

A Good Find

Gary L Beer

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The Author

Gary L Beer born in Kent, England and of English and Welsh descent became a traveller at an early age. The travels to the mountains of Wales with his parents as a child instilled in him a wanderlust that has remained to this day.

After raising a family a new life was forced upon him and taking up the challenge Gary went to university and achieved a BSc in Pharmaceutical Chemistry following this with a Masters Degree in Chemistry, studying nano-particle science at the very cutting edge of technology. Able to turn his hand to most things in life he has worked as a Carpenter, Steeplejack, Car Mechanic, Panel beater, Chemist and Teacher.

Gary has written many popular novels;
Journey Thru America My Quest For Peace
Journey Thru America The Way Home
A Good Find
SUZY
Starship Stinedern
Grailem
Belief of the Reborn

Gary L Beer the popular travel writer delves into the realms of fiction and presents us with a fascinating crime thriller.

Three friends go for a cycle ride along the North Kent coast and find a bag of money belonging to local smugglers and drug dealers. The drug dealers are soon hot on their trail to regain their money and the three friends soon find themselves in very serious trouble.

With twists and turns a complicated web of deceit

amongst the drug dealers is woven and the unconcern they show for the health of their customers in the dangerous substance they sell is portrayed vividly. The gangland life appears very real and one that is shocking and violent and strangely often hilarious.

S.Gregory

It is an intriguing tale and shows the cold business attitude of the drug dealers who plague our streets. The story captivated me immediately, many of the characters appear familiar I would not be at all surprised if some were my neighbours, they appear so normal!

George Burnson

An amazing adventure, one fraught with danger and showing a darker side of life that many do not believe exists.

The desire for money and power that the dealers crave is shown in this novel and the lengths people are prepared to go to obtain it.

Mr S. Ansenn

Chapter One

Nicola looked down at the mess on the floor; torn cigarette papers, sweet wrappers, shopping receipts and what looks like dirt is now spread out on the floor where Stef, her boyfriend, has emptied his pockets out. Nicola feels her face flushing with anger as she had only

cleaned and dusted the whole flat twenty minutes ago!

“Stef!!” Nicola shouts.

“What ya want?” answers Stef from the other room in a ‘do not bother’ me tone of voice. Stef has a light-hearted outlook to life; he knows his put-on tone of voice will upset Nicola and feels she takes life too seriously.

“Get in here; *now!*” shouts an angrier Nicola as Stef’s attitude does infuriate her.

Stef stomps his feet as he walks into the room; “What’s the matter with you now?”

“Look at the mess you have made; you complain to me that I do not keep this place clean enough, how can I with you around?”

Stef looks down at the floor; “Nothing to do with me.” he answers in a bored voice and starts to turn away.

“Stay right where you are, how dare you say that to me?” screams Nicola.

Stef turns and looks at Nicola’s red face; “You wanna learn how to take a joke, yeah sorry, I forgot about that.”

Nicola is off balance with Stef’s calm voice and easy admission of guilt and she stares at him as the anger inside her slowly fades; “You bastard.” she laughs; “Do it now please.”

“Of course dear, is there anything else that you would like me to do?”

Nicola stares at Stef, not sure if he is being serious or sarcastic she decides that “No thank you.” is the safest answer.

Stef nods in apparent obedience and walks into the kitchen for the dustpan and brush; opening the cupboard door under the sink he rummages around inside;

“Come on; where you put it?”

“Put what?” answers Nicola innocently from the dining room.

“The dustpan and brush; what else?”

“You had it last when you knocked my plant over.”

“Oh yeah I remember.” Stef laughs and opens the back door as the telephone rings.

“I’ll get it.” shouts Nicola.

Stef is closer and reaches it in two steps, picking up the receiver he says in a put on common sounding voice; “What’dya want?”

“Yo Dude, how yer doin?”

“Simon, good to hear from you Dude, how was the States?”

“Really great, had lotsa beer and bike rides.”

“Strange mix, ouch!” shouts Stef as Nicola comes up behind him and punches him on the arm for answering the telephone.

“Hi Simon” shouts Nicola into the telephone as she walks into the kitchen.

“What’s goin on Dude?” asks Simon.

“It’s Nic being a usual pain, hey, hope you didn’t spend too much on me present ya know I will get embarrassed.” laughs Stef.

“You don’t have to worry about that I got you nowt,” laughs Simon, “I spent the money on a taxi to get to the airport.”

“Thought you were going on the train?”

“Yeah I was, got as far as Rainham and there was a bomb scare at Gillingham. We sat and waited for about an hour and then got shunted back to Sittingbourne as they were meant to be laying on buses. I waited along with about a thousand others for half an hour or more, so got a taxi to take me to Paddington for eighty quid.”

“Bomb scare? Didn’t hear nothing about that.” asks Stef.

“Yeah well, you wouldn’t would you as you don’t read the newspapers or watch the news on the telly do ya?”

answers Simon, saying it as more of a statement than a question.

“So what do you want then? As you haven’t got a present to bring over.” answers Stef in a put on rough voice.

“Ha ha, sorry mate, now I got over the jet lag I was wondering if you and Nic fancy a bike ride.”

“Where you thinking of going?” asks Stef.

“Down to the cliffs, maybe bit further to the river if you feel up to it, sure is a nice day.”

“Sounds a good idea, could do with getting out of here, hang on.” replies Stef into the telephone, covering the mouthpiece with his hand he shouts to Nicola to ‘Get here!’

“What now?” shouts Nicola from the kitchen.

“Do you wanna go for a bike ride with Si?”

“Depends where he’s going, I am not cycling ‘till we are exhausted like last time!”

“Nah we’re only going as far as the cliffs, maybe go the other side.”

“As long as you promise not to go too far.” says Nicola as she enters the room.

Stef uncovers the telephone; “Yeah, she’s up for it; ouch!” exclaims Stef as he receives another punch on the arm from Nicola.

“She?” shouts Nicola, “Who’s *she*?”

“Yeah all right.” grumbles Stef in an angry voice as Nicola’s punches hurt!

“That’s cool I’ll come right over as long as you two ain’t gonna have a fight.” says Simon in a nervous voice, he had witnessed their fights and arguments and would rather avoid the unpleasantness.

“She knows better,” laughs Stef rubbing his arm painfully; “Give us a half hour.”

“Yeah Ok see ya in a bit.” answers Simon as he

disconnects the call.

“That hurt bitch.” says Stef as he puts the receiver down.

“I have got a name you know.” replies Nicola in a sarcastic voice.

“Yeah, well I keep forgetting what it is,” laughs Stef “right now I’ll call you Joe as you can make me a sandwich or something nice to take with us.”

“You can make your own sandwich, I’m gonna get changed.” laughs Nicola as she brushes past him and goes into the bedroom.

Stef and Nicola live in a ground floor flat on the outskirts of a seaside town on the north Kent coast in England. The flat is large, as the building, built in the eighteen hundreds and of Victorian design, was originally built for a wealthy land owner to be a home for his large family of nine children; and as many servants to look after them!

The house originally had a lounge, two dining rooms, a library, large kitchen and servant’s quarters on the ground floor, with an equally large cellar beneath. The cellar had been divided to accommodate more servants and had also been used for storage of hay for the horses. Upstairs was divided into two floors with each floor having a lounge, two bedrooms, with a modern kitchen and a toilet and wash room.

Stef and Nicola are lucky in renting the ground floor as this included a small private area of the back garden that led directly from their back door. The area is about three metres square and surrounded by a high hedge of green privet, giving them a little privacy from the other tenants. The cellar below them remains empty as it is cold and slightly damp and unsuitable for living in.

Immigrants from Poland live in the flat above; two young couples in their early twenties. One couple do

night work at the local supermarket and the other couple work during the day as casual labour on a nearby chicken farm.

The top floor also houses immigrants; three families from India who seemed to be involved in two restaurants and a Take Away. They do not appear to be short of money as each family owns a Mercedes and they have a multitude of children!

Even though they all live in the same building their paths seldom cross. Stef and Nicola work long hours; Stef as a forklift driver at a haulage company about thirty miles away and Nicola as a qualified staff nurse, who is often called to work long hours at the local and other hospitals.

Stef is a swarthy looking individual; about two metres tall with close cropped light brown hair sitting on top of a round chubby face that looks ten years younger than his true age of twenty five years. His body looks muscular, but is betrayed by the pot belly that hangs over his leather belted blue jeans. A belly that is due to the long hours spent in his forklift truck and the five pints of brown ale that he drinks each day.

Nicola is three years older than Stef and appears delicate compared to Stef; being a good twenty centimetres shorter with a slim body and long brown shiny hair that reaches to her shoulders. Dark brown eyes look out from a thin face that appears to have seen troubled times. Slight worry lines are making an appearance across her brow and her eyes seem shadowed from lack of sleep and appear dark against her pale skin.

Nicola looks through her wardrobe for something to wear over her blue sweatshirt and black slacks. Choosing a pale lightweight jacket she puts it on and

looks at her reflection in the long wardrobe mirror. Twisting to the left and then to the right and with a stretch of her arms above her head she appears satisfied with her choice. Removing the jacket Nicola lays it carefully onto the bed and looks down at the array of shoes and trainers that cover the bottom of the wardrobe. Picking a pair of silver coloured trainers she flicks off her slippers and puts the trainers on, she ties them up tight and reaching over to her bedside table picks up a book and starts to read.

