

“You're sure?”

“Never heard of her. I mean he doesn't really trust birds. His own missus topped herself. Well, I mean you would if you were married to that psycho, wouldn't you?”

As he pulled up at the junction with Farringdon Road, he was still trying to think what he could say to the police, how he could convince them the threat was genuine and ongoing. After all the detective were still working on the assumption the shooting was a case of mistaken identity and despite everything he still couldn't connect Khouri, Terry and Linda. Whatever he told them would sound like the ramblings of a fantasist.

“You can drop me anywhere round here,” said Sean

As the lights changed Jack crossed the junction and pulled up in a quiet side street opposite.

“Do me one favour then before you go.”

“What's that?” said Sean flicking his finished cigarette out of the window.

“You've got Terry's number, haven't you?”

“You 'aving a laugh? What you gonna do? Call him up for a chat?”

“Look, just do it for me. It's not like he'll know where I got it and don't worry... I'm not going to phone him up.”

“So why have it then?”

“Just leave that to me.”

Sean chewed his lower lip, apparently confused by the request.

“Alright,” he said picking up a notebook and pen that lay next to the dashboard, “I'll give it to you. I'll write my number down here too. You're still going to chat to your boss about this reward thing, ain't you?”

“Yeah. I'll have a word but, like I said, I'm not promising anything.”

He watched as Sean flipped through the contacts section of his phone and then scribbled down the number.

“Well, be lucky,” he said as he climbed out of the passenger side and slammed the door behind him, “I'd keep my head down if I was you.”

As Jack watched the man disappear around the corner, the realisation that he was alone again started to sink in. Together, the pair of them had struck up an unlikely and not unsuccessful partnership. The guy was smarter than he'd initially given him credit for and not even without a degree of charisma but what haunted him was the man's parting words, the fear that somewhere out in the city streets the man's so-called associates were making other plans. He needed a bolthole, he'd decided. He needed to get him and Laura out of London until he knew they were both safe but how he was going to do that without telling her the real story he still hadn't quite worked out.

CHAPTER 31: 'HACKED OFF'

Around lunchtime the next day, Jack was sitting on the couch in Rhys' lounge staring at a mound of discarded take-away cartons, crumpled Coke cans and empty Marlboro packets piled up on the coffee table. Perched on the arm of the sofa, was an overflowing ashtray and with its curtains drawn the room was a haze of cigarette smoke that hung in the air like a grey, toxic fog.

He could hear Rhys' voice from the kitchen as he set about making tea.

“Sorry about the mess, mate. The cleaner was supposed to come today but I told her not to bother. I'll suppose I'll have to tell her the bad news at some point.”

As Rhys returned, still in his dressing gown and holding two mugs of tea, Jack glanced at television where the BBC News channel was on mute. The programme cut to a shot of the offices of the Sunday Exclusive as a group of men with bowed heads carrying cardboard boxes trooped out of the building's entrance like a funeral procession. He reached for the remote control and turned up the volume.

Police enquiries continue today at The Sunday Exclusive into allegations of alleged phone-hacking. Officers from the Metropolitan Police's Operation Weeting are believed to have met with the tabloid's senior management who have offered their full co-operation in an attempt to stem growing speculation that illegal practices were rife at the paper. It is understood that the paper's Showbusiness Correspondent has now been suspended although a police spokesman stressed that allegations may extend to previous employees of the paper and that a full-investigation will take several months to complete. This morning documents and computers were removed for forensic examination although no arrests have been at this stage.

“Turn it off, Jack. I'm fucking sick of it already.”

He reached for the control and they sat in a gloomy silence as Rhys lit a cigarette. The grin and the swagger of the old Rhys had disappeared and the man who had replaced him seemed a morose, lonely figure living in the self-imposed exile of his Wapping loft while the world outside conspired against him.

“Well,” Jack said eventually, “This enquiry thing... it could take months and you never know – I mean it might still all come to nothing.”

“Come off it! You know as well as I do that there's no stopping this train. There's a massive damage limitation exercise in full swing down there. Everyone's fucking paranoid. The fuckers have hung me out to dry.”

“Yes but –”

“No. Don't try to sugar-coat it. I know it's going to be bad, Jack. The only question now is *how* bad.”

Jack wanted to offer some faint flicker of hope but he suspected Rhys was right and speculating about worst case scenarios wasn't going to help. They both knew what that really entailed: arrest and a possible criminal trial. He could barely imagine Rhys in the dock, the one time rising star of the Exclusive now having to defend himself against allegations from the very executives who had once heaped praise upon him. And if he was convicted could he really cope cooped up amongst the burglars and rapists and shaved-head thugs? He tried to picture it: Rhys being led down from the dock to a waiting cell leaving the tattered remnants of a career that he himself had once secretly envied.

“Have you spoken to anyone else? What about Adele?”

“Adele? Are you joking? None of them are even returning my calls. I'm dead and buried to that lot,” replied Rhys taking a long drag on his cigarette.

Jack's thoughts turned to the scrap of paper from the previous night that he'd kept in his wallet.

“So what about this investigator you used?”

“His phone's already been disconnected. I wouldn't be surprised if he's *helping police with their enquiries* as we speak. He's in it right up to his neck, isn't he? If he co-operates now he can probably chip a bit off his sentence.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” said Jack sweeping away a cloud of cigarette smoke that was swirling around him, “So how does it work then?”

“What? The police enquiry?”

“No. I meant how did this bloke do the phone-hacking. You know... did he use some sort of special equipment?”

Rhys flashed him a look of suspicion.

“Why do you want to know?”

“I don't know. Just curious, I suppose.”

“Well, I never did it myself but apparently it's not exactly tricky. Your voicemail is protected by a PIN but someone figured out that most people never bother changing it so it's just the factory setting. Like '0000' or something. You just call up the person to keep the line engaged – say you're from the phone company or whatever and say you want to offer them an upgrade – and then while that number's engaged you call them again on another line get through to their voicemail, enter the PIN and bingo! You're in.”

“You mean, that's it?”

“Yeah. It's not exactly fucking rocket science. It's just most people never *know* to change their PIN, do they? Sloppy really.”

Jack was taken aback at the simplicity of it. If it was that easy perhaps he could try it out himself. Perhaps he wouldn't even need this investigator after all and maybe that was just as well if Rhys was right and the guy had gone to ground or was helping the police. He'd decided he needed to access to Terry's voicemail if he had any chance of discovering details of the plot against him. It was perhaps the only small advantage he had.

“I mean they're going on all the time about 'hacking',” continued Rhys, “It makes it sound like I was breaking into the fucking Pentagon. The fact is... well, the door was wide-open. I mean... if you left your front-door open and someone walks into your house then would you call them a burglar?”

Jack shrugged. He was barely listening.

“Well, would you?”

“Would I what?”

“Fucking hell, Jack. I thought you'd come round to offer me a bit of support.”

“Yeah. Sorry, it's just that I've just remembered something. I've really got to make a move actually.”

He watched as Rhys' expression changed from one of annoyance to open-mouthed confusion.

“What? But you only got here five minutes ago and I've just made us both a cuppa.”

“No. Seriously, I've got to get going,” said Jack, reaching for his work bag, “Look, just try to stay positive, mate. And maybe clean this place up a bit... it might help you feel a bit better about things.”

Down on the ground floor, Jack had just opened the entrance door to the apartment block when he noticed a tall woman in a beige raincoat who was standing on the other side staring at the buttons to the intercom.

“Oh,” she said, turning to greet him with a smile, “Do you live here?”

“No. I was just visiting someone.”

“I see. I'm looking for Rhys Evans,” said the woman, placing her hand softly on his arm, “You wouldn't happen to know which apartment number he lives in? I need to speak to him. It's rather urgent.... a family matter.”

He smiled back and noticed a slight raise of her eyebrows, a small involuntary gesture of expectation as if she was confident such flirtation would glean her what she wanted.

“No, sorry. Never heard of the bloke.”

Her smile vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared and as he walked away, he looked back to see the woman anxiously chatting into her mobile phone. He knew she would be just the first in a series of hack-desperados determined to scoop an interview with the culprit at the centre of the Exclusive's legal woes. How strange it seemed for Rhys to be on the other side of the great game – playing the part of the pursued rather than the pursuer. He had been right about one thing though: the

vultures were already circling and this time it was Rhys' carcass that was providing the feast.

As he reached the high road, he paused outside a run-down looking internet café where through the front window he could see a kid in a baseball cap sitting, watching what looked like a rap video on YouTube. At the back of the shop there were a couple of cubicles for making phone calls and next to them a fat Somali-looking man who sat at the counter reading a magazine. Jack took out of his wallet to retrieve the scrap of paper with the number and was about to enter when he noticed a video camera pointed at the entrance fixed to the ceiling just above the man's head. At the last moment, he decided against it. If was going to make the call it needed to be somewhere more anonymous, a phone that couldn't easily be traced.

He hurried along the street, past a gang of youths in baggy jeans hanging around outside a fried chicken shop and then on the corner spotted a phone box covered in bright-green graffiti. He opened the door, picked up the receiver half-expecting it to be out of order and was surprised to hear a dial tone then, rooting around in his pocket for some change, inserted a handful of coins.

Placing the scrap of paper on the ledge of the phone box he waited for the call to connect, all the time trying to rehearse the script he'd concocted in his head, and almost immediately a gruff voice at the other end answered.

“Hi there,” he said, tried to imitate the fake *bon homie* of a salesman's patter, “I'm calling from your mobile phone provider. As a valued customer, I'm calling you today to offer you a very special upgrade.”

“Nah. I'm fine with the phone I got.”

The man's curtness had caught him off-guard and he could immediately sense his opportunity slipping away.

“I know you're busy,” he stammered, no longer quite sure where he was going with his pitch, “It's just this is a quite a special deal.”

“I've told you already. Not interested, mate.”

“Look, just gimme a second,” he said, doing his best to imitate a broad Essex accent, “I’ll level with you, mate. The fact is I’ve got to meet my target today or I’m out on my arse. Now I shouldn’t really be saying this to you but I can see you’re a good customer and let’s just say there’s a few little fiddles I can do with the system here to offer you the kind of deal we wouldn’t normally offer to our customer if you were willing to renew today for another twelve months.”

“Like what?”

“Well, the contract is on a new iPhone and let’s just say it has occasionally been known for customers to be accidentally dispatched two phones if you get where I’m coming from. Now my supervisor has just gone to lunch so I don’t know... maybe you have a son or daughter whose been nagging you for a new phone or maybe you could flog it to someone. I mean they ain’t cheap these iPhones and as I’ve been left in charge of the paperwork.”

“Oh right. Well...”

“And what about if I throw in three months’ free line rental to sweeten the deal,” continued Jack, reaching in his pocket for his mobile phone.

“And these are new phones, are they?”

“Yeah, mate. All brand new.”

“Alright.”

“Nice one. Now let me just put you on hold while I pull up your details. The system here is running a bit slow today so just bear with me for a minute.”

Jack cupped the mouthpiece of the phone tightly and then on his mobile called the number written on the scrap of paper. As the call connected, it went straight through to voicemail. He reached for the zero button, pressing it four times and waited nervously. Nothing. Finally, he tried pressing the hash button and then he felt his heart skip as a robotic-sounding voice announced: “You have two messages. Press one to review your messages.”