Nicola likes to read, especially romance novels and this one, about a girl in Jamaica has become very exciting; and Nicola is finding it hard to put down! Avidly she reads, imagining herself on a Jamaican beach in the arms of a strong, Jamaican hotel owner when Stef snaps her away by shouting her name repeatedly, and loud!

Annoyed to be taken away from the Jamaican sunshine Nicola throws her book down on the bed and with a; 'I'm coming.' goes into the kitchen; where Stef is still shouting.

"Alright, alright I'm here what's all the fuss?" says Nicola as she enters the kitchen.

"Where you been? You been gone twenty minutes!" demands Stef in his loud voice as he knows what Nicola has been doing.

"I've been getting changed." Nicola replies defensively. Stef eyes her up and down; "Changed?" he asks in his indignant voice "All you've changed is your trainers!"

"Well I been doing other things"

"Like what? Reading your sappy novel, I bet."

"Maybe." Nicola replies with a small smile on her face.

"I can see you have, your eyes go all soft and dopey looking."

"They do not," Nicola exclaims; "Have you made

sandwiches for me?" she asks looking at the sandwich filled plastic containers on the worktop.

"No they are mine, and there is no more bread left, well only what's in the freezer."

Nicola looks dismayed and upset that Stef has used all the bread, before she can pass comment Stef laughs; "You don't think I'm gonna eat all them do ya; especially the lemon curd?"

Nicola looks at Stef's smiling face; Stef does not like lemon curd and despite his denial had obviously made sandwiches for her as well as his own.

Nicola smiles sweetly in reply, her whole face changing, the smile making her look younger and somehow more vulnerable; "Thank you kind sir, you are like Winston in the book I am reading."

"You'd better watch your language or I might confiscate your sandwiches." says Stef sternly, now with only a hint of a smile, as he feels jealous of Nicola's romantic dreams; even though they are only stories in a book.

Nicola is saved from answering as the front door bell rings several times; Stef runs to the front door and opens it quickly to a stressed looking Simon.

"About time you answered it I been standing here for ages."

"We never heard it, you have to push it dead centre to get it to work." apologises Stef.

"I weren't sure if it was working or not, till I heard you running up the hall; you ready then?"

Stef looks at Simons flushed face, Simon is breathing heavily from riding his bicycle, and his large chest pulsates heavily as he quickly draws breath in and out. Simon is a well-built man; over two metres tall in his socks, his long black hair is tied into a pony tail at the back and is tied tightly around a very round face. Weighing a hundred and eighty pounds few challenge

his muscular form and he is used to getting his own way; he asks first but usually takes what he wants.

“Just waiting for Nicola,” lies Stef “Come in for a second.” Stef stands back from the door opening it wider.

Simon looks at his bike which is leaning against the wooden front fence; “No, I’ll wait here.”

“Suit yourself” says Stef as he walks back into the flat. Nicola appears carrying two small rucksacks;

“I heard that, Hello Simon, I am ready it’s *him* we’re waiting for.”

“Hi Nic, yeah he’s always bragging you have to wait for him.”

“Yeah, too right.” laughs Stef as he takes a rucksack from Nicola’s outstretched hand.

“You as well? A lot of people believe his lies.” answers Nicola in a bored voice.

Stef gives a snort as he opens the door to a front room, taking a couple of steps inside he pulls out Nicola’s shiny red bicycle and pushes it towards her. Nicola takes it from him, putting her rucksack over her shoulders and sitting astride her bike she rides it out of the open front door.

Stef follows quickly, slamming the front door he jumps on his expensive shiny black bicycle. Costing five times the amount as Nicola’s, it comes complete with twenty one gears, suspension, disc brakes and ergonomic saddle. He speeds down the path and out onto the road, without a backward glance as he passes Nicola and Simon, he pedals quickly down the road and is soon lost to sight around the corner.

“Looks like someone’s in a hurry, you two had a row?” asks Simon.

“Not that I know of.” replies Nicola as she pedals after Stef.

Simon's bike is similar to Stef's but in a metallic blue with down swept handlebars and hard thin leather saddle, he pulls it away from the fence and follows Nicola and Stef down the road.

Stef is waiting impatiently further on at the entrance to the path that leads down to the seafront. There were steep cliffs here years ago; now the cliffs have been landscaped to an angle of forty degrees to stop the erosion. Paths criss cross the grass covered slope that is interspersed with small bushes of gorse and young trees, giving it the appearance of a park in its early years.

As Nicola approaches the path Stef turns and rides down the slope, not giving her a chance to stop and catch her breath. Nicola is annoyed with Stef's behaviour and would much prefer a gentler ride. She turns right halfway down the slope, as she knows that riding down to the beach will mean cycling back up; as steep cliffs bar their way further on.

Simon speeds past her as she takes the turning and he joins Stef to cycle along the concrete sea defences that border the shingle beach. Nicola does not mind cycling alone, in fact she is getting used to it as more and more these days she finds herself separated from Stef somewhere along the ride. She looks down at the two men cycling side by side; already they are fifty feet in front of her and seem oblivious to her presence.

"How far do ya wanna go Dude?" asks Simon as he pulls level with Stef.

"Dunno, not too far depends on Nic, we'll ask her when we get to the Towers." he replies in an impatient voice.

"Nice day for a ride Dude." Simon enthuses looking up at the sky which is a deep blue. White cumulus clouds looking like giant balls of cotton wool drift on a high wind

far above.

“Yeah, lucky for this time of year it being only April.” replies Stef with enthusiasm warming to the favourite subject of the British; discussing the weather!

“The forecast is for rain this evening.” replies Simon seriously.

“You wouldn’t believe it.” answers Stef looking up at a big patch of blue sky. He looks behind only now remembering that Nicola is meant to be with them, not seeing her he looks up the slope. For a moment he cannot see her as she is far behind them; “What’s she doing up there?” he asks.

“She ain’t daft, we will have to go up there at the end, unless you wanna carry your bike up the one hundred steps?” asks Simon, referring to the steel steps that scale the steep cliffs at the end of the concrete sea defences.

“No, better not, Nicola won’t wanna do that and we can’t let her ride around The Glen on her own.”

“Yeah, that is what I was thinking, that’s a lonely path around there you would never hear the last of it if she slipped and fell.” says Simon with a wry grin.

“If she fell down there, she would probably break her neck.” replies Stef, picturing the fifteen metre drop to the bottom of the gorge. Though only created out of the sand and clay cliffs by a seasonal stream The Glen’s cliffs have become a sheer drop. The fall from the narrow path through trees and bracken onto the sand and rubbish of rusty bicycles and supermarket trolleys far below, would probably result in serious injury or death.

Simon slows a little and looks up and back at Nicola who is now a good five hundred yards further behind. Stef pedals faster and pulls away suddenly seeming to be in a hurry, Simon, seeing Stef speeding up pedals

hard to catch him up;

“Slow down Dude, we got all day, give Nicola a chance to catch up man.”

Apart from themselves the beach and path before them is deserted and Stef sees no reason to go slowly as they can meet Nicola at the entrance to The Glen. Ignoring Simon’s plea Stef pedals harder and soon leaves Simon far behind who frowns in irritation.

Stef takes the path that leads off the seafront at speed, even though the path now leads upwards Stef is going too fast and skids on some loose dirt and gravel. In a big swirling of dust and stones Stef skids off the path and nearly loses complete control; as he wobbles dangerously, almost falling to the concrete several feet below. Putting on the brakes he skids to a halt and looks down at the front wheel as if something is wrong. The noise of Simon approaching makes him look up and he stares at Simon in embarrassment.

Simon stares back at Stef with a blank expression on his face and rides past saying nothing as if they are strangers. Nicola pedalling furiously towards them sees Simon ride past Stef and seeing that Stef has come to no harm slows down to a sedate pace.

Simon waits for her at the end of the path; “Bit of a daft one your bloke.” he says with a laugh.

“He has got so much pent up energy he feels he has to go mad all the time.” Nicola replies in disapproval.

“Well you are only young once I suppose.” Simon says in defence of Stef.

“He is going to kill himself one day.” Nicola says with conviction.

“Let’s hope it’s not today as be a long way to carry him home.” answers Simon drily.

Nicola stares coldly into Simon’s eyes and pushing past him takes the lead going up the path, Simon looks

back at Stef who is now only a few yards away; “You upset her today Dude?” he asks.

Stef looks at Nicola as she rides away; “I dunno man, this always seems to happen when we go on bike rides together, I always end up riding on my own.”

“Maybe you should try and go a bit slower and let her ride up front for once.”

“I tried that but she goes so *slowly*.” laughs Stef in frustration.

Simon looks at Stef and feeling as if it is none of his business cycles up the path behind Nicola.

Nicola is waiting at the entrance to The Glen; seeing Simon and Stef as they enter the car park she rides slowly into the trees following the narrow path. As she approaches the bridge, made of scaffold poles and planks of wood, Stef squeezes past and overtakes her; making her wobble and weave on the narrow path.

Nicola feels the blood draining out of her face as she tries to gain control of the handlebars;

“What do you think you are doing?” she screams.

Stef laughs as he passes her and not looking behind crosses the wooden bridge and pedals faster; only to have to screech to a halt, as a golden retriever pulling its master along appears from around the corner.

The man, wearing a flat cap and long black coat, scowls at Stef. The way Stef is riding is too fast for this winding path; and he had nearly rode into him!

Stef looks down at his front wheel ignoring the man and dog as they walk past. Nicola and Simon stop as they reach the bridge and let the man and his dog walk across first.

The man stares at Nicola as he walks past; the leering look on his face shows what he would like to do to her. Simon, seeing the way the man is looking at his friend

walks forward with his bike; narrowing the path and forcing the perverted man to the far side of the path.

As soon as there is room Nicola pedals hard and crosses the bridge with Simon close behind, Stef has already gone on ahead and they cycle a little faster to catch him up.

The path leads along the side of the gorge; the steep cliffs above and a horrendous drop below makes Nicola slow to a walking pace; Simon narrowly avoids crashing into the back of her as she gives no warning!

They cycle slowly along the path which leads them up and out of the gorge and onto a large area that is heavily overgrown with gorse, brambles and small trees and bushes. The path weaves its way amongst the bushes and undulations in the ground until it reaches the top of the high cliffs that lead to The Towers.

Stef sits out of the wind behind a large old building that looks out across the North Sea. The building was used as a Customs and Excise Headquarters many years ago, but is now empty and deteriorating in the wind and cold winters, and is a useful place to sit and rest.

“You took your time.” laughs Stef as Nicola and Simon reach him.

“We are in no hurry Dude.” answers Simon a little breathless as he lays his bike down on the grass and sits beside it.

Nicola leans her bike against the brick of the building and sits down next to Stef; leaning back gratefully against the cold brickwork she closes her eyes and gives a little sigh.

“You alright?” asks Stef.

“Yes, fine, that last bit is all uphill.”

Stef for all his apparent unconcerned attitude feels a deep love for Nicola and watches her with concern, Nicola had been ill over the winter months with constant

colds and influenza and never seeming to recover before another virus would attack.

"Well it's all downhill to The Towers now, bumpy is all." he smiles.

Nicola smiles back; "Apart from the bit that goes uphill."

"That's not much; anyway we will rest again at The Towers."

"What do you mean *rest again*, how far are we going?"

"Only to the river, if you feel up to it, that is?"

"Yeah, I'm Ok it feels good to be out." Nicola replies looking up at the sky and at the surrounding fields.

"Anyone want a drink?" asks Simon, offering a green water bottle.

"Yes please." answers Nicola holding out her hand.

Simon hands it to her and gives a big sigh of happiness; "My legs feel better now after being all cramped up on planes and trains."

"Hark at the jetsetter; wish I could go to the states for sixty quid!" Nicola laughs.

Simon's face falls; "Don't forget the extra eighty quid and the ulcer getting to the airport."

"Yeah, I wouldn't have liked the stress, but that's still not a lot for a return to America!"

"S'pose ya right," laughs Simon; "We gonna sit here all day then?"

Nicola, after taking a small drink from Simon's water bottle, hands it back to him and stands up; "I'm ready."

Stef also stands and sits on his bicycle and waits for Nicola and Simon before he follows the path into a large open field of grass that borders the cliffs.

They cycle slowly as the field is bumpy and now they are away from the building the view from the cliff top of the North Sea is awesome! A distant island appears to glow and move in the sunlight. A shingle beach forms a fantastic border between the grey of the sea and green

of the land. Far beyond the island is the city, the grey of the buildings and skyscrapers look dirty from this distance and to the east, the hint of the French coastline shows as a dark line bordering the horizon.

They all cycle steadily across the field avoiding the many dogs and dog walkers and soon arrive at the large car park and 'The Towers' visitor centre. Without a glance at the attractions Stef cycles across the car park to the public house. Getting off his bike he is already walking towards the entrance when Nicola and Simon arrive.

"You wanna beer?" he asks.

"No, I don't want one." replies Nicola with disapproval.

"Yeah I'll have a lager please mate." Simon smiles.

"You sure you don't want a drink; coke, orange?"

"No, I'm fine." smiles Nicola as she gets off her bike, she leans it against the wall near Stef's bike and sits down at a bench and table as Stef enters the public house. Simon lays his bike carefully on the ground and sits beside her and they wait quietly not speaking until Stef returns with the beers.

"This is what I need." he says putting Simon's lager in front of him and Stef takes a long drink of his brown ale; "That's better." he says removing the now half empty glass from his mouth as he wipes the froth from his lips and belches contentedly.

Simon raises his glass; "Cheers." as he also drinks half the glass in one swallow. With the same contented smile and soft belch he raises his glass again and finishes the lager in one go.

Stef quickly follows and reaching his hand out for Simon's empty glass he goes back into the public house.

"I hope he isn't getting me another one, I won't be able to ride me bike." Simon laughs.

“I noticed that you did not say no.” says Nicola with a smile.

“I thought he was just taking the empty glasses back.” Simon laughs as a blush of red shows on his cheeks.

Nicola smiles, tempted to criticise Simon’s addiction further but decides against it, instead she looks back across the car park and distant cliffs. There are not many cars in the car park this early in the season and she has an uninterrupted view of the magnificent sandy cliffs; that are topped with an amazing field of green.

Stef comes out of the public house empty handed; retrieving his bicycle from the public house wall he jumps astride and looks at Nicola and Simon with impatience.

Simon stands appearing relieved that Stef has not bought any more beer and picks his bicycle up. With a happy smile he puts a foot on the pedal and sits on the saddle as the bike is propelled along the path.

Nicola takes her time; adjusting her rucksack she takes her bike from Stef who has been patiently holding it and pedals after Simon.

The steep hill up to The Towers is too steep for Nicola to cycle up and she gets off and walks as Stef labours past her on his bicycle.

Simon and Stef’s bicycles lay beside the path when she reaches the top and she looks about anxiously; they are by the wall of the old church looking out across the water, they appear excited as they both shout and point far out to sea.

Nicola lays her bike down on the grass next to the others and runs across the old graveyard to see what all the excitement is about.

About half a kilometre away a sleek speedboat with two large black engines on the back is being chased by

a police launch. The speedboat weaves one way and then the other trying to escape the slightly slower launch. The speedboat slowly increases the gap and heads out to sea; Stef and Simon shout excitedly encouraging the speedboat in its escape.

“Hope he makes it, whatever he’s been doing.” shouts Stef in excitement.

“Probably speeding and scaring the locals in a boat like that.” laughs Simon.

“Wrong time of day to be doing any smuggling.” confirms Stef, seeing Nicola behind them he asks; “Did you see that Nic?”

“Don’t see what all the excitement is about; apart from a boat escaping the police.”

“Well that’s worth seeing once in a while.” smiles Stef.

Nicola turns and starts to walk back to the bicycles, with a last backward look at the speeding boats Simon and Stef run after her.

Beyond The Towers the sea defences stretch all the way to the next town which can just be seen in the distance. The sea defences are made up of a high concrete thick wall topped by a flat single track road; and makes an ideal cycle path. The views of the distant seaside town and across the marshland keep them occupied as they cycle along at a steady pace. The sea is at high tide; waves splash gently on the shingle beach as small birds run between the waves catching food, and not seeming to get their feet wet. The speeding boats are now lost to sight amongst the waves and only the faint hum of their engines can be heard as seagulls float lazily on the light wind.

Stef, impatient with the slow progress starts to pull ahead; turning his head he shouts that he will meet them at the river and pedals hard. He is proud of his

physique and likes to push himself to the limit; along with the excitement of going fast the blood coursing through his veins as he pedals makes him feel alive and proud. Furiously he pedals, his heart beat increasing as he looks at the blur of concrete below him, tucking his head down he pedals faster.

“Look at him go.” enthuses Simon.

“And on only one pint of beer.” laughs Nicola.

They watch Stef’s departing figure as they cycle slowly along enjoying the peace and smell and sound of the sea. Skylarks sing from above the marsh making it appear a beautiful place. The sun soon changes that by disappearing behind a cloud, silencing the Skylarks and bringing a chill wind from the east.

Nicola stops and taking out a thin waterproof jacket puts it on as Simon waits and looks out to sea. Dark clouds now line the horizon to the north and east and they seem to be coming this way.

With jacket on Nicola continues cycling at a sedate pace with Simon riding beside her. They talk of Simon’s recent trip to America and of Nicola and Stef’s desire to move to Australia until they reach the river; and a very excited Stef!

Chapter Two

As they had approached Stef, who was waiting beside the river, Nicola could tell by his posture that something was wrong; pedalling faster she rides up to him and pulls up sharply;

“What’s wrong?” she asks as Stef’s face is flushed red with excitement.

He stares deep into Nicola’s eyes, his eyes flash and

sparkle with excitement and he jumps nervously backwards when Simon screeches to a stop in front of him.