He unclasped the clammy mouthpiece of the payphone.

“Sorry about this. As I said, our system is really slow today.”

“Yeah, well, fucking hurry it up, will you? I ain't got all day.”

“Yes. Promise I won't keep you much longer, mate.”

He pressed his palm back over the payphone's mouthpiece and then pressing one on his mobile phone listened intently.

It was a deep voice at the other end and he could hear the sound of a car engine in the background.

“Terry, it's me. I've got her. She's up at the place in Hornsey. Don't worry she ain't going nowhere. And I got the thing done too. I'll drop the phone down to you a bit later before loverboy shows up.”

He guessed it was the girl Sean had mentioned. He was sure of it. He skipped on to the next message and again it was same baritone voice.

“Tel, I'm down in Forest Hill down on Averley Crescent. It's ten'o'clock now and looks like it ain't happening tonight. I've seen his missus come home but no sign of our bloke.”

The words sent a cold shiver down Jack's spine as he continued to listen.

“I reckon we give it another go at the weekend,” continued the voice, “Try and catch him leaving the house on Saturday. Anyway, I'll catch up with you at the club tomorrow.”

The mention of his own address paralysed him and as his grip weakened the payphone receiver slipped out of his hand and clattered against the wall of the phone box.

As he pushed open the door of the phonebox and stared out down the road he was still trying to comprehend what he'd just heard. In the distance, he could see the skyline of Canary Wharf shrouded in a haze of fog. The glimmering towers looked like obelisks belonging to a fantasy dreamscape, monuments to an alien god. Even now his predicament seemed scarcely believable and yet the man's words still rung fresh in his ears. They hadn't given up. They were plotting his murder for the very next day. He and Laura needed to get out of London, he decided, and they needed to leave tonight.

CHAPTER 32: 'PAYBACK'

In the afternoon, Sean was in the lounge of his apartment counting the wads of twenty pound notes that Izzet's brother had delivered to him that morning. It was a relief to feel the weight of the money, as he bundled it up into thousands and dumped them into an old duffel bag. Of course, there was still the meet on Sunday with Terry and the Kosovans to deal with but he'd bought himself forty-eight hours and for now it felt like he'd been granted a last minute stay of execution.

He'd already counted out about five grand when the mobile in his pocket started buzzing. He took it out and stared at the number. It wasn't a number he recognised and he hesitated for a moment before deciding to pick up the call.

“Sean, it's Jack.”

The voice at the other end sounded shaken and he was out on the street by the sound of it.

“You alright?”

“Look, I'm taking your advice. I'm getting out of town for a few days. Did you get your money?”

“Yeah. I'm counting it out now.”

“Good. It's just....”

“What? Spit it out, will you?”

“Well, there was a message on Terry's phone.”

“What? You got into Terry's phone? You crafty cunt. How did you –”

“Yeah, I'm not going into all that. I haven't got time. But there were a couple of messages. Both from the same guy. And you're right. They know my address. That's why I've decided I got to get away tonight.”

“I told you to keep your head down. Look, go to the Old Bill if you have to. Just keep me out the frame.”

“I'm not sure about going to the police right now.”

“Maybe you're right there. Terry's got a few bent coppers on the firm. If you

report it then report it out of London. I wouldn't trust any of these plods in the Met.”

“The other thing is that there was a second message... it mentioned a girl and a video they'd taken.”

Sean suddenly put down the bundle of notes and listened intently.

“The message said something about a place in Hornsey. I presume that's where they're keeping her.”

“Who left the message? I mean.. what did he sound like?”

“It didn't say but the guy had a really deep voice and a thick east London accent.”

It was Curtis. It had to be. It all made sense now. Curtis had taken her. After all, he'd known where she was. And Terry must have been in on it too. Anna had just been a pawn in their bigger game. It had never been about the money. They were just using him to get Izzet out the way and after that they'd probably planned to dispose of him. After all, that was the way Terry liked things – no loose ends. The thought of his own naivety now infuriated him. All that bullshit about being a valuable member of the firm. How could he have not seen that he'd been played for a mug all along?

“You still there?”

“Yeah.”

”Look, don't do anything silly.”

“No, no, 'course not. Look, I gotta go. Cheers for the call.”

He hung up the phone and stared down at the table. The Glock was still sitting there from where he'd left it the previous night. He shovelled the rest of the money into the bag then picked up the gun and pushed it into the waistband of his jeans before pulling on his bomber jacket and zipping it up. He thought for a moment about hiding the cash in the flat but at the last moment decided against it. Wherever he was going now he didn't intend letting that money out of his sight.

The minicab pulled up on a stretch of Hornsey Road just opposite a kebab shop as Sean held his hand to his jacket, feeling the hard outline of the pistol under the lining. Peering out on the street, he grabbed the duffel bag which lay on the back seat next to

him and pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his face as the minicab driver glanced in the rear-view mirror.

“That's twelve pounds.”

He pulled a crumpled twenty out of his back pocket and handed it to the driver, a stout West African bloke with scarred cheeks.

“Keep the change, mate.”

“You sure?” said the man, his dark eyes looking at him quizzically.

“Yeah. Don't worry about it. We did that stop at the hardware shop, didn't we?”

Walking down the main road he kept close to the shop windows, trying to keep out of the view of a CCTV camera he'd spotted mounted on a lamppost. For mid-afternoon there were few people about on the High Road. When he reached the corner, he checked further down the street before making the turn. It was deserted apart from a delivery van pulling away from the kerbside.

Reaching the house, he slung the duffel bag over his shoulder then rang on the bell and stepped to the side of the front door with his back against the pebble-dashed exterior. Within a few seconds he could make out footsteps in the hallway as he unzipped his jacket and – heart thumping in his chest - pulled out the Glock, keeping the weapon pressed hard against his stomach.

As the door opened he could just make out the woman's foot as she leaned to peer outside. In a split second, he turned on his heel, thrust the gun hard into the woman's belly and clamped his other hand over her mouth before forcing her back into the hallway and kicking the door shut with the sole of his trainer. She looked stunned, the colour bleached from her face as her pupils bulged like a terrified rodent. They struggled in the hallway for a few seconds, her round glasses dropping onto the carpet and getting crushed underfoot as he forced her further down the passage.

Inside the kitchen a mug of tea sat on the sideboard next to a steaming teabag and a pile of crumpled twenty pound notes. He released his hand and shoved the woman down on to a stool then put his finger over his lip, gesturing for her to remain silent.

“It weren't my idea! You got to believe me,” she sobbed.

Pointing the gun at her head she fell silent again, her body trembling as he reached into the duffel bag and pulled out a roll of gaffer tape.

“Listen to me, I got a daughter. Don't do anything –“

He ripped a strip of tape from the roll and pressed it over the woman's mouth, checking to make sure her nostrils were still clear then quickly taped her hands together behind her back. She was hyperventilating, snorting and exhaling huge gasps of air as he picked up the pile of cash and dumped it into the duffel bag and then, pointing the gun at the stool, gestured for her to stay as he turned and crept back down the hallway.

At the bottom of the stairs, he paused to peer up to the landing above. He had to be careful now. He had no idea about the layout of the place upstairs but he could just about make out a couple of faint female voices and the sound of a television from a room directly above him. Holding his breath he started to tiptoe up the staircase stopping only momentarily as the old timber creaked under his weight.

At the top of the stairs, the door to an empty bathroom was open and from further along the landing were the doors to what he guessed were the bedrooms. One of them was slightly ajar and he could just make out the sound of women's voices talking in a foreign language over the noise of a television. Calmly, he crept along the landing and then burst open the door with a huge lunging kick.

Inside, two teenage girls dressed only in their bras and knickers scrambled away in terror. They were screaming as he entered, both of them huddling on a dirty grey sofa at the far end of the room.

“Where is she?” he said, pointing the gun at elder of the two, “Where's the girl?”

They were still cowering at the end of the sofa, their young faces twisted in expressions of astonished terror. He repeated the question but the elder girl shook her head whilst the younger of two started wailing hysterically.

“There's another girl. Here! In the house. Where the fuck is she?”

The elder of the two stood up and gestured frantically to the next room.

“Stay here and don't fucking move! You understand?”

They both nodded as they crawled into the corner of the sofa, the younger of the two curling herself into a ball as Sean walked back out on to the landing. The door to the next room was closed but the key had been left in the lock. He stepped to the side of the door, turned the key then burst into the room with his finger on the trigger of the Glock ready to blast anyone who might be waiting to ambush him. To his surprise, however, the room was almost empty. Even the carpet had been pulled up to expose the rotting floorboards, and newspaper had been stuck over the windows to prevent anyone from the opposite houses being able to see in. He recognised the place immediately from the video that Terry had shown him and there, in the far corner of the room was Anna sitting in a chair, her hands bound to the back of the seat with electrical cabling and a thick strip of masking tape over her mouth. She was staring at him, tears streaming from her dark, sunken eyes as he rushed over and his fingers began manically working the knotted cables.

It took him a couple of minutes to untie her and then he gently began to peel away the masking tape from her quivering lips. She looked haggard and pitiful as she stared back at him, her gaunt face was stained with tears and her skin so pale he could almost make out the spider's web of capillaries below the surface. The burden of his own guilt seemed to weigh heavy in the space between them and for a moment they shared a glance that seemed to crush him.

“I'm so sorry, babe. You know I would never..” he started to say but then realised he had no idea how to finish the sentence and as he said it something inside her seemed to break and she started sobbing uncontrollably, her whole body convulsing with grief.

He wanted to hold her. He wanted to squeeze her hand and tell her that everything was going to be alright but he couldn't because he knew now *he* had brought her to this. Just his association with her, that single act of talking to her that day in the pub when they'd first met, had been enough to bring her to this. There was no one else left to blame. It was undeniable. His very being was what corroded the lives of all others

that it touched.

He barely had time to take in the situation when from the street outside, he could hear a car engine and, as he grabbed the duffel bag and slung it over his shoulder, there was the sound of footsteps on the pavement and the front gate opening. He stared back at Anna pressing his finger to his lip as he heard a key being turned in the lock of the front door.

Taking her arm, he lifted her to her feet and then they crept both crept along the landing as from below he could hear the baritone growl of Curtis' voice.

“What the fuck...”

At the top of the staircase, with Anna crouching at his side, he lined up the Glock as he could just make out the shape of Curtis' huge shaved head moving out of the kitchen and down the hallway. As he came into full view at the foot of the stairs, the two of them stared at each other for a split second before he squeezed the trigger of the pistol which fired with such recoil that it felt like it shook the entire house. There was a scream from the room where the two girls had been and then he watched as Curtis' huge frame stumbled backwards crashing against the frosted glass of the front door. From where they huddled, he peered down the stairs at the body but from his vantage point could only make out the tip of a foot still twitching.