“What’s up Dude?” Simon asks.

Stef turns and looks deep into Simon’s eyes not saying anything. He appears proud and sure of himself, but at the same time there is a strange look in his eyes. Stef looks at Simon and back at Nicola unable to speak; the thoughts racing through his mind become a jumble of excitement to what he has found. He opens his mouth to speak but finds it too dry, reaching down to his rucksack, which is on the ground beside his feet, he takes out a small bottle of water. Unscrewing the lid hurriedly he takes a long drink. Mouth no longer dry he turns back to Nicola and Simon, the excitement he feels makes him stutter; “Loo-Look what I f-found.” and waving his arm he indicates to them to follow him.

Nicola and Simon lay their bikes down on the soft grass and follow Stef along the riverbank until they reach a large area of reeds growing on marshland.

Stef looks around mysteriously to make sure no one can see him before he enters the reeds; “Stay there.” he commands as he disappears into the reeds.

A few moments later he emerges from the reeds carrying a long black holdall; the holdall looks heavy as he struggles to carry it towards them. Dropping the bag in front of them he lets out a big breath; “I think those fellas the old bill were chasing were smugglers; cop this!” he says excitedly.

Simon looks surprised and leans down to unzip the bag.

“What is it?” asks Nicola.

Simon unzips the bag as Stef says; “Have a look.” and attempts a scared smile.

“Oh my good god!” Simon exclaims as he looks inside

the bag.

Nicola peers inside; the bag is full of money, Simon reaches in and takes out a thick bundle of twenty pound notes. There must be five thousand, if not ten thousand pounds in this one bundle, and the bag is full of them and many bundles that look composed of fifty's!

Nicola takes the money from Simon's shocked hand; the money is wrapped tightly with an elastic band and she struggles to pull a single note from the middle of the bundle. Not succeeding she impatiently removes the elastic band and then holds a note up to the sky;

"Hey, these are real." she says with rising excitement.

The realisation of what Stef has found hits Simon and Nicola at the same time; "What are we going to do?" asks Nicola in a worried voice.

"Keep it." answers Stef firmly.

"You sure 'bout that Dude?" asks Simon.

"A third of it is yours." replies Stef with a smile.

Simon looks down at the bag and thinks of the problems it will cure; and the problems it may cause, looking Stef in the eyes he says firmly; "If that money does belong to smugglers they could be difficult to deal with, guns possibly if they are dealing in that amount of money." and he nods towards the bag at his feet.

Stef looks around at the empty marsh that surrounds them and laughs; "Who's gonna know?"

Simon stands and looks at the surrounding marsh, being a head taller than Stef he can see further, a blue flashing light in the distance attracts his eye; "Maybe they will." he says in a flat tone of voice.

Stef looks in the direction of Simon's gaze and can see nothing, except marsh, reeds and grass; "Who?"

"Stand up on the bank, you'll see better."

Stef walks up the bank a little way and looks across the marsh, the flash of a blue light increases his heartbeat

and he looks down at Simon; “They are a long way away and it’s a real bumpy track. I reckon we got twenty minutes before they get here that is if they are coming this way, they don’t seem to be moving.”

“Yeah I was thinking that Dude, shall we get out of here?”

“Don’t I get a say in any of this?” asks Nicola in a stressed voice.

Stef looks at her; “Of course you have a say on a third of it.”

“I say we get out of here; and fast!”

“Couldn’t agree more.” laughs Simon nervously.

Stef takes the money from Nicola’s hand and puts it back in the holdall, zipping the bag up he picks it up and with muscles straining walks towards the bicycles.

“How are you going to carry it back? You’ll end up with a hernia or something if you think you can carry it over your shoulder.” asks Simon.

“Easy, I’ll lay it along the crossbar, won’t be too bad cycling as long as I keep my legs open.” laughs Stef.

“How yer going to get past the pub or even home come to that, without being seen?” asks Simon.

Stef laughs putting the holdall on the ground he opens his rucksack and putting his hand in he pulls out what looks like a green waterproof jacket. Hooking the rucksack over his handlebars he slowly unfolds the waterproof jacket which gets larger as he unfolds it; Simon can see that it is a large waterproof cape!

With a swirl above his head Stef neatly puts on the cape and sitting astride his bike he picks up the heavy bag and lays it along the crossbar, where it fits neatly tucking itself under his saddle. Adjusting the cape Stef drapes it over the handlebars; the cape hangs low, about to his knees and effectively covers the bag.

“Cool,” laughs Simon; “You want me to take your

rucksack?”

“Good idea.” replies Stef handing the rucksack to Simon.

Simon’s arm bends a little under the weight; “What you got in here Dude?”

“Bottle of water and sandwiches, you can chuck them if you want.” Stef replies.

Simon opens the rucksack and takes out a lunchbox of sandwiches and an old plastic lemonade bottle filled with water. Putting the bottle on the ground he looks inside; Stef tells him there is only another small water bottle and his tobacco. Simon takes off his rucksack and folding Stef’s he puts it inside. Emptying the sandwiches onto the grass he puts the empty box into his rucksack and slings it over his shoulders. Picking up the large bottle he unscrews the lid and empties the water over the grass; “I’ll throw this in the sea.” he says holding up the empty bottle.

“Can we please *go*.” shouts Nicola as she sits impatiently astride her bike.

Stef starts to pedal slowly away, the weight of the bag makes him wobble as he rides and it is a good twenty metres before he gains full control and able to ride in a straight line. Simon and Nicola ride about five metres behind, Simon anxiously looks out across the marsh and can see the blue flashing light in the distance. He speeds up and pulls alongside Stef; “A little faster if you can Dude and it looks like you are gonna need that cape; look up at the sky.”

Stef looks up, the black clouds that lined the horizon are nearly upon them and the air feels heavy with rain; “That’s good, keep the tourists away.”

“How are you going to get past the pub?” Simon asks him.

“You can go first and check it out.” Stef smiles as his

bicycle wobbles dangerously.

Simon brakes, letting Stef pull in front of him and concentrate on getting his bike under control, Stef weaves in front of him and manages to steer his bike in a straight line.

“Is he alright?” asks Nicola as she draws level with Simon.

“Yeah, he’s alright, don’t go too close or he’ll run you over.” he laughs.

Nicola feels too tense to laugh only managing a worried smile as the first drops of rain blown in the wind reach them. Simon stops and hurriedly puts his waterproof jacket on as Stef and Nicola continue cycling. Zipping the jacket up to his chin Simon pedals hard to catch them up as the rain starts in earnest. Fifty yards further on Simon’s legs are soaked, as he has no waterproof trousers. Nicola has the same problem and pedals with difficulty as her jeans stick tightly to her legs. Stef fares better under the cape with only the bottom of his jeans and socks and trainers getting wet.

The rain beats down heavily upon them as they struggle along; visibility is down to about a hundred metres making them feel isolated and alone. The appearance of the Roman wall that once bordered The Towers is a welcoming sight and Stef gets behind it to get out of the rain and wait for Simon and Nicola.

Simon pulls alongside Stef as Nicola pulls in behind him and gets close to the wall; “Wait here Dudes, I’ll go and have a look.” he says as he leaves them sheltering against the wall. Simon cycles slowly up the little hill where he can see the car park and with only his head showing, he dismounts laying his bike on the ground and moves slowly forward.

The car park is empty; except for a police car parked in

the far corner that overlooks the sea.

Simon goes back to his bike, picking it up and keeping his head down below the brow of the hill he uses The Towers as a shield between him and the police car. Crossing the graveyard he reaches The Towers; looking around a rain soaked corner he looks down at the car park; the police car has gone! Simon looks around wildly for it and his eye catches movement by the old Arcades as the police car drives up the road. Simon smiles in relief and leaning his bike against The Towers he runs back to Stef and Nicola and waves them forward.

Stef tries hard to pedal away from the wall but the bike and bag are too heavy for the soft ground. He dismounts and pushes it up the hill towards Simon, as a dripping Nicola follows behind.

Simon runs down to Stef and getting hold of the other side of the bike helps him push it up the hill. The rain has eased a little but everywhere is soaked and dripping, including themselves!

They push Stef's bike over to The Towers to get some shelter from the rain and catch their breath. Nicola impatiently leans her bicycle against the brick of The Towers, walking past Stef and Simon she approaches the corner and cautiously peers around the brickwork at the car park below; with relief she sees that the car park is empty and can see no signs of life.

"There's no one about." she says softly to Stef and Simon.

"I'll go first again," volunteers Simon; "the problem is the pub, there are bound to be people in there, maybe even looking out of the windows."

"How we gonna do this?" asks Stef nervously as Nicola comes back from the edge of The Tower.

"I'll ride to the far end of the car park in case there are

people watching from the pub. I'll give the all clear by taking off my rucksack and I'll drink from my water bottle."

"And what if it's not cool?" Stef asks with a frown.

"I'll go in the pub." Simon says with a grin.

Looking up at the sky Simon mounts his bike; "Is that getting brighter, or is it my imagination?"

Stef and Nicola look at the sky; "Could be." says Stef optimistically.

"See you on the other side Dude." Simon says as he rides out of the shelter of The Towers and into the rain.

Stef and Nicola watch him ride slowly down the steep path and into the car park. Simon cycles to the top of the car park and turns around facing them and the public house. He sits still and looks up at the sky, Stef and Nicola know he is looking all around and eagerly, and nervously await his signal. Simon appears to find something interesting to look at near the Arcades; the road is in that direction and Stef feels his stomach tense.

Simon slowly removes his rucksack and takes out a bottle of water, turning in their direction he drinks from the bottle.

"Come on." says Stef grabbing hold of his bicycle, he pushes it away from The Towers and contemplates the steep slope before him; "Hang on Nic, let me go first as I will have to walk most of the way down the hill or I will fall off."

Nicola nods in agreement and steps back behind The Towers so that she is out of the rain, nervously she watches him struggle to control the heavy bicycle. When Stef is about halfway down he quickly steps astride his bike and free wheels down the hill and into the car park. Nicola quickly follows, though like Stef she walks part way down the hill before freewheeling into the car park.

Peddalling furiously to keep her momentum going she soon pulls up alongside Simon who is putting his rucksack back on, Stef has continued past him and is nearly at the field.

“Keep going, I’ll catch up.” Simon tells Nicola who wastes no time and cycles quickly to Stef, who is struggling now he has reached the grassy field.

The rain has softened the ground at this part of the field which grips the wheels making it difficult for Stef to ride. He gets off and pushes his bike for about fifty metres until the ground starts to slope away and is a little drier. Stef pedals slowly weaving about and is unable to keep his bike in a straight line, Nicola and Simon keep behind him until the ground starts to rise again forcing Stef off his bike. He turns and looks at his friends, the tiredness and frustration showing on his dripping face.

“You alright Dude?” asks Simon.

“This is hard work I’ll have to walk up to the top.”

“No problem to take it in turns Dude.” suggests Simon.

“Yeah there is, we need to keep the bag dry.” replies Stef, even though he has dismounted his cape is still draped over the handlebars and saddle protecting the holdall from the rain.

“No worries, I’ll give you a push.” says Simon as he moves forward and putting his hand on the back of the saddle starts to push Stef’s bike along.

Stef is taken by surprise and nearly loses his footing as he is still holding onto the handlebars and Simon’s push jerks him forward.

“Sorry Dude.” Simon laughs.

Stef takes a couple of quick steps and helps push the bike through the soft ground. Nicola stays a few metres behind, nervously she looks behind them and with the rain getting lighter is relieved to see that the car park is

still deserted. Looking out to sea she can see nothing except for a lonely seagull bobbing on the waves far in the distance. Her wet jeans stick to her legs like a second skin and feel most uncomfortable; and she is getting cold as well!

They struggle along, with Simon helping to push the heavy bicycle they make good time and stop in the lee of the old customs building that is on the top of the cliffs.

“I could go to sleep.” says Stef in a weary voice.

“We can’t stop long Dude, there were cops in the car park when I first looked, now the rain is easing they are bound to come out again.”

“Thanks for telling us!” says Nicola in a stressed voice.

“I thought it best.” smiles Simon.

“Come on then.” says Stef impatiently and pushes his bike away from the wall and follows the path down towards The Glen.

Simon and Nicola follow wearily behind; the rain, long journey, stress and cold is taking its toll and they still have a fair way to go before they are safe and dry.

Stef struggles to control his bike as he slips and slides down the steep path, Simon helps him by holding the saddle and keeping the bike upright. The conditions improve as they enter The Glen, sheltering them from the wind and rain. Stef gets on his bike and cycles slowly along the path, wisely he dismounts and walks across the wooden bridge. The wood is wet and slippery; to fall here when so close to home would be difficult to take.

As Stef approaches the entrance to The Glen he stops and waits for the others to catch up; anxiously he looks out across the rough surfaced car park.

“You gonna check it out?” he asks Simon.

“Ok Dude.” answers Simon as he cycles past and out into the car park, circling around he comes back to Stef

and Nicola; “Not a soul Dude, who likes the rain?”

Stef gives a cold grin and rides out into the car park, Simon and Nicola follow and they get across and onto the path that leads to the seafront without seeing anyone. Stef turns onto the path halfway down the smoothed cliffs and with a spurt of energy pedals hard not stopping until he is forced to go uphill and has to dismount. Pushing hard he is soon at the top and breathing hard jumps astride his bike and cycles quickly along the road.

Nicola and Simon struggle to keep up with him and they marvel at Stef’s new found energy, too tired to say anything they push on hard to try and catch him up, which they eventually do when they reach Stef and Nicola’s front gate!

Stef is already putting his key in the front door when they pull up and opening the door he pushes his bicycle inside.

Simon leans his bike against the front of the house and shuts the front gate. When he enters the house Stef has already opened the inner door and is putting their bikes into the spare room, the holdall lies on the floor just inside their flat.

Stef comes out of the room and drags the heavy holdall further into the flat; “Come in Si, and shut the door.”

“Yeah, too right” answers Simon as he walks in closing the door behind him; “Where’s Nic?”

“Getting changed, she’s soaked and so are you, I’ll see what I got.” says Stef as he walks into the bedroom.

Simon stays where he is not wishing to sit down in his wet clothes, a couple of minutes later Stef comes out of the bedroom carrying a black tracksuit; “Here ya go, that should fit, though you are a bit taller than me.” he says as he hands the tracksuit to Simon and goes back into

the bedroom.

Simon walks to the bathroom at the back of the building, shutting the door he strips off his sodden clothes and puts the tracksuit on; which is too short at the arms and legs! The end of the sleeves are a good six inches from his wrists and the trousers finish halfway down his shins making him look most comical.

Picking up his wet clothes he puts them in the enamel bath and goes back into the front room. The holdall lies on the floor where Stef had dragged it and Simon looks down at it with a happy smile on his face. Sitting down on the huge couch he stares and dreams until Stef and Nicola bring him back to earth by entering the room, both now wearing dry clothes.

“I need a drink, you wanna coffee Si?” asks Nicola.

“Yeah please.” answers Simon, still with a dreamy look on his face.

Nicola laughs, looks at the holdall and goes into the kitchen, the sound of running water and clashing mugs shows that she is in a hurry to make it.

Coming back into the room she looks at Simon and Stef who are staring at the holdall as if it contains some wild animal, or something dangerous!

“Aren’t you going to open it then?” she asks in a commanding voice.

Stef seems to snap out of his dream and looks her in the eyes; “What’s the hurry?”

“Are there any valuables in your clothes Si? I am going to put them in the tumble drier as that tracksuit does not become *you!*” and she laughs and laughs, laughing more with relief, than at Simon’s ill fitting tracksuit.

Simon blushes a deep red and joins in the nervous laughter, when he manages to catch his breath he is able to say; “Only money.” before he goes into hysterical laughter.

Stef joins in, relieved that the ordeal is over and excited as to how much money is in the bag!

Nicola goes back into the kitchen and finishes making the drinks, carrying three mugs in her hands she comes back in and puts them on the coffee table. The holdall remains on the floor unopened and she kneels down and unzips the bag. Standing up she goes back into the kitchen to put Simon's clothes in the tumble drier.

Chapter Three

"We counting it Dude?" asks Simon.

"S'pose we'd better." laughs Stef, reaching out for a coffee he takes a sip and closes his eyes in appreciation.

"There sure is a lot there." says Simon excitedly.

"Yeah, looks to be a million, they are bundled in twenties and fifties!"

Simon takes a drink of his coffee and stares at the open bag, eager to count it he feels that Stef should make the first move and looks at him impatiently.

Stef laughs and putting down his coffee he drags the bag closer and reaching in takes out several bundles of twenty pound notes, handing them to Simon he laughs; "Here, have a count."

Simon quickly puts down his coffee cup and reaches for the money; "Cheers Dude." he laughs, putting the bundles down onto the little table he takes one, removes the elastic band and starts to count.

Stef takes a bundle of notes out of the bag and taking a sip of his coffee and removing the elastic band he starts to count.

Nicola comes back into the room, seeing them

counting she picks up her coffee cup and takes a drink as she watches.

Several minutes later Stef slaps the bundle of money down onto the table; "Five." he says with a loud laugh.

Simon looks at him as he finishes counting; "I made it four eight; I musta missed one."

"How much?" shouts Nicola.

"Five grand in mine." Stef laughs.

Nicola leans down to look inside the bag; "But there are loads!" she exclaims holding one of the bundles of fifties.

"Better get counting then instead of watching us." Stef commands.

Nicola obediently takes a handful of the bundles and sitting back in the armchair removes all of the elastic bands and excitedly starts to count.

A frown crosses Simon's brow; "Problem we got is counting all that lot again!" he looks down at the coffee table. As they had been counting they had removed the elastic bands dropping them on the floor. The money, after they had counted it they have been putting on the coffee table; which is now covered in loose money.

"Oh yeah, I see what you mean." laughs Stef, "better organise a bit better." he says as he picks up some of the elastic bands from the floor.

"Keep 'em in the elastic bands, put 'em in ten thousands make it easy to count at the end." orders Stef.