He stood up, pulling Anna up with him, then grabbed the duffel bag and frantically made his way down the stairs. His eyes were still fixed on Curtis' foot which became a whole leg and torso as he reached halfway down the staircase. Someone in the street was probably dialing 999 at that very instant, he thought, and he knew it would be a matter of minutes before the police arrived. They needed to get out. They needed to get as far away from the house as possible. And then just as he was thinking it, there was a sudden white flash and a burning sensation between his thigh and stomach and an intense ringing in his ears. He staggered against the wall and fell a couple of steps landing on his back and then as he looked down he could see a red patch forming on his jeans and it seemed like minutes before it dawned on him that it was his own blood seeping across the denim.

Almost by reflex he grabbed for the Glock fired two jerky shots at what he could make out of Curtis' body until finally it just lay there limp and lifeless. The shock and confusion of it all seemed to take his mind off his own wound for a moment and, with the whiff of cordite still heavy in the air, he stared for a second at Curtis' body. And then at that moment, his leg seemed to give way and he slid further against the wall before tumbling down the remaining stairs.

Anna was in front of him now and she was saying something to him that he couldn't quite hear. He felt cold. He'd never felt so freezing in his entire life. Not even that winter as a child when he'd locked himself out of the flat while his Mum was at the shops and it had started snowing and he only had a t-shirt and jogging bottoms on. He tried to get up but he didn't have energy. It felt like something strange was happening, like everything was becoming blurred and he struggled to keep his eyes open. He felt giddy, a sort of motion sickness like he'd felt as a child when he'd been on the Waltzer at Mile End Park fair. He wanted to say something. He wanted to talk to Anna. He wanted to tell her it would be alright now but somehow he couldn't do it. He seemed to have lost the ability to make the words. He only just managed to pick up the duffel bag beside him, exhausting the final bit of strength in himself, and pushed it towards her. He wanted her to take it but she was crying again. She was saying something, her arm tight around his shoulder, but it was no good. He was too tired. His eyelids felt so heavy and now he pictured Geoff smiling to himself as he made his final move on the chessboard. It felt so good as he finally let his eyes close. It was all over now. Endgame. And he was starting a new journey, a journey to somewhere beyond the stars and, at last, it felt like the weight of the world had been left behind him.

CHAPTER 33: 'IVORY TOWERS'

They had spent the best part of that Sunday morning looking around the Ashmolean in Oxford and by midday Jack had already exhausted all interest in the museum's archaeological collection. Finally, he managed to coax Laura into the adjoining café where a number of couples with toddlers were trying to organise a noisy lunch and a few nervous-looking undergraduates sat at tables discussing their impending exams.

“So, this is nice,” said Laura as Jack returned to the table with a tray holding two small pots of teas, “Is it just me or do I detect that you're trying to make more of an effort?”

“Well, I just thought it would be nice to get away. It's good to get out of London sometimes, I reckon.”

“No, definitely. You know... I could live out here. It's seems so refined compared to South London. I'm sure there's a local paper around here where you could get work. Don't you think?”

“Maybe. Mind you, a lot of these local papers are folding. I can't really see them wanting to take on more staff.”

“Not even a *veteran* like yourself?” replied Laura with a coy smile.

“Are you taking the piss now?”

“No, of course not! I think it's sweet that you booked this for us and that you kept it as a surprise. In fact, I never knew you were so good at keeping secrets.”

He sipped his tea and tried hard not to think about the real reason he had decided to get them away. He would have to tell her at some point. He knew that. It was just about finding the right time and the right words. Laura wasn't unreasonable but he knew the first thing she would ask him is how long it had all been going on and if he was going to lie about that then he should get his story straight in his head now or she'd slowly pick it apart. She had a knack for that; for homing on the little inconsistencies and sniffing out his deceit like one of those dogs at the airports

trained to uncover contraband.

“This afternoon we should visit some of the colleges,” she said leafing through a small book on the university which she had bought from the museum's giftshop, “I'd like to see New College and Christ Church is supposed to be amazing. Isn't that the one that's in *Brideshead Revisited*?”

“Yeah, I think so. To be honest, it's ages since I read it.”

“I'm surprised we've never thought of coming here before. It's only an hour on the motorway and it's so pretty, don't you think?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“What makes me laugh is how the colleges all have these really wanky Latin names. Like it says here Oriel College's proper name is 'Collegium Oriense'. I mean as if –“

He snatched the book from her and stared at the page.

“Hey! I was reading that, Jack. Don't be so rude!”

“I'm sorry,” he said glancing up to be met with a familiar glare, “I didn't mean it. Where did you see that?”

Laura pointed with the tip of her fingernail below a photo of a building with an ornate window. His eyes scanned the text: “Located in Oriel Square, the college has the distinction of being the oldest royal foundation in Oxford and was originally known by its Latin name, Collegium Oriense.”

Oriense had been the name of the offshore company that Khouri had been involved in, the company that had been investigated by the Serious Fraud Office over allegations of money-laundering. He had thought the name was of Middle Eastern extraction, possibly Lebanese, but perhaps it had been a Latin name.

“Yeah, let's go and check out this Oriel College.”

“Hang on, I've only drunk half my tea.”

“Okay but hurry up I don't know if these places close early.”

“God, you're so impulsive sometimes. One moment you want to stop looking around and have a cup of tea and then the next moment you can't wait to get out and

do some more sightseeing. Isn't there a medical term for people like you?"

After Laura had finally finished her tea they left the museum and made their way down Magdalen Street and on to Cornmarket. The streets were crowded with tourists and Jack was almost run over by a student on a bike who was forced to swerve at the final moment as he stepped out into the road in front of her.

On the High Street they asked a young man smoking a cigarette for directions to Oriel Square and he pointed them further down the street to a turning opposite a huge baroque church built in yellow sandstone.

Jack hurried them along. He could feel it again now: that pulse of a story beating somewhere out there. He'd first felt it so long ago and now it was stronger, almost begging itself to be heard. He needed to chase it. He needed to get so close that he could feel its cardiac rhythm beating alongside his own.

"I think that guy said it's in the square at the end of this road, right next to Christ Church. We could take a look in Christ Church first if you like?"

"No! No. We're going to Oriel," he snapped back.

"Jesus! Okay. Okay. What the hell's got into you?"

As they came out into the square, the elegant stone façade of the college stood in front of them. To Jack it looked almost like a Gothic castle with its ornate gables and light stone exterior. He could see now why they referred to these places as ivory towers. It seemed a world away from the modern university campus he remembered as a student.

They walked through an open wooden gate and into a quadrangle with a square of immaculate lawn with a small wooden sign at its edge warning them to stay off the grass. To his left was a doorway which led to a porter's lodge.

A man, soberly dressed in a dark suit and tie, came through the lodge door and glanced at them disapprovingly.

"I'm afraid visitors aren't allowed in term time."

“I’m sorry,” replied Jack but just past the man on the wall of the lodge he could see a number of college photographs with rows of students in gowns and white shirts lined on the steps of the college chapel, “You wouldn’t mind if we just take a look at the photographs, would you?”

“I suppose not,” said the man with an expression of mild irritation before turning and heading back into the lodge with heavy clumping footsteps.

They walked inside. Laura stared at the posters and day-glo flyers pinned to the student message board while Jack examined the college photographs.

“You worked here long then?” asked Jack to the man who was now sitting back at his desk and filling in some columns in a ledger book.

“Long? If you consider thirty years long then I suppose so.”

“Thirty years? So I suppose you’ve see a few come and go in that time?”

“Oh yeah. Must have seen a few thousand faces walk through those gates. One who’s now a member of the cabinet. A few who became writers and journalists. We’ve even had one who’s become a film director in Hollywood. You’d never have thought it too. Real quiet chap he was.”

“You don’t happen to remember a student by the name of Khouri? Rafiq Khouri?”

Laura turned and stared at Jack quizzically.

“He was Lebanese, I think,” continued Jack, “Maybe in the early nineties?”

“Yeah, the name does ring a bell. Let me have a think. Khouri...”

The man put his ledger down and waddled out from behind his desk.

“The matriculation photos from around then are up on this wall, I think,” he added pointing to the far end of the lodge.

Jack followed him and they stared at a series of college photographs. Each year’s new intake of undergraduates posed with their eager smiles, their expressions conveying a confidence about a glittering future they were assured lay ahead. He was also struck by how almost universally white the college was too. There were a handful of Asian students, a couple of young oriental women, and then as he continued to scan he finally recognised him. His build looked more slender in the

photograph but his slightly darker, olive complexion made him stand out amongst the crowd.

“That's him, isn't it?” Jack said pointing at the face.

“Oh yeah,” said the man, “Yeah I do remember him now. Friend of yours, is he?”

“Well, I've met him. More through work than socially though.”

“Yeah. I remember him, of course, because of who he was best friends with.”

“Who was that?” asked Jack trying to quell his own excitement.

The porter gestured at the figure standing next to Khouri. A tall suave-looking man with dark hair slicked back like an Italian playboy. He didn't recognise him immediately.

“He's the one I was talking about.”

“Sorry?”

“He's in the cabinet now, isn't he? That's that Henry Hunter-Goodwin. You know... the Culture Secretary?”

Jack stared at the photo again. He looked so different back then. There was a kind of swagger about him, a sly smile on his face as if he thought the camera's focus was trained almost exclusively on him.

“And they were friends you say?”

“Oh yeah. They were almost inseparable. It was as if they were joined at the hip. Of course, Harry was a bit of a handful back in those days.”

Jack could suddenly feel his heart racing. He felt as if he was on the verge of something. A breakthrough. Something in his story was surely just about to click into place.

“And there was another guy, wasn't there? Piers? Another friend of theirs?”

The porter squinted at the photo, his forehead creased as he scanned the faces again and, from the corner of his eye, Jack noticed Laura wandering towards them.

“Piers, you say? What's the surname?”

“I'm afraid I can't quite remember.”

“Hmmm,” said the porter with a frown, “Well, don't remember anyone by that

name.”

“Anything interesting, babe?” asked Laura, as she wrapped an arm around Jack's waist.

“No. Nothing really,” he replied, “Just a bunch of old college photos.”

Later that day they ate an early dinner at Le Petit Blanc restaurant on Walton Street where Laura eulogised endlessly about her mushroom risotto.

“They should open one of these in London. It would do so well. You know it's owned by that French chef.... you know the one... he's got that show on the telly.”

Jack nodded but he was barely paying attention as Laura went on to provide a comparative critique of the various cooking shows which nowadays seasoned the otherwise bland television schedules. Instead he was still thinking about the photograph. Ivan had said something about this cabinet minister when they'd chatted that evening at the pub but he couldn't quite remember now. He made a mental note to phone him on Monday. He also couldn't help but wonder how Sean's meeting with Terry and the Kosovans had gone but what was troubling him most was that he still hadn't spoken to Laura about the real reason for their visit. He'd stalled for as long as he could. He would have to break it to her that evening when they got back to the hotel. He would have to tell her that for the moment their mini-break was being extended indefinitely and yet he had no idea how financially they would manage.

“What's the matter?” asked Laura, interrupting his thoughts “You seem a million miles away. You've hardly said anything since we left that college.”

“Oh, I'm just tired that's all. I don't usually do so much walking around.”

“I know you don't. Why don't you think about signing up to a gym when we get back to London?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Or what about swimming lessons? Did I tell you that they're running an adult class at the lido by us ?”