Nicola stands up and putting the money she was counting onto the table she bends down and starts to take the money out of the holdall putting it on the floor.

"What are you doing?" asks Stef.

"I counted six bundles and each one had five thousand pounds, just thought that I would count what was here."

"We're getting in a mess here; help us sort this out on

the table and we won't have to bend down too much."

"Ok." replies Nicola disappointedly and starts to count the money on the table; "Put it in ten thousands you said?"

"Yeah be easier." confirms Stef, wrapping an elastic band around a bundle of twenties as he puts it down onto the table and picks up a large wad and counts quickly.

All is quiet as they concentrate and tie the newly counted larger bundles with the elastic bands and stack them neatly onto the coffee table. Stef starts to empty the bag and with the help of Simon and Nicola they stack the money in neat piles.

"I think we need a calculator." laughs Nicola as she stands and walks over to a chest of drawers. Opening the top drawer she reaches inside and takes out a large calculator, with large square buttons that make it look like a toy.

"Does that work?" asks Simon.

"Course it does." states Nicola firmly.

Nicola turns on the calculator and looking at the table of money pushes buttons with a thoughtful look. Stef and Simon watch her with impatience, a few minutes later and with an excited glint in her eye she hands the calculator to Stef.

"How much?" he asks taking the calculator from her outstretched hand.

"See if we make it the same." she replies as she walks back to the chest of drawers. Opening the top drawer again she takes out a ballpoint pen and an envelope and writes down her total.

Simon and Nicola stare at Stef as he works the calculator and after a few minutes he hands the calculator to Simon and stands up; "I need the loo." he laughs and walks across the room.

Simon counts silently, a frown furrowing his brow as he concentrates. As Stef comes back into the room he looks at Nicola with a questioning expression.

“I made it three million three hundred pounds.” she says grinning broadly.

“That’s what I made it,” laughs Simon; “What ‘bout you Stef?”

“We’re rich!” he shouts with excitement; “How much is that each?”

Simon pushes buttons on the calculator; “That’ll be; dunno what’s that say?” he asks in confusion showing the calculator to Stef.

Stef looks at the figures on the calculator, at first not understanding the confusion of figures; “Erh That’s one million one hundred pounds.” he says giving Simon an odd look.

“And one hundred pounds?” laughs Simon.

“Let’s have it?” Nicola asks walking over to Simon. With shaking hand she takes the calculator from Simon and with a serious expression pushes the buttons. Simon and Stef watch her expectantly as she works out the money, hitting a final button hard she looks up and smiles broadly; “That’s what I make it too.” she laughs; “Do it in your head.”

Simon and Stef both say the same swear word and burst out laughing as Nicola sits back down in the armchair.

“I’ve had enough of counting; you’ll have to count your own.” Stef tells Simon.

“You serious Dude, a third?”

“Yeah, I found it, but I couldn’t have got it home on me own.”

“Wow, hey thanks Dude.” answers Simon with a big grin and starts to separate the bundles of money in front of him.

“I need another drink.” says Nicola as she picks up the empty mugs and goes out into the kitchen.

Simon concentrates on counting his money and when he has a large pile in front of him he looks at Stef;

“You owe me one thousand three hundred Dude; coz I can’t be bothered.” he laughs as he sits back on the couch.

“Sorry mate I’m skint.” laughs Stef.

Simon shrugs his shoulders and stares at the money before him; “What ya gonna do with yours?” he asks Stef.

“Need a new motor and we wanna go to Australia, this will sort us right.” replies Stef with a huge grin on his face.

“They won’t accept pound notes in Australia Dude, its dollars out there in it?”

Stef’s face falls and he frowns in annoyance; “Ya know I hadn’t thought of that, do you know a money changer?”

“Not an illegal one, maybe you’d better stay here, you got no problems now.”

Stef looks at the money on the table deep in thought; “No, we’re going to Australia.” he states firmly.

“What’s the matter?” Nicola asks as she enters the room carrying three mugs of coffee.

“Stef says you are going to Australia; how are you going to spend this down there?” Simon asks nodding towards the money on the table.

Nicola puts the mugs down on the only spare space on the table and looks intently at Stef; “Well?” she asks in a cold voice.

“I’ll think of something, Martin will know someone.”

“Martin? He works in the bank admittedly but doesn't he still owe you one hundred and twenty five pounds?” says Nicola angrily. All her dreams seem to be falling around her faced with this problem, she had dreamt of

owning a lovely home in Australia and had thought finding this amount of money would enable her to fulfil her dream. This is a large problem and she is angry at herself for not thinking of it; and not knowing the solution! With a worried look she stares at Stef hoping he could come up with a different solution. Martin, though a good friend mixed with the wrong kind and she felt that she could not trust him.

“He knows a lot of people, I know he’s got some dodgy mates but he knows some good people as well.” answers Stef defensively not answering her question.

Nicola stares at him not convinced as her mind races for a better solution, in frustration she realises that she knows no money launderers and clenches her jaw in agitation.

“Don’t worry about it.” assures Stef, “Anyway we’ll eat well,” taking a twenty pound note from the table he waves it around; “Anyone want a Take Away?”

“Yeah, I’m starving, let me pay.” laughs Simon taking a twenty from the pile in front of him.

“I can’t afford it.” laughs Nicola holding up a huge bundle of money; “I only got this and it’s gotta last me.”

They all laugh, Stef walks over to the telephone and dials a number, after a few seconds he speaks into the telephone and orders three large pizzas. Confirming his address and telephone number he hangs up the phone and waits for the return call. The telephone rings almost immediately and he confirms his name and address.

“What did you order Dude?” asks Simon.

“Thought we’d celebrate; so I ordered three deep pan tropical.”

“Cool.” laughs Simon.

“I’d better sort some plates and things out.” says Nicola as she stands up, looking down at the money on the table she shakes her head in wonder at the sight and

goes out into the kitchen.

“I’m starving Dude, did they say how long?”

“About twenty minutes, the fella reckoned.”

“My clothes must be dry by now.” says Simon as he stands and walks into the kitchen, going to the tumble drier he opens the door and puts his hand inside.

“They should be dry, they’ve had long enough.” Nicola tells him as she opens the cupboard door and gets the plates out.

Simon pulls out his hot and now dry clothes and goes into the bathroom to get changed out of the ill fitting track suit.

Stef goes into the bedroom and searching under the bed pulls out a large flattened cardboard box. Walking back into the lounge he reassembles the box and gets a roll of parcel tape from the chest of drawers. Securing the bottom of the box with the tape he turns it right way up on the floor and sits back down on the couch with a thoughtful expression.

“Why so worried Dude?” asks Simon as he walks into the lounge wearing his dry clothes.

“Now we’re back and I’ve calmed down I feel really scared.”

“Scared of what Dude?”

“The police for one; but I’m more scared of the owners.” he says in a shaky voice nodding towards the table of money.

“I was trying to say that at the river Dude.” Simon says with a tone of impatience to his voice.

“Yeah, well I been thinking since then, ‘specially ‘bout changing it to dollars, just get the feeling I’m gonna lose it all.”

“Bit late for those thoughts Dude.”

“Yeah let’s hope no one saw us.”

“The rain certainly helped, we got no worries Dude.” Simon says in a positive voice.

“As long as we play it cool and keep our heads down, how about stashing the money for a while and see what happens?” asks Nicola from the doorway where she had been listening.

“Yeah, give it a month or so.” agrees Stef nervously.

The look on Simon’s face shows he does not agree with this thinking; he is behind with the rent and owes for gas and electric; and he’d not had a decent drink since he got back from the states.

Nicola and Stef do not see the look on Simon’s face and Nicola talks about putting a thousand to one side before they hide it. Stef disagrees with her saying that he needs a new car and how it would be good to take a few days off work now that they can afford to pay the bills. They start to argue; Nicola is more in favour of keeping spending to a minimum and to carry on life as normal, for a month or more. The ringing of the doorbell stops the arguing and they all look at each other with real fear in their eyes.

Simon is the first to realise it is the pizza delivery and laughs as he picks up two twenty pound notes and goes to the door to pay.

“Pizza delivery.” says the delivery boy stating the obvious as he has three pizza boxes in his hands.

“Nice one Dude.” says Simon handing him the money and taking the boxes from him.

The delivery boy takes out of his pocket a blue cotton bag that is full of change.

“Don’t worry Dude, have a beer on me.”

The delivery boy looks at him in surprise; “Thank you Sir.” he smiles.

Simon does not give him any opportunity to say any more and shuts the door with a bang.

“Grubs up.” shouts Simon as he turns and walks back towards to where he was sitting.

“I’ll have them.” says Nicola holding out her hand.

Simon looks surprised, but obediently holds out the pizza boxes for Nicola to take.

Nicola walks into the kitchen and almost immediately returns with two plates, covered in pizza slices!

“I don’t want them greasy boxes on my furniture thank you.” she says as she hands Simon a plate of pizza.

“Fair enough.” laughs Simon as he takes the plate from her hand.

Silently she passes the other plate of pizza to Stef who mumbles a ‘Thank you’ before he takes a huge bite.

Nicola goes back into the kitchen and puts water on to boil; loading her plate with pizza she goes back into the lounge and taking a slice as she walks bites off a huge mouthful. Stef and Simon eat quietly and soon consume all of the pizza, Simon gets second helpings from the kitchen and Nicola and Stef persuade him to make more coffee.

It is nearly midnight before Simon opens the front door to leave; Stef is close behind carrying the holdall with Simon’s money. It being so late, Stef has offered to take the money in his car to Simon’s flat whilst Simon cycles home.

Simon retrieves his bike from the front of the house and pushes it towards the front gate; “See you there Dude.” he says to Stef happily and cycles in the direction of the seafront. Having no lights on his bike he has no choice other than to ride along the seafront, or walk as the police are very strict about that sort of thing in this town.

The light from the new moon and few stars that show through the cloudy sky does little in helping Simon see

the way and he cycles slowly in the darkness. Reaching the seafront he pedals harder along the concrete road on top the sea defences; lights on the beach in the distance show fisherman casting their lines to a rising tide.

Simon feels relaxed and overjoyed at his new found wealth and rides along on auto pilot, his thoughts a thousand miles away as he enjoys a tropical sun and palm trees.

“Hold it there mate.” shouts a voice from the darkness and a huge figure appears before him.

Simon puts on his brakes as hard as he can and skids to a stop within a few centimetres of the huge individual.

“Where you come from mate?” asks the same voice from behind him!

Simon turns quickly to see a dark figure approaching him, as the figure draws close Simon hears a noise from the left indicating there are more than two!

“Where you from?” asks the man in a louder voice; the man only looks to be about one and a half metres tall and has a thin face that matches the skinny frame underneath the thin raincoat, blonde hair shows beneath a bright red baseball cap.

“Who are you?” asks Simon indignantly; even though he appears surrounded he does not like to be pushed around.

“We are looking for our friends, two men and a girl on bicycles, they should have been home hours ago have you seen anyone?” asks the little blonde haired man not answering Simon’s question.

Simon feels the fear rising from his stomach as he tries to answer the obvious lie.

“Have you seen anyone?” demands the man.

“No, not seen anyone mate, been round me girlfriends, she lives up there.” says Simon indicating his head

towards the distant shape of houses on the hill; “Ain’t no one between here and there.”

The little man stares at Simon, and Simon feels that the man does not believe him.

“You live ‘round here?” he demands.

“Yeah, down in the town mate and I gotta get up for work in a few hours.” Simon looks expectantly at the little man who nods to his giant friend.

Standing aside so that Simon can pass the huge man, the man stares at Simon intently with what looks like hatred in his eyes. Simon’s stomach feels like it is turning upside down under the fierce gaze and he puts his head down and starts to cycle slowly away.

“If you see them, you let ‘em know we are looking for them.” shouts the little man as Simon rides towards the bright lights of the town.

Simon cycles quickly when he is out of sight, but not before hearing the engine of a car start up from near where he had just been stopped! Putting his head down he keeps just ahead of the following car getting glimpses of it as he races around the street corners. Cutting through an alley he manages to lose his follower amongst the back streets. and arrives at his flat to find Stef sitting outside waiting impatiently; “You took your time, thought you got lost.” says Stef sarcastically.

“It’s really dark Dude and had to take it real slow in places.”

Stef grumbles a reply and gets out of his car, opening the trunk he pulls the holdall out and drops it by Simon’s feet. Simon visibly jumps and looks around nervously; everywhere seems quiet and deserted and he relaxes a little.

“Jumpy ain’t you?” laughs Stef.

“Only a bit Dude.” replies Simon getting off his bike, he

leans it against the concrete wall of his small front garden and picks up the bag, taking out his keys he unlocks the front door; "You coming in Dude?" he asks.

"No, I'm gonna get back, keep ya head down." he says as he gets into his car feeling that Simon appears more agitated and is not telling him something. With a worried frown he closes the door quietly and starts the engine and drives slowly up the road.

Simon throws the holdall into the hall and getting his bike pushes it inside and shuts the door. Struggling up the stairs with the heavy bag he unlocks the door to his flat and enters quietly. Walking softly he goes into the lounge and putting the holdall on the floor walks to the window and peers out nervously. The street appears empty and deserted and Simon relaxes, until he sees a bald headed man in a bright green T-shirt, long khaki shorts and battered brown work boots turn the corner into his road and walk towards him!

Simon leans back from the window his heart pounding loudly, how could he know? Simon had cycled fast and really thought he had lost the car following him, meaning they may not have seen Stef.

Peering out of the window again Simon looks down the street; the bald headed man is making no secret that he is looking for someone or something as he brazenly peers into houses and up at windows. Releasing the curtain Simon steps back into the room his heart beating fast. Looking down at the holdall of money his mind racing, Simon thinks what he is to do. In agitation he paces around the room now too frightened to look out of the window. Walking into the kitchen he fills the kettle and turns it on. Getting a cup from a high cupboard he puts it next to the boiling kettle and spoons in sugar and coffee as the kettle boils. Walking back into the lounge he nervously approaches the window, still too scared to

look out he sits back on the couch and unzips the holdall.

The sight of the money in its neat bundles makes him smile and laugh; reaching into the bag he pulls out several bundles and laughs louder shaking his head as if in disbelief. Feeling more confident he stands and approaches the window; gently he pulls the curtain back enough to see out and nervously he looks down the road.

The road is empty, in both directions and Simon smiles in relief as a wave of tiredness sweeps through him. Leaving the holdall on the floor he goes into his bedroom, stripping off his clothes he gets in between the sheets and closes his eyes.

Sleep eludes him as images of the bald headed man walking down the road conjure up in his mind. The anxiety he feels twists his stomach and he tosses and turns for several hours until sleep overcomes him.

Stef drives slowly away from Simon along the empty road turning into the town centre which by all appearances is as empty. Driving along the High Street his thoughts are on money and what it will bring not on where he is going and not paying attention he does not see the shadowy figures that stand on the street corners, and who step into the shadows at his approach. Happily he dreams of life in Australia until the thoughts of money changing and smugglers takes away the smile. The feeling that he is going to lose it all returns as he turns the corner into their road; driving slowly he pulls up outside their flat and switches the engine off.

Opening the door quietly he gets out and shuts it as quietly and walks up the path with a frown furrowing his brow. Simon's body language wasn't right, something was wrong. Nervously he looks up and down the road;

all is quiet and feeling more confident he opens the door and gently steps into the hall. Putting a smile on his face he opens the inner door expecting to see Nicola, all is quiet and dark! Nicola has gone to bed not waiting for his return. The worried frown returns and Stef walks across the room and sits on the couch in the darkness.

Now he is back home safe his mind starts to whirl in a confusion of thoughts; where to put the money, how to change it into dollars, his mind goes round and round the same thoughts and worries repeating themselves in his head until he thinks he is going mad!

The grey of the dawn is beginning to light the sky when Stef finally gives in and goes to bed; Nicola sleeps soundly and he gets into bed as quietly and softly as possible. Staring up at the white patterned ceiling his thoughts continue to torture him until sleep finally claims him as another day begins.

Chapter Four

“You took your time.” says the voice from the darkness as Dippa opens the door.

“Wanted to make sure, we followed everyone to their homes that came along the seafront, except for one.”

“Who was that?” asks the voice as the man turns on the light; he is a big man wearing a deep blue pinstripe suit that strains almost to bursting as it tries to cover the muscular frame. The shaved head, tattooed neck and hands seem out of place in the expensive suit and surroundings. Expensive oil paintings of the seashore from a few miles up the coast adorn the lavishly purple

patterned wallpaper. A massive flat screen television appears to fill one wall and beside it is an impressive sound system. The man sits at a large glass table that is littered with Kentucky Fried Chicken buckets and bags, some look like they have been there for several days.

“Fella on a bike we stopped along the seafront.”

Blue suit stares hard at Dippa controlling his anger, the man standing in front of him maybe small, but he is deadly seeming to have no compassion or feeling, apart from the pleasure in hurting people.

“What happened?” he asks.

“Sorry Steve, feel like I’ve let you down; we stopped this fella along the seafront just after midnight. He was on a bike but being on his own I believed him when he said he had been with his girlfriend. He cycled away slowly when we let him go and I sent Cheesey to follow him. Cheesey couldn’t catch him and lost him in the town, the fella cycled real fast when he got out of sight of us.”

“Where about in the town?” Steve asks feeling his anger getting the better of him as this is not what he wants to hear.

“Just about in the middle, there are a lot of flats above the shops and Cheesey is convinced he knows the road where the fella lives. Cheesey took a walk down it but didn’t see anything though he did have the feeling he was being watched; could feel it. A couple of the gang gonna keep an eye out for him from now on, be just a matter of time.”

“I hope you are right we need that money for when Ingrid comes, how do they know what he looks like?”

“Eric and Carol saw him on the seafront when I stopped him; they were in their car having a smoke so he never saw them.”

“What are they going to do; hang about in the street

until he shows himself or what?” asks Steve impatiently.