“Swimming lessons? At my age?”

“For god's sake, Jack, there's no shame in it and it's great cardio. Why don't you at least try it?”

“Okay. Yeah... I'll have a think about it.”

He shrugged as he refilled his glass with water. He was still wondering about how he was going to tell her that there was no way they could head back to London tomorrow morning. Not until he knew for sure that they were out danger. He'd been delaying it for so long but now it was finally time to admit the whole truth.

By eight'o'clock that evening they were back at the hotel. As Laura took a shower Jack connected his laptop to the hotel's wifi network. When he finally got the connection working he started trawling Wikipedia. The entry for Henry Hunter-Goodwin appeared to have been removed so instead he searched for 'Kosovan Liberation Army' and began reading the history of the conflict.

He was intrigued to discover the KLA had been heavily involved in heroin trafficking before the war and that the US State Department had even labelled them a terrorist group. He was half-way through the article when Laura came out of the bathroom and switched on the TV and his attention was suddenly distracted by a bulletin on the evening news.

“The commissioner of the Metropolitan Police has denied that gun crime is out of control after two major firearms-related incidents in London this weekend. Two men were found shot dead in a house in north London on Saturday afternoon. The Met's specialist firearms unit, Operation Trident, have confirmed that a number of witnesses are currently helping police with their enquiries. Meanwhile, in another incident on an industrial estate in Dagenham, a local businessman was shot at the wheel of his Land Rover in what Police suspect may have been a botched gangland execution. The victim, who police have named as Terence John Francis, was taken to Homerton hospital where his injuries are described as life-threatening. So far police have refused to comment on speculation that the two incidents may be linked.”

He turned to catch the final images of the bulletin: two police-officers standing in

front of a police cordon by the entrance to what looked like an industrial estate as a car covered in a tarpaulin was loaded on to a tow truck. He felt numb just looking at it. The Kosovans, it seemed, had exacted a grisly revenge for Terry's double-crossing. Perhaps it was only surprising that they hadn't finished off the job properly. Had Sean been there too, he wondered. Maybe he'd even pulled the trigger? Maybe the ambush had not gone to plan? Whatever the case, at least with Terry in hospital, he reckoned it was safe for him and Laura to return to London. His only fear now was the slim possibility that somehow Terry would pull through.

“What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost,” said Laura.

“No,” Jack said shaking his head, “It's nothing. Just wondering about getting home. That's all.”

CHAPTER 34: 'DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER'

By mid morning on Monday Jack was wrapping up an interview at a coffee shop on Bethnal Green Road with a council administrator who had recently been sacked from her job at Tower Hamlets. He'd been put in touch with her through one of his contacts at City Hall and the woman had previously dealt with the tendering of contracts for refuse removal in the borough.

“Yeah, they say it's competitive tendering but it seemed we always chose the same company,” said the woman as she sipped from a mug of milky tea, “You know, even though other companies put in lower tenders. It didn't seem right to me. I mean why would you do that? And yet when I question it, well...”

“And can you remember the company name?” Jack asked.

“Not off the top of my head but I can find out for you.”

He was jotting down some notes in his notebook when his mobile phone rang with a withheld number. He guessed it might have been Ivan. He'd left a message for him to call him back earlier that morning.

“You don't mind if I take this, do you?”

“No, go ahead. I've got to be off anyway. I've got a meeting with my solicitor today. The industrial tribunal is next month.”

He took the call and was surprised to discover it was someone from the Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel at the other end of the line.

“Is that a Mr. Jack Clarke?”

“Yes. Speaking.”

“We're wondering if you're related to Ms. Debbie Smedley? We're trying to contact a next of kin.”

The name meant nothing to him. He asked the woman at the other end of the line how she had obtained his number.

“She had it on a business card in her purse. I'm afraid she is in intensive care at the moment. She's suffered a heart-attack and liver failure so we're trying to track

down friends or relatives in case they might want to make appropriate arrangements.”

It took a moment before it finally it dawned on him. It was Diamond the woman was talking about. He'd never even known her surname.

“Oh, I'm sorry. Debbie, you say? Yes, I'm a friend of hers.”

“Are you sure? You said you didn't recognise the name?”

“Yes, it's just that Smedley... that must be her maiden name. ”

“Ahh.. I see. Do you know how we can contact her next-of-kin?”

“I'm not aware she has any actually. She's widowed, I believe.”

He asked the woman if it would be possible to visit her. All the remaining leads to the story now seemed exhausted and yet he still couldn't place the pieces of the jigsaw together. He wondered if there was still a faint chance that Diamond might remember something, or whether with the spectre of death looming over her hospital bed, she might divulge the identity of the mysterious Piers.

“Visiting hours are in the mornings from ten until twelve and then in the afternoon from two until four. I should warn you that Ms Smedley is currently on a dialysis machine. She is conscious but I'm afraid she is very weak. We are looking for a liver transplant but, well... because of her history, she's not regarded as a priority case.”

“Of course, I'll come straight over.”

He didn't bother finishing his tea and headed straight for the door until the coffee shop owner, a middle-aged Turkish man, angrily reminded him that he'd forgotten to pay. He ran back to the counter, shoved a five pound note in the man's hand and then ran out on to the street and hailed down a cab.

Inside the hospital he followed the signs to the intensive care unit. Taking the lift up to the second floor, he hurried through a labyrinth of grey corridors passing huddles of relatives anxiously awaiting test results or news from the operating theatre. He hated hospitals. They always reminded him of the last time he'd seen his grandfather; the wrinkled face which had grinned back at him when they caught a

brown trout on their first fishing expedition connected to ventilator pumping the final gasps of oxygen into his lungs.

Finally, he came into the IC unit through a reception area that smelled of sickly disinfectant. He checked his watch. It was five-to-twelve and a nurse glanced up at him as he pushed open the door into the ward itself where twelve beds were lined up in rows on either side of the wall. Somewhere nearby a couple of life support machines bleeped out a macabre, electronic death march.

Her bed was the last on the left-hand side. Yellow sunlight flooded through the small window next to her exaggerating the paleness of her skin and her parched lips. Her arm was connected through a tube to an IV drip and there was a sign, 'Nil By Mouth', attached to the frame at the foot of the bed.

He sat down in the chair next to her and she seemed to stir from her sleep.

“Debbie?”

“Who's that?”

She seemed barely able to muster the strength to open her eyes. She looked so weak, so pathetic lying there, it was impossible not to pity her. How could people push themselves to the very brink of self-destruction, he wondered.

“It's Jack. Remember me? The journalist who –”

“Oh Jack. Yeah I remember,” she said, straining to recognise him “Look, I'm sorry about –”

“No, don't worry about it. It's fine. I needed a new DVD player anyway.”

He'd almost coaxed a smile out of her before she let out a small cough and winced with pain.

“How are you doing?”

“Not so good.”

“The doctors here are very good. I know they'll do everything they can.”

She nodded before closing her eyes again.

“I meant to tell you,” she said, her voice fading to a raspy whisper, “There was a letter.”

“What letter?”

“Linda gave it to me before she went off. Told me to deliver it to Kenny personally but I forgot. I found it again ages afterwards.”

“And what did it say?”

“She told me not to open it. I felt bad you know. But she said she was sending him details... details of some insurance policy.”

“Insurance policy? What policy?”

“I don't know. She told me Kenny would know what it meant. I felt bad. You know because I –”

She winced again, her face creasing up with pain.

“Listen, Debbie, I want to ask you a question. I know it's hard but can you try to remember.”

She nodded slowly.

“Do you remember a guy called Rafiq or Henry? Did they come to the parties?”

As her eyes opened again, he noticed her irises were tinged a sickly yellow.

“Yeah... Rafi. Handsome fella. He had a friend, Harry. Rich kids they were but nasty.”

“What do you mean by *nasty* ?”

“Liked it rough. Horrible to the girls they were. Harry had money though that's why Linda put up with it. She had a plan. Said one day she was going to –”

He watched on pitifully as she struggled to catch her breath.

“And do you know how she met him?”

“They had this party... in a field in the country. In a big marquee... weird kinky stuff. Like a rave but all full of all these posh kids... all off the nuts, Linda told me. He'd seen her films, you see... That's why he wanted her there.”

“And where was this party?”

She scrunched her eyes up in pain as she coughed up some mucus in her throat. Then, hearing the door at the end of the ward open, he noticed a middle-aged man in a suit entering the ward.

“Try to remember, Debbie. Please try to remember. For me.”

The man was pacing towards him now.

“Excuse me,” the man interrupted as he neared the bed, “I’m the consultant on this ward. This woman is in a critical condition and is in no state to be receiving visitors. She should be resting and, besides, I’m afraid visiting time is over.”

“I just wanted to ask her –“

“No, I’m sorry. I’m going to have to ask you to leave. Immediately.”

The man was scowling at him, clasping a clipboard to his chest like a riot shield.

Jack nodded. As he walked back towards the doors of the ward he glanced back at Debbie. She looked so white and frail. He knew it wouldn’t be long now.

In a cab on the way back to the office, he was still wondering what to make of Debbie’s mention of the letter when his mobile phone rang. It was Ivan calling from his mobile. He closed the glass hatch door that separated the rear of the cab from the driver to afford himself some privacy as he picked up the call.

“Jack. I got a message to call you. I can’t really talk for long. I’m in the Commons lobby.”

“Yeah, thanks. I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Sure, fire away.”

“Remember, we had that chat about the new Culture Secretary?”

“You mean Henry Hunter-Goodwin?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“What about him?”

“You said before he went into politics he was a bit of a party animal.”

“Yes, apparently so.”

“And he was at Oxford ?”

“That’s right. A first in PPE if my memory serves me correctly. And Eton before that, of course. A pretty bright spark by all accounts.”

“So was he a member of any of those dining societies or anything?”

“Oh those... I think he was a member of The Bullingdon Club, the one where they go out for a meal and then smash the restaurant up. It's just hooliganism by any other name, of course. And I heard a rumour that he was also on the organising committee of that other one.”

“What other one?”

“Oh, the one where they have these terribly debauched parties. You must have heard of it? The name... oh, it's on the tip of my tongue. Yes...The Piers... The Piers Gaveston Society. That's it.”

The words felt like shockwave thundering its way through his brain.

“Jack? Jack? Are you there?”

For a couple of seconds he lost the power of speech. That's what Diamond had been talking about. There was no third man.

“Yeah, I'm still here. Thanks for that, Ivan.”

“Not at all. Pleased to be of service, Jack.”

CHAPTER 35: 'A LEVEL OF DISCRETION'

Back at the office Jack could barely concentrate on typing up the notes from his interview that morning. He was still trying to assimilate every detail in his head. So, if it was through the infamous Piers Gaveston Society that Linda had met Rafiq and Henry then what did she mean about an insurance policy? And why hadn't Kenny ever mentioned it? Furthermore, if the old man had been lying then there was no way now of ever getting to the truth. It felt so frustrating for to have come all this way only to be left with the split ends of a story he couldn't quite stand up.

Sitting at his desk he fired up the internet browser on his computer and brought up Google. Out of curiosity, he checked Wikipedia for an entry on the Piers Gaveston Society and was surprised to discover there was a short, six line entry. Despite its brevity there was a tantalizing reference to “bizarre entertainments and sexual excess” at the Society's annual parties along with a list of previous members including a member of the Rothschild banking dynasty, and the Hollywood actor Hugh Grant.

He wondered what strange magnetism attracted the upper echelons of the British establishment towards the London lowlife. It had been the same in the sixties when the Krays had rubbed shoulders with the likes of Lord Boothby and the Labour MP, Tom Driberg, at their West End nightclub, Esmeralda's. Perhaps things hadn't changed at all and then he remembered that Sean still hadn't returned his call and he had a nagging sense that something wasn't right. He'd tried the number a couple more times but the call just went through to voicemail. He wanted to ask about the safety deposit company. It still intrigued him. With Terry out of the way, he thought there was at least an exposé there that Charlie would be interested in and then just as he was about to type another email his desk phone rang.

“Hello is that Jack Clarke?”

“Speaking.”

“This is DCI Raymond Beech from Operation Trident. I want to apologise for not

contacting you sooner but I'm afraid I've been busy with other operations. As I'm sure you'll appreciate, my unit is rather overstretched at the moment.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, I'm just phoning to let you know that we have charged someone in connection with the shooting incident outside your house a couple of weeks ago. The suspect in question has been remanded in custody for now but we'll be needing a full statement from yourself if that's okay?”

“Sure, so it will go to court then?”

“Well, I would imagine so. It's in the hands of the CPS so I can't really comment but let's just say that we think the suspect may well decide to co-operate with our enquiry.”

“That's a great relief.”

“So I'm trying to organise my diary and I'm wondering if you could you come in next Monday at, say, 2pm to make a statement?”

“Absolutely. Shouldn't be a problem and thanks for keeping me up to speed.”

He hung up the phone. He didn't dare tell the detective the extent of his own knowledge about the case. After all, Sean seemed to suggest that there were so many bent coppers in the Met that none of them could be trusted. And, besides, he already knew the juvenile in question wasn't the real story. He was the Oswald, a patsy employed to pull the trigger by those by those playing a far more sinister game.

Restless, he pulled up Google again and stared at the text box in the centre of the screen for a second and then typed “Safety Deposits Hampstead.” A slickly-designed web page appeared in the window of his browser with a graphic of a London beefeater holding a ceremonial axe. It all looked so legitimate it was hard to believe that he was looking at the marketing for a lucrative criminal enterprise but then that was the ingenious part, he supposed, how these places passed themselves off to the unsuspecting public as above board. He clicked on the 'About Us' link and read the text:

“Safety Deposits Hampstead Limited (SDH) provides a level of discretion and security to a broad range of clients. We have over 25 year's of expertise in the security industry and our premises operate state of the art security systems. As well, as our Hampstead branch we also operate Safety Deposits Knightsbridge Limited (SDK) which is ideally located for those based in the West End of London. Please telephone us or email for more details about our service.”

He couldn't help but smile at the reference to 'a broad range of clients'. Sean had said the place was chock-a-block with guns, drugs and dirty money. He wondered what else people were hiding in those boxes. Only the owners of the boxes knew for sure – that was only reason he could think of for why anyone would insist upon such a level of discretion.

He closed the browser window and opened his drawer. Inside was a manilla document wallet with the photocopied library clippings he'd taken on Oriense. He took it out and flicked through them again. He must have read and re-read them a dozen times over now. He wasn't going to find anything new in there, he told himself. And then at the back was the photo Kenny had given him with Linda and Lewis looking so happy that summer in Ibiza. He looked at it again. It was tragic really. How could they have known back then it would all end like this? That dark world had sucked them into its vortex. Like Diamond, they too had become victims of the beast.

He stared at the scribbled message at the bottom of the photo: “Thanks for looking after things for me in London. I know I can always trust you with my life. It's 36C here. Sweet Dreams, Kenny. Love always. Linda. xx”

It was a strange message of thanks. The thought had occurred to him before but he'd dismissed it. And it seemed odd that she'd underlined part of the message. Then the realisation broke like a sudden cloudburst. “Trust you with my life” - she was referring to this life insurance that Diamond had mentioned. The message was some sort of cypher. A mnemonic or an acrostic perhaps. He scrutinized the handwriting again and almost pinched himself when it finally dawned upon him: Sweet Dreams,

Kenny.... SDK. It was a reference to Safety Deposits Knightsbridge. Sean had said their clients just needed a box number and a code and there they were too. He'd had them the whole time: the temperature and the date written under it. It had all been written down for Kenny and sent to him only Diamond had never delivered the letter providing the explanation.

He looked at the date. It was written as '25/05/95'. If it was May then that was before the season started. He was certain it couldn't have been the date of the photograph and he had a sudden hunch of how to prove it to himself. He stuffed his hand into his pocket, pulled out his wallet then fumbled through a bunch of receipts and business cards he'd kept in there before finally finding the card for the holiday rentals business in Ibiza. The guy had said they only rented the villa for part of the season. If the villa wasn't available to rent at that time then the date couldn't have been the date when the picture was taken. It would have to be the box number or the passcode.

He grabbed the phone, dialled the number and explained to the voice at the other end if they could check their records. The man seemed confused by the request but after a minute or so Jack could hear him flicking through the pages of a book.

“Yes. I check now for you, señor... No, I see from our records that the villa was, in fact, rented from the fourth of June.”

“Thanks,” Jack said and slammed the receiver down.

He could hear his own heart pounding in his chest, the exhilaration of knowing he had finally cracked the code although exactly *what* it was that Linda had been looking to protect he had yet to discover. For that, he now decided, he would have to take a trip to Knightsbridge.

For the entire length of the tube journey Jack could barely sit still. He found himself manically chewing gum and fidgeting in his seat as he constantly wondered about the contents of the safety deposit box. Had Linda literally meant a life-insurance policy? How exactly would that have kept Terry's mob at bay? There had

to be something else she had kept in that box although he had no idea if it would still be there or even if his hunch about the coded message was correct. Even so, he reckoned there was nothing to lose by paying a visit and he'd convinced a brooding Charlie Drayton that he needed to step out of the office to chase a contact about the refuse contract investigation.

The address was a couple of streets away from Knightsbridge tube station. A tiny side street between Basil Street and Pavilion Road and with its plain black door and unmarked intercom no one would ever have guessed the nature of the premises. It was certainly just as discreet as the website had promised.

He buzzed the intercom and the door opened then he walked up some stairs into a small reception room at the top. There was a man, probably in his late forties or early fifties, with a greying beard and small square glasses sitting at a luxurious mahogany desk. In his dark blue suit and gingham shirt he looked more like a lawyer or accountant than a banker to the criminal underworld. Jack couldn't help but wonder if he even knew the real nature of the business. Surely, you couldn't work in such a place and not know? Didn't the clientèle give the game away? Wasn't the level of security and discretion they required too much of a giveaway?

“Can I help you, sir?”

“Yeah, I'm here for box 36C.”

He'd gambled on which of the two numbers was the passcode and which was the box number. He'd reckoned there couldn't be that many boxes in such a small place. Even if he had got it the wrong way around then he reckoned he could bluff his way out before the man became suspicious.

The man tapped at the keyboard next to his desk.

“I'm afraid that box has fees outstanding, sir.”

“I'm sorry?”

“I'm sure this was explained to you, sir. Most of our clients either pay upfront or set up a quarterly direct-debit. It appears that the last payment for that box was in November. We tried to take payment last month but it failed. In such circumstances,

we usually open the box and destroy the contents. Again, I think you'll find that this all stated in your contract, Mr. Campbell.”

The name confused him for a second. So Lewis had been renting the box. He'd even used his real name. It made sense, he supposed: it would have been harder to connect to Linda that way and Lewis had been murdered in November which perhaps explained the failed payment.

“I've switched banks lately, you see, and they'd promised me that all my direct debits had transferred across but, well, you know how banks are these days.”

“Yes... perhaps you should try Coutts, sir? A lot of our clients find them a great deal more than amenable. I could refer you to a contact of ours there if you like.”

“Yes, I'll certainly consider it... so, tell me, much is outstanding exactly?”

“Five hundred pounds, sir. You're fortunate. Our system indicates that the contents are intact. Usually, we provide our clients with a month's grace period before we destroy the contents although, as you'll appreciate, that is strictly discretionary.”

He balked at the sum.

“And you take cash, I presume?”

“Yes, of course, sir.”

He rushed to a cashpoint around the corner. It was approaching the end of the month. He wasn't even sure his balance would stretch to five-hundred pounds without phoning his account manager and organising an emergency overdraft. After all, the trip to Oxford had almost cleaned him out. He tapped the amount into the machine and was relieved to hear the mechanical whirring as it dispatched a wad of crisp notes then he returned to the premises and, after being buzzed inside hurried up the stairs and paid the man.

“I'm terribly sorry for that inconvenience,” said the man.

“Not at all,” replied Jack, straining hard not to raise a smile, “Always a pleasure doing business with you.”

The man pointed him towards to a door which Jack presumed was the entrance to some sort of vault and then pressing a button which seemed to be concealed under the

desk the door swung open. As Jack entered he gazed at the columns of grey steel boxes which stretched from the floor almost to the ceiling, each of them had their own keypads and were mounted into a heavy steel casing and organized vertically from A to L and in horizontal order from one to fifty. Turning to the column of boxes marked 'C' he could hear a buzzing from the ceiling and turned to see a security camera craning itself on him.

He located box thirty-six then punching in the six digit date he'd memorised the door of the small box sprung loose. He wiped his mouth nervously before opening the door fully. Inside was a metal tray which he slid out to peer inside. For a split second he felt confused at its contents. There was a small object at the far end. What looked like a black plastic videotape with the letters 'Hi-8' in the corner in small, white block-capitals.

CHAPTER 36 : 'SEX, LIES & VIDEOTAPE'

“So, are we paying for all this?” asked Jack as Rhys reclined into the plush leather seat at the centre of the video editing suite. The premises were situated above a bar in one of the streets off Soho Square but with its double-glazed windows they could barely hear the sounds from the street below.

“No. All gratis. I called in a favour from a mate of mine works in post-production.”

“You didn't tell him what it was about?”

“No. Anyway, you haven't even told *me* what's on this tape of yours. Is it something mucky? I've to got to say I didn't have you down as a connoisseur celebrity of sex tapes. Thought that was all a bit low brow for a man of your tastes.”

Rhys was giving him one of those goading grins of his but Jack didn't rise to it.

“I don't know what's on it. That's why we're here”

He glanced around at the video kit, a stack of expensive-looking Sony boxes with a bewildering array of buttons and knobs.

“So you definitely know how to work all this then?”

Despite the favour he still felt slightly perturbed at the idea of Rhys damaging the company's expensive video equipment.

“Yeah. I did six month's work experience at a TV production company before I got into print.”

“Really? I never knew you worked in TV.”

“Yeah. It didn't really work out. I made a pass at the managing director's wife one night at some after work drinks. I mean... I didn't know she was with him but, looking back, I think it might have been a bit of a career-limiting move.”

“Quite possibly.”

“Anyway, their loss, eh?” said Rhys as he loaded the tape into one of the machines, turned on the big flatscreen monitor and grabbed the mouse.

“Hi-8 is an old analogue format,” he continued “Like the Gallagher brothers, it

was big in the nineties but these days it's all digital. Still, shouldn't be a problem. We'll can capture the signal, digitize it and then burn it on to DVD.”

“And that's easy to do?”

“Yeah. As I said, should be a piece of piss really.”

Jack watched as Rhys loaded up the application on the computer and then clicked his way through a baffling series of menus and pop-up screens. He'd had been forced to do a computer science qualification at school and it had only served to confirm his sense of technophobia. Computers had never really been his forté but, secretly, he'd always been impressed with how comfortable Rhys was with any new technology. Then again, given Rhys' current legal troubles, he wondered whether that hadn't also played a part in his professional downfall.

“Right, that's it,” said Rhys “Looks like we've captured the input. So... Let's roll VT, shall we?”

They both watched as a slightly obscured flickering image appeared on the screen and below a timecode with a date: 25/05/95.

“What the fuck is this?” said Rhys, “Looks like some dodgy home video.”

“Yeah. See, where the camera's been placed... Looks like it's been hidden. There's some line at the bottom..... like they've put in a cupboard of a wardrobe or something.”

Rhys nodded.

“Don't tell me that's your bed with the satin sheets, ? Jack, I got to hand it to you. You're a classy guy.”

Jack ignored the comment and gazed intently at the screen.

After a couple of seconds, two girls came into view. A blonde who he immediately recognised as Linda and a black girl, with a long plaited hair and heavy mascara. The two of them rolled on to the bed, giggling as if they were actresses in a porno flick. Despite the graininess of the image, he could just make out a tattoo on the upper arm of the black girl, a sailor-style design in the shape of a loveheart with a dagger's blade pierced through its centre.

“Hello ladies ! Fucking hell, Jack.... You don't get this on *You've Been Framed*.”

Rhys' juvenile quips were beginning to grate on him but he couldn't take his eyes away from the screen.

Now a man came into shot. He climbed on to the bed and started to lightly spank the buttocks of the blonde girl. He had the muscular physique of a rugby player, perhaps early twenties with slicked-back hair and a slight tan. As he rolled towards the end of the bed and put his hands on the black girl his face became recognisable.

“Fuck me!” gasped Rhys, “That's...”

“Yeah. Henry Hunter-Goodwin. The Culture Secretary.”

“Jesus Christ, Jack. You've got some home-made porno with the fucking Culture Secretary. They'll write you a fucking blank cheque at the Exclusive for this.”

“Yeah. Let's just shut up and watch it, shall we?”

They sat back in silence as on screen the blonde stood up and then disappeared out of shot. For the next couple of minutes the man undressed the black woman, gently pulling off her thong as she giggled and then, suddenly and inexplicably, he slapped her hard around the face.

“What the fuck?” whispered Rhys, “Why did he do that?”

“I don't know.”

“This is some kind of proper kinky shit. Where the fuck did you get this?”

Jack shook his head then they both watched in increasing discomfort as the naked man put his hands around the girl's neck and started squeezing her throat. She was choking, spluttering, her eyes staring into the camera with an animal-like fear but still he kept on.

“What the hell is he doing? He's going to fucking strangle her!”

An eerie atmosphere pervaded the room as they continued watching the flickering images. A growing feeling of unease and self-disgust, as if they were voyeurs pruriently peering through a keyhole, as if *they* too were somehow complicit in this sordid act. Then there was a short-lived sense of relief as the man released the woman but as his hands let go the girl's body slumped on to the bed. She was limp.

Slaughtered as casually as an animal in an abattoir.

They continued to stare in silence and then there was the sound of screaming from somewhere, a blurred shape that loomed in front of the camera and the tape abruptly ended.

Nothing was said between them for several minutes. Jack could only hear the two of them breathing in the room. The human noise of two people who had just witnessed some terrible evil.

“Fucking hell,” Rhys whispered eventually “What exactly are planning to do with this?”

“I'm taking it to Charlie. I'm hoping he's going to run it. We're going to nail this bastard.”

“You sure that's a such good idea, Jack?”

“What do you mean?”

“You need me to spell it out for you?”

“Spell out what?”

“Jack, this is dangerous... I mean a whole different league of danger. I mean I've taken chances - doorstepped the odd villain of whatever – but *this*.... You really sure you want to get mixed up in all this?”

“Of course, I'm sure. Rhys, this isn't just a story. This is the reason I became a journalist. This is about justice. This is about letting people know what bastards like that are really like.”

“Jesus Christ, Jack,” snapped Rhys, “Just listen to yourself! If you can just drop the whole Jack-The-Fucking-Piuos routine for a second then I'm trying to warn you that this is the kind of thing which could get you killed. Even to publish this – which is a decision way above your payscale – would be an act of professional suicide. I mean, The Exclusive would bite your arm off to get hold of this tape but, trust me, it would never ever see the light of day. It's fucking kryptonite! It would be deposited in the editor's safe under lock and key... a massive credit in the favour bank between the Exclusive and all those fucking bods who really run this country.”

“And what about that girl? You saw it. Doesn't *she* deserve justice?”

Rhys shook his head in disbelief.

“This isn't about justice, Jack. This is about your fucking ego. This about you want to prove something to Charlie, to me, to yourself. Be honest!”

“That's bullshit!”

“Well, tell me then, have you even stopped to think about the danger? And not just to you.... what about Laura? Do you think the people involved in this play by any rules? Do you think they subscribe to all that crap about sparing women and children? Just how fucking deluded, are you?”

Jack shrugged but deep down he too was struggling to digest the gravity of what he'd just witnessed. He needed a moment a moment alone and excused himself to the toilet while Rhys offered to burn the footage to a DVD. When he returned Rhys handed him a DVD and then busied himself deleting all trace of the files from the computer's hard disk.

“Right... It's in your hands now. Tread very carefully. As I say, it's your funeral, mate.”

Ten minutes later as he stepped on to the street, the paranoia about knowing just what he was carrying starting to encroach. There was no doubt in his mind now that every possible effort – both legal and criminal - had been made to bury the evidence he had now unearthed. It was the kind of smoking gun that every journalist dreamed of – a scandal that went right to the heart of the British establishment – but with that very evidence now in his possession, he only felt an intense insecurity. Rhy was right. Danger, it seemed, lurked in every doorway, potential enemies conspiring everywhere in the shadows.

When he got home he made the call to Charlie from lounge as Laura finished the washing-up in the kitchen.

“Jack? It's eleven'o'clock at night. You nearly woke my fucking kids up.”

“Yeah. Look, sorry about that but this is urgent.”

“What?”

“I've got a story. Something big.”

“What you on about? Have you been fucking drinking or something?”

“No, I'm serious, Charlie. I'm talking about a genuine exclusive. Can we meet?”

“What? You mean *now*?”

“Yeah, well... if you can.”

“Jesus, Jack. No. we'll do it first thing tomorrow. Seven'o'clock. My office.”

“Okay and, look, I'm sorry for calling so late.”

“Yeah, well, I'll see you tomorrow then but, trust me, this better not be some sort of wind up.”

He hung up the phone and joined Laura in the kitchen where he made himself a camomile tea in preparation for bed as the adrenaline continued to pump its way furiously through his veins.

He couldn't sleep all that night. The mental images of the video playing over and over in his mind like some grisly loop on a projected on videowall. He tossed and turned, waking up Laura in the night who groaned every time he got up to visit the bathroom.

At half-six in the morning, he took the DLR into Canary Wharf. Flicking through that morning's Guardian as the train rumbled its way into the Docklands, his attention was drawn to a story on page two concerning a Kosovan war criminal who the previous evening had been picked up boarding a ferry at Dover on a false passport. The suspect, named as an Izzet Argani, was alleged to have been a KLA commander for whom Interpol had outstanding warrant. The article went on to detail how the suspect, originally from the Drenica region, was suspected of being the commandant of a concentration camp where he'd earned the monicker, The Butcher of Lapušnik, for his brutality. The accompanying photo – a grainy, black-and-white image of a man in combat fatigues surrounded by paramilitaries – was instantly

recognisable to Jack as the same man he'd met that night in Soho. According to the article, a human rights lawyer was protesting the man's innocence but the suspect had already been remanded at HMP Belmarsh whilst the Home Secretary considered his extradition to The Hague to face trial.

He guessed Izzet had tried to flee abroad until the dust settled on the police investigation into Terry's shooting. Whatever the reason, he imagined the seedy pubs and clubs where London' underworld rubbed shoulders were already buzzing with talk of the Kosovan's arrest.

When he finally reached the Post's offices on the twenty-fifth floor of Canada Tower, the newsdesk was deserted. He strolled past the cluster of desks to the News Editor's office where Charlie was already sitting, hunched over his laptop and going through his emails.

“Ok, Jack. So are going to fucking tell me what all this is about?”

Closing the door, Jack took out the DVD from his jacket pocket and handed it to Charlie.

“And what the fuck am I supposed to do with this?”

“Put it in the computer. There's a file on there. I think once you've seen it you'll know exactly what this about.”

Charlie snatched the silver disc and loaded it into his laptop. Jack stood and watched from the other side of the desk as his boss began to view the contents. There was a look of incredulity spreading across his face and then, within minutes, Charlie was speechless, his mouth gaping wide like a dog who'd lost his bone.

“So we're going to run it?” asked Jack eventually puncturing the silence.

“Tell me, Jack,” replied Charlie when he'd finally composed himself, “Do you know what news is?”

Jack shook his head. It was too early in the morning to solve any of Charlie's cryptic riddles..

“News is what someone, somewhere, doesn't want you to know,” said Charlie

with sly grin, “Now you're positive you're the only one who know about this? We need to move fast because I can't risk a fucking spoiler on this.”

“One hundred percent.”

“Good.”

“So we *are* going to run it then?”

“Of course we're going to fucking run it. This thing is dynamite. Now pull up a chair because I want you to sit down and tell me exactly how you got your hands on it.”

CHAPTER 37: 'IN CAMERA'

For the rest of the day, Jack could hardly bring himself to think about anything other than the video. Occasionally, he caught himself fantasizing about the Press Gazette Awards, mentally rehearsing his acceptance speech as he scooped the Journalist of the Year Award to the applause and adulation of his professional peers, but for in reality he spent the best part of the day surfing the web and occasionally peering at Charlie's office at the far end of the floor where for the whole day the blinds remained firmly closed.

He'd only seen Charlie once scuttle out to visit the gents but there was no emergency meeting of the newsdesk as he'd expected and then, around five'o'clock, Charlie finally appeared at the doorway and beckoned Jack into his office. As he shutdown his laptop and put on his overcoat, his boss explained that the two of them were to attend an important meeting but insisted that he couldn't go into further detail on the strict advice of the Post's legal department.

It had to be handled with the utmost care now, Charlie emphasized. The reputation of The Post itself was on the line.

Outside the Post's offices they hailed a taxi as the smartly-dressed City workers in their suits and raincoats made their way back to their homes in the suburbs.

“So who's this meeting with?”

“We're going to see the top man.”

“What? The Post's proprietor?”

Charlie nodded and then barked the address of a property in Chelsea to the driver. Jack had never met the Post's proprietor. He was a secretive Ukranian billionaire who had recently bought the paper but, who to his knowledge, took little interest in the paper's editorial policy.

For the rest of the journey Charlie droned on about his football team's recent goal drought. Jack suffered it all in silence, occasionally nodding but secretly in awe of the idea of meeting their secretive proprietor, and then after half an hour they came to a

street of smart town houses just off the King's Road.

“Nice pad,” said Jack as Charlie paid the driver and waited for a receipt.

“Yeah. You got to have a few quid to live here. That's for sure.”

They rang at the door of one of the townhouses in the middle of the street and as it opened they were met by a maid wearing a black skirt and white cotton blouse.

“Charlie Drayton.”

“Yes, sir. He's expecting you.”

They followed the maid down a corridor. On the walls were oil paintings in the style of the Old Masters and in a corner an antique grandfather clock beat out the silence. Then, finally, they walked into an elegant drawing room, its shelves stacked with antique, leather-bound books with a small fire burning in the grate and two figures dressed in suits who stood with their back to them, peering out of a Georgian-style window at the far end of the room.

As the two of them entered, the two men turned round to face them. Jack was astonished. It was Rafiq Khouri standing right in front of him and alongside him, the Minister of Culture, Henry Hunter-Goodwin.

“Good evening, gentlemen. I'm glad you could both make it at such short notice.”

The minister managed a brief smile as he fiddled nervously with a gold signet ring on the little finger of his left hand.

“What the fuck is going on here?” exclaimed Jack.

“Don't worry, Jack,” Charlie said calmly, “We're just here to talk.”

“That's right,” continued Henry, “And I believe we also agreed that this meeting is *in camera*.”

“In camera?”

“I mean to say this meeting is behind closed doors. Officially, this little *soiree* of ours never happened. Just as we agreed, if I'm not mistaken?”

Charlie nodded.

“And you brought the items we discussed with you?” added Khouri.

“Yeah, it's all here,” said Charlie reaching into the pocket of his overcoat and

handing over the DVD along with the Hi-8 tape.

“And these are the only copies in existence? I mean to say... I have your word on that?”

Charlie nodded.

Henry took it and with one sudden motion of his hands snapped the disk and threw the pieces on to the open fire along with the small, black videotape. Green flames licked around plastic which started to sizzle over the coals filling the room with sickly, chemical fumes.

“What the fuck are you doing, Charlie? I thought we were going to run this.”

Charlie shrugged.

“Look, Jack. We're in the news business and I want to emphasize the word *business* to you. We're doing ourselves a decent trade here.”

“A trade?”

“Yes,” Henry interrupted, “And I suppose it falls to me to explain exactly what has been agreed. Mr Drayton is going to resign as News Editor from the Evening Post which leaves a vacancy for which I believe you are perfectly suited and to that extent I'd like to offer you my sincerest congratulations on your imminent promotion. Meanwhile, our friend, Mr Drayton, has kindly accepted a position as Special Advisor within my department.”

“What?” said Jack turning to Charlie with a look of incredulity, “Are you out of your mind? You're going to be this wanker's spin doctor? He's fucking murdered someone, Charlie! Have you completely lost the plot?”

“Listen, Jack.... it's not like that.”

“Like what? Well, what is it like? Please fill me in here, Charlie!”

“This is something which works for everyone,” Charlie continued “Believe me, it's a real win-win for us both.”

“He's right,” added Henry.

”No, hang on... I know what this is about! This is really about the fucking phone hacking enquiry, isn't it? He's going to call off the dogs, isn't he? Bury the evidence

and you get off the hook, right? That's the deal.... isn't it?"

Charlie clenched his teeth.

"Look," continued Henry, "It's not in any of our interests for this rather sordid little chapter to emerge, is it? Just think about it. By managing the situation as I've proposed, we all stand to gain."

"We? Who's we? Oh, don't tell me... *we're all in this together*, are we?"

"For fuck's sake," Henry snapped, "Just be sensible about it.. You think you're some kind of moral crusader, do you? You think you haven't done things in your past that you're ashamed of? I'm hardly proud of that sordid little episode but who was she? Who was this girl? Just some tart who would most probably be dead now anyway given all the drugs she was taking. Why does she even matter so much to you? Tell me, what do you *want* out of all this."

"Well, let me see," replied Jack "Justice? Yeah... that might be a good place to start or is that a concept that's completely alien to you, Minister?"

"Justice?" scoffed Henry, "And what does that mean exactly? Isn't justice just a negotiation? And that's what I thought we were doing here. I thought we were having a negotiation."

Jack could feel himself almost bursting with indignation.

"Oh, fuck you! Fuck you both! You think the fucking rules don't apply to you? Is that what you really think? You think you can get away with anything? You think that's somehow your fucking birthright?"

"Look, there's no evidence now," interrupted Khouri, "It's over, Jack. You're a good journalist but this is something else... this is business."

"Business?" Jack spluttered, "No, this isn't business. This isn't one of your crooked business deals! This is about real people... ordinary people's lives but then perhaps the Minister here has some difficulty relating to that concept."

"And I suppose you realise her and her boyfriend were trying to blackmail me?" replied Henry calmly, his previous nervousness now replaced by a steely confidence, "Is that what ordinary people do? Tell me, is that *ordinary* behaviour? Well, since

you are so desperate to know the truth, perhaps you should also know that I paid her fifty thousand pounds when this whole saga began and I trusted her when she said she had destroyed the tape and that I'd never hear from her again. And then two years ago she contacted me again. And do you know what she wanted this time? A million pounds! A million pounds or she said she'd feed it to the tabloids. Can you even begin to imagine what that would have done to my career, to my family, to everything I've ever worked for? The press would have had a fucking field day.”

“So you decided to murder her?”

“Well, let's just say the situation was resolved on my behalf. I could hardly let her continue extorting me, could I? And do you honestly believe that if I'd paid her the million she wouldn't have come back demanding more? For someone like her even a million would never have been enough. It was sheer greed on her part. She had only herself to blame.”

“And who else did you have killed along the way? Her boyfriend too?”

“Well, I wasn't even aware of his existence until he approached me last Autumn. Believe me, it was not a decision I took lightly but what would you have done in my circumstances? A minister of the crown being the subject of a blackmail plot over something that happened almost two decades ago. Of course, it had to be resolved.”

“Resolved? Is that how you would choose to describe it?”

“Presumably, in your peculiarly rose-tinted view of the world, Mr Clarke, you think things like this never happen? It never occurred to you, for example, that your own government has from time to time pursued a strategy of *elimination* whether it be in Northern Ireland or in the Congo or wherever our interests may have been threatened. This may come as shock to someone like you but, to those of us who have party to such decision-making, this is simply the way the world works. I don't expect you to like it but this is a case of what one might call *Realpolitik*”

“And what about your friend here and his business dealings. Launder all the money for some gangster's drug deals, did you? Is that what you meant by making your own way in the world.”

Jack turned to Khouri who stood silently glaring back at him.

“As you well know, Jack, the SFO investigation never proved anything. I'm clean. And, believe me, if they couldn't then you won't prove anything either.”

“And you know these guys tried to have me murdered?” said Jack finally turning to Charlie, “Just so this dirty little secret of theirs would never come out.”

For the first time, Charlie looked flustered.

“Yes, well,” interrupted Henry, “I can assure you now that that unpleasant business is all over. I'm sorry but you have to understand –”

“No! I don't *have to* understand anything! You people talk to us about 'Broken Britain' and drone on about the loss of this country's moral compass in your Savile Row suits with all the privileges of the world that have been thrust upon you and yet you commit murder and think you can just walk away. You treat people like objects because that's just what they are to you. It's inhuman... it's so fucking heartless.”

“Excuse me but who the hell do you think you're talking to?” snapped Henry.

“Take it easy, Jack,” said Charlie, “Look, I know you don't like it. We all know that – I don't like it either - but when you've had time to think it over then you'll see this is the best way. Take a holiday. Take a couple months off. You'll still get paid. I'll sign you off... we'll say it's stress. It will be good for you.”

“Fuck you!”

“Look, I think we're done here,” added Khouri staring into the flames as globules of melted plastic dripped from the coals of the fire, “Accept it, Jack. It's all over now. There *is* no more story.”

For a moment, Jack stared at the other three figures in the room. He wanted to do something. He wanted to lash out, to punch Henry's long, chinless face as hard as he possibly could, but now, engulfed in the furnace of his own fury, he couldn't find it in himself. Violence had never been his thing. He was no good at it. In the end, he turned away feeling nauseous and desperate from some fresh air.

He walked out of the door and down the hallway and then slammed the front door on his way out. Charlie had outplayed him and Henry and Khouri ... well, they had

got the deal they wanted.

The game was over, he told himself as he paced back along the street and now there was nothing left to play for. As he reached the junction, King's Road was still bustling with evening traffic. A hundred yards down on the left he spotted a couple of young guys in rugby shirts staggering out of the doors of The Cadogan Arms. There was one way he knew to quell the anger burning inside himself. A few scotches would soften the pain. Surely, the world at least owed him that much.

CHAPTER 38: 'LONDON'S BURNING'

In the early hours of an August afternoon Kofi Boateng was sitting in the lounge of his parents' flat in one of the tower blocks overlooking St Thomas Square. It was hot and stuffy in the small room where him and his mother were sitting on the sofa watching Sky News. The newsreader was speaking in an unusually serious tone about a man shot dead in Tottenham which had provoked a riot two nights previously in Tottenham over a series of video stills showing row of burned out shopfronts.

"I can't believe they just shot him," Kofi said as his mother leafed through the Hackney Gazette.

"They say he was a drug dealer," his mother grumbled, "They say he was carrying a gun. You can't defend someone like that!"

"Yeah. That's what *they* say, Mum. How do we know what really happened? Do you think he'd be that stupid? To shoot at the police?"

"I don't know. It's none of our business anyway and I think you should stop getting so worked up about it and do some reading. You're starting university in September. You know they sent you a reading list and I haven't even seen you open a book all summer. Remember, it's costing us a lot of money to send you there, Kofi."

"Yeah but all I'm saying is do you think the police have the right to go around shooting any black man because –"

"Look, the police have a difficult job to do. It's not easy round here with all these gangs and guns on the street. And at the end of the day, people must respect the law."
"

"Why? Do you even know how many times I've been stopped in the last year, Mum?"

"I don't know."

Kofi could see his mother was becoming increasingly irritated by the way he was steering the conversation.

"Twenty-two times! Do you think the police would stop some white boy twenty-

two times? Well...do you?"

His mother just shrugged. Kofi was getting really angry now. His mother didn't seem to get it. He peered out of the window at the street below. A crowd was beginning to gather and then in his pocket his Blackberry buzzed into life with a BB message from one of his friends.

"Well, just look at that friend of yours, Donnell," said his mother "Where is he now? Locked up. Thrown his whole life away. I'm not having you doing that. We took you to church. We gave you values, Kofi, and taught you right from wrong not like some around here."

"Don't bring, Donnell, into this. Jesus, you sound as bad as the police!"

Kofi's mother scowled at him angrily.

"You will not take the Lord's name in vain in my house, Kofi! Take that back."

"I'm not taking anything back, Mum!"

"Now you listen, boy! I'm your mother and if I tell you –"

"No, mum. I'm not a boy any more. I'm a grown man. I've fucking grown up."

Kofi's mother gasped in horror at her son's outburst. Profanity, she'd always reminded him, was not tolerated in their household.

"How dare you speak to me like that?"

Outside he could hear police sirens. This was it. It was kicking off. It had finally happened. Everyone had finally had enough. It was payback time.

He picked up his Nike jacket and a black bandanna he sometimes used to tie in his hair.

"What do you think you're doing, Kofi?"

"I'm going out."

"You're not going out. You're staying here. You know there'll be trouble out there. I'm not having you leave this house, do you hear me?"

"You can't make me stay here."

"Kofi! You will stay here with me! Or just wait until your father hears about this."

“No, I'm going out, Mum, and you can't stop me.”

His mum was crying now.

“I'm begging you now, Kofi. Don't go out there. I don't want to lose you.”

Tears were rolling down her face but his mind was already made up. He'd had enough. Enough of being stopped by these stupid cops who went around his neighbourhood with the view that every young black man like himself was a hoodlum. He wasn't going to do anything. He wasn't going to lob petrol bombs or loot shops but he wanted to make a stand just like Rosa Parks had when she'd decided that she just wasn't take it any more. He wanted to tell the feds that people like him had rights too and they'd had enough and that for once it was them who would have to listen. He could still hear his Mum calling him back as he slammed the front door and marched out to the lift.

Later that afternoon, in the communal TV room at Belmarsh prison Donnell was watching the Sky News coverage of the riots. There was a buzz in the room as people watched the live television pictures of a crowd in Hackney, masked in bandanas and jeering at a squad of riot police dressed in their blue boiler suits and plastic helmets. Donnell suddenly felt very homesick. He wanted to be on the streets with them now. He too wanted to lash out at the fucking cops who'd fucked up his life and tricked his mother into agreeing to a search. And maybe if the windows of Foot Locker got kicked in him he could even help himself to a pair of new trainers. Except there wouldn't be any lashing out at the feds or any free trainers because he was stuck in this stinking shithole of a prison with a bunch of mugs on remand. The injustice of it all was killing him.

“Reports are surfacing of trouble in the Mare Street area of Hackney now as youths who have been congregating all afternoon have started to clash with police,” said the newsreader, “We're going over live to our reporter.”

And then just as he watched a whole crowd pelting the police with stones just outside where Kofi lived he could make out a tall, black kid in a Nike jacket and

wearing a black mask right at the centre of it. And then at that second, just as the camera zoomed in the man's mask slipped. It was Kofi! He was throwing a bit of pavement slab at one of the feds who was standing around idly doing nothing. This was madness! Way funnier than that TV show where people sent in their home videos of themselves having stupid accidents at home. Kofi was putting the boot in! Kofi, of all people, mashing up the boydem!

Donnell could barely hold himself together.

“Hey. That's my boy,” said Donnell turning around to another prisoner who had been sitting next to him enjoying the riots, “That's my fucking mate, that is!”

But the inmate had gone. In fact, now he realised the entire room had emptied out except for a broad-chested man with a shaved head who was walking straight towards him with something in his hand.

Why had everyone suddenly left and what was this big white geezer up to?

“This is for you,” he said as he lurched towards Donnell, “A present from my friends in Kosovo.”

At that he moment could feel a pain in his chest like he'd been winded. He coughed. Something was in his throat as if he was going to be sick and then he spat out a mouthful of blood. He looked down and there was a razor blade moulded into a toothbrush which had dropped to the floor. He reached for his neck and suddenly his hands were covered in hot, foamy blood. He wanted to shout. He wanted to call out to someone but he felt like he was suddenly drowning as he desperately gasped for air.

It was dark when Jack was awoken by the sound of something moving in the undergrowth outside. He'd fallen asleep at God knows what hour at the old oak table in the kitchen and woke soaked in his own sweat and still hunched over his laptop. As usual, his mouth felt as parched as the earth of the dusty scrubland that clung to the surrounding hills and, as he sat up and squinted towards the open doors that led down to the pool, he could feel his head throbbing as if his skull was being pounded by an army of miniature workmen with jackhammers.

He guessed it was three or four in the morning but recently time had become a more malleable concept. In fact, there were really only two times now: the time that he spent drinking himself into oblivion – occasionally (like tonight) supplemented by a few lines from the *cocaína* he'd been offered one night by a local taxi driver on a half-comatose trip back to the villa – and the time he spent sleeping it off before nursing himself back to the point where he could consider cracking open another bottle and starting his whole spin cycle of debauchery once again. None of it did any good though. Nothing could quite make him forget what he'd left behind in London.

Looking around, he breathed in the shame of the last few days; the dozen or so empty wine and whisky bottles, the detritus of a half-eaten chicken carcass that had started to decompose in a couple of days of Mediterranean heat, a small arsenal of Pringles tubes scattered on the floor like empty shell casings and two CD cases which lay next to the laptop smeared with a white, powdery residue.

Finally, he stood up, grasping at his aching spine, staggered to the end of the kitchen and the doorway which opened on to the steps outside. The previous night – or maybe it was the night before that – he'd woken to a similar noise and wandered out there to find a huge, brown hare staring at him from the bottom of the steps. It had just sat there – seemingly quite unafraid – as the pair of them eyeballed each other like two old gunslingers in a spaghetti western. Now something told him that the animal had come to visit him again but this time his intention was to somehow catch it (although what he would do afterwards with an enormous, live hare he hadn't quite worked out.) But as he reached the doorway and peered down the whitewashed steps to the patio there was nothing. There were only the strange, flickering shadows that danced on the rippling surface of the heart-shaped pool in the light of the patio a few meters away. Shadows that gave rise to an illusion that its cool expanse of turquoise water was something living, an organ pulsating to its own private rhythm.

Reaching into his pocket, he switched on his mobile phone and waited for a text message or a voicemail alert, anything which might remind him that the umbilical cord to his old life still remained intact.

There was a text from Rhys.

“U got the file I sent u?”

The file. The fucking file. Of course, he'd suspected that moment in the edit suite when he'd mentioned popping out to the toilet that Rhys would have seized the opportunity to take his own copy. (And now, having thought about it, he'd have probably done the same; after all, it was always prudent to take out some insurance.) But it had still taken a number of phone calls to get Rhys to admit as much and, besides, Rhys had other (more pressing) worries now that he'd been formally charged by the police. There were the eye-watering fees of his barrister to contend with, the flurries of anxious phone calls to the estate agent organising the sale of his apartment and then all the other arrangements that he'd decided had to be made should he find himself spending the next couple of years in the company of convicted felons. *Conspiracy to commit misconduct in a public office*. The irony of it all had not been lost on Jack.

And what to do with the fucking file – that was what had occupied the best part of his limited headspace ever since he'd accepted the Post's offer of a month-long period of “recuperation.” He still held the ace, he'd assured himself, but how should he play it to his maximum advantage?

In one of his more reckless moments, he'd considered uploading the whole thing to YouTube; lighting the blue touchpaper and then watching the scandalous inferno from afar like some gloating arsonist. But then, on further reflection, that had just seemed too much like selling himself short. News Editor at the London Evening Post was just too good an opportunity to throw away on a whim. He may not have arrived there under circumstances he would have chosen but it still meant he was within reach of a pinnacle that few others in the business would ever achieve, a gratifying introduction at any respectable Notting Hill dinner party. But whatever decision he might finally come to, it didn't need to be finalized until he got back to London and at this precise moment he was far too wasted to give it any more consideration.

He turned off his phone.

“She hasn't called. I knew she wouldn't.”

He heard the voice wafting on the breeze as he was putting his phone back in the pocket of his jeans. It was clear, seemingly coming from only a few feet away – somewhere in the shadows of a palm tree - and he looked up quite startled to see a figure at the other end of the pool. A woman with long, curly blonde hair and wearing sunglasses who was immersed up to her chest in the shimmering water.

“No point trying to patch things up now, Jack. Anyway, you're better off without her anyway. Boring fucking bitch! Always freaking out over you having the odd drink now and again.”

Jack staggered down the steps and approached the edge of the pool. He'd left his glasses on the kitchen table and he was squinting at the face of the woman twenty meters away but something within told him he already knew her identity.

“Linda?”

“Just me and you at last. Funny, eh? All this time you've been searching.”

He drew himself up right to edge of the pool and peered into the shadows.

“You know, I think its kind of sweet really... I mean that. I always said you was a real sweetheart. You know that, don't you?”

Jack shook his head. He was so baffled by the vision he was finding it hard to find the right words. And he had so many questions.... so many questions he wanted to ask.

“The thing is... well, what I never understood was what was in it for *you*? What made you want to find me so much?”

Jack shrugged.

“I mean you didn't think I believed all that cobblers you told ol' Harry about justice, did you?” she said with a giggle, ”Because there's enough injustice in the world, Jack. Ain't there? So what was it? You know, sometimes I even wondered if you were one of those other types... you know what I'm talking about, don't you?”

Jack shook his head.

“Come on, Jack, you know what I'm talking about. The ones who want to take a

little peep through the keyhole. The ones who find all that stuff a bit of a turn on. The guys who act all innocent but really... well....”

Jack wanted to say something, to offer some form of defence to the accusation, but right now he couldn't seem to marshal his words into anything meaningful.

“Because none of us are really innocent, are we? Me, you, Rafi, Harry... we all done bad things. We all took liberties one way or another, didn't we?”

“No!” Jack protested.

“Shhhh, babe! Come on now. There ain't nothing wrong with wanting something. You and I know that. I mean... me and you got nothing to hide, have we? See, I know you watched those videos – those old clips of mine you found on-line when Laura was out of the house. You see... I know you, Jack. I know all about you. I know what you wanted.... what you still want.”

One of her hands was reaching behind her back, unclasping her bikini top which she now casually discarded by her side, leaving the swell of her breasts resting buoyantly on the surface of the water.

“And I feel I owe you that, Jack. I owe you that much at least, don't you think?”

Her arms were reaching up out of the water towards him, silently calling him to join her like a centrefold siren. Her lips were puckered like a lipstick advertisement and the shape of her bronzed breasts – those breasts which he could now barely take his eyes off as at the poolside he slipped out of his t-shirt and shorts - appeared the same as they had the very first time he'd seen them in the photo Kenny had given him.

Lurching forward, he splashed clumsily into the centre of the pool and suddenly felt his whole body descend beneath the water. The coldness suddenly engulfed him as he ascended back to the surface, desperately trying to find his footing against the bottom but only kicking against the weight of the water. Once again, he found himself slipping back below the waterline and choking on another mouthful of chlorinated water. He started to panic. His heart pounding furiously in his chest as he tried to keep himself afloat and then desperately he looked up to where Linda had

been as he resurfaced – reaching for her outstretched arms - but there was nothing. Nothing but a flickering shadow thrown from an overhanging palm tree.