“Carol reckons she’s got a friend who lives in the same road, they are round there now, well they haven’t phoned to say otherwise, hang on.” says Dippa taking his mobile phone out of his pocket he punches buttons and puts it to his ear; “You all settled in?” he says into the phone a few seconds later, nodding his head he looks at Steve and nods his head; “Let me know soon as.” he says and pushing a button puts the phone back into his pocket. “Yeah, they are in and looking out the window.”

“How many others were there along the seafront?”

“One other on a bike and four people walking, I got the lads keeping an eye on them.” answers Dippa with a cold smile.

Steve relaxes and sits back in the chromium chair; “Been a nightmare this one, you’ve told me some of it on the phone now you can tell me the rest.” he says staring Dippa in the eyes. They had known each other for many years and his trust in Dippa is not complete.

“Yeah, we were lucky if it weren’t for Cheesey seeing the blue lights; gave us time to stash the bag in the reeds. We were parked in the usual place and had the rods set up when the police drove up. They made us move back to the other side of the railway line; but not before looking through the motor and our bags. I got right stroppy with them when they started to search through the motor and one of ’em threatened to arrest me for obstruction so I shut up. They wouldn’t tell us what it was about just told us to move back to the other side of the bridge if we wanted to continue fishing.”

“You sure it weren’t them who took the bag?” asks Steve.

“No, I watched them all the time; they walked up the bank and looked out to sea for about half an hour before

getting back in their car. Then they drove and parked behind some bushes whilst they ate their sandwiches and they just sat and waited looking at us more, than towards the beach.”

“Did you see the three on bikes?”

“Cheesey saw them better than me when he went for a pee, by the time he came back to the car and told me I could hardly make them out they were so far away. If the Old Bill hadn't parked behind the bushes and been more interested in us they would have seen them.”

“You saw them as well?” Steve snaps quickly at Dippa.

“Yeah, just about; riding along the seawall.”

After a while the Old Bill drove back up the track towards us and stopped saying we could go back to where we were fishing as the panic was over. When they got about a quarter of a mile away the blue light came back on and they raced up the road. We thought we'd better stay where we were for a while in case they came back.”

“Why didn't you go after the three on the bikes then?” asks Steve angrily.

“We had no reason to think they had taken it, until we went back to get it. I never saw them go near it and assumed they were just riding past, well the Old Bill were there watching.” replies Dippa defensively.

There seemed to be a ring of truth in what Dippa was telling him. Dippa's attention appears to be on watching the police rather than the bag of money and in that short amount of time the money had gone; “And you were watching the police instead of our investment.” answers Steve with resignation; “Was that one of the cyclists that you stopped later?”

“Couldn't tell as they were so far away but I got the impression it was two fellas and a girl.” replies Dippa with a thoughtful look on his face as he remembers the

cyclists.

“And you stopped him when he was on his own near the town, what happened to the other two, do they live between where you stopped him and The Towers?” asks Steve.

“You could be right there though it was hours later he could have been anywhere, I’ll go have a look round after breakfast.”

“See you in a few hours then.” Steve orders.

“Yeah, sure.” says Dippa as he turns away and opening the door he steps out into the large hall. Shutting the door quietly behind him he stands for a moment, deep in thought. Straightening his jacket he looks at himself in a large mirror that is fixed to the wall. Appearing to like what he sees he goes out the front door to get his breakfast.

“We have to go to work.” shouts Nicola from the kitchen as she makes her breakfast of bacon, egg and toast.

“What for?” laughs Stef from where he is lying on the couch; “I’m ill need the day off.”

“Come on, we agreed last night to carry on as normal.” says Nicola from the doorway of the kitchen. She is dressed in her nurse’s uniform and apart from breakfast she is ready for work.

“You are the keen one, anyway you like your job I hate mine.” answers Stef with a trace of anger in his voice.

“But we agreed last night.” Nicola replies her anger rising.

“Yeah well, that was last night it’s morning now and I ain’t going.”

Nicola looks at Stef, knowing that tone of voice she knows it is pointless to argue and goes back into the kitchen to finish cooking her breakfast.

Stef reaches for the remote control and turns the television on; it is early and all he can find is news programmes or cartoons. In agitation he turns it off and thinks about what he is going to do today. Looking at their old television set he smiles at the thought of surprising Nicola with the High Definition television that she wants. His car badly needs renewing and he decides that he will have a look around the second hand car dealers as well.

Nicola walks into the front room carrying a large tray containing her breakfast, sitting down in the armchair she puts her cup of tea on to the little table and after giving Stef a strange look starts to eat.

“Where’s mine then?” Stef asks in an indignant voice.

Nicola looks at him as she slowly chews a mouthful of bacon, making Stef wait before she answers; “You can make your own especially if you are not going to work.”

“Yeah all right then.” Stef laughs as he stands and goes into the kitchen, turning on the tap he fills the kettle with water and putting it on to boil he comes back into the lounge and lays back down on the couch.

Nicola eats quietly and with only a half piece of toast left and a long drink of her tea she stands up to go into the kitchen.

“I’ll have that.” says Stef reaching out for the piece of toast.

Nicola is too quick for him and pulls the tray out of his reach making him lean forward; where he loses his balance and falls onto the floor. Nicola laughs as she runs into the kitchen. Stef gets up off the floor and lays back down on the couch a little red-faced.

Nicola puts the tray on the worktop and goes into the bathroom to clean her teeth, when she comes out she sees that Stef is still lying on the couch. Putting her mobile phone in her bag she puts her coat on and walks

to the door. As she reaches for the handle she turns and looks down at Stef; "You make sure you keep your head down." she says to Stef firmly and not giving him a chance to answer turns the handle and goes out of the door.

The cold of the morning makes Nicola button her coat up as she walks along, she does not pay much attention to the thin faced man parked at the end of the road. He appears to be talking on his mobile phone and she does not look twice, not noticing that his eyes never leave her as she walks past.

Stef stirs his coffee and turns the television back on, seeing that he still has over an hour before the shops open he looks through his DVD collection. Predator appears a good choice and taking it out of its case he puts it in the player and presses 'play' and settles back down on the couch.

The sound of the music at the end of the film wakes him and he watches the credits for a few seconds before he realises he has slept through the film. Getting up from the couch he goes into the bathroom and washes his face in cold water and cleans his teeth vigorously. Walking into the bedroom he gets a cardboard box out of the wardrobe; opening it he reaches in and takes out a bundle of money. Counting a thousand in old notes he puts the bundle back in the box and returns it to the wardrobe. Picking up the money he puts it in his jeans pocket and smiling broadly opens the flat door and steps into the hall. As he starts to shut the door he realises he has left his keys on the coffee table in the lounge and runs back in; picking up the keys he leaves the flat and steps outside.

The sun is shining amongst the clouds, bringing a little warmth to the spring day. Stef unlocks his car door and

jumps in and still smiling starts the engine and drives slowly along the road. Daydreaming of a new flat screen television he pays no attention to the thin faced man sitting in a car at the end of the road, apparently talking on his mobile phone.

The noise of the dustcart wakes Simon as the dustbins are emptied into its huge interior. The sound of the hydraulic lift as it lifts the bins is annoying and Simon dreams of a house in the country; and away from the noise of a busy town. Looking at the clock he sees that he has overlaid if he wants to get to work on time, which he doesn't!

Smiling contentedly he pulls the bed covers up higher and closes his eyes to dream of living in a big house that tightens his stomach in excitement. He opens his eyes and now wide awake gets out of bed quickly and puts his jeans and T-shirt on; cautiously he pulls open the curtain enough to peer out.

The dustcart is still emptying dustbins further up the road, the fluorescent jackets of the loaders bright against the dirty buildings and the grey of the road. A young couple, arm in arm walk beneath him; the view of the girls low cut blouse from this high makes Simon smile. Looking further up the street he sees it is deserted and relaxes, dropping the curtain back down and goes into the kitchen to make coffee.

As the kettle boils Simon thinks back to last night and being stopped along the seafront. The bald headed man walking along the road was no coincidence. In the cold light of the morning the realisation that he *was* followed home appears very real. Reaching into the cupboard he takes a cup out and slams the door shut in agitation.

With a frown covering his brow Simon makes coffee and walks back into the lounge; seeing the holdall of

money on the floor where he left it last night makes the frown disappear. Smiling he sits down and stares at the bag, the solution is easy he thinks; just stay indoors for a few days and keep his head down. Looking down at the money he knows that will be difficult, as it has been ages since he has had a decent drink. Putting the coffee cup down firmly onto the table he picks up the holdall and carries it into the bedroom. Zipping the bag closed he pushes it under the bed and closing the bedroom door goes back into the lounge and turns the television on. Tuning in to the Movie Channel he settles back on the couch and with broadening smile settles down to watch John Wayne as Rooster Cogburn.

Dippa waits patiently as he watches the road before him; the past hour has been quiet with only a few people passing him. He had watched the husbands go off to work and children in school uniforms reluctantly walking along the road to stand at the bus stop and wait impatiently for the bus. A few people walk past him and these he is able to observe closely. Most drive past him in a variety of cars and vans, appearing to go to work and these are followed by mothers taking their kids to school. Only a few have come back and apart from the milkman delivering the odd pint of milk nothing moves.

He had hoped that he might see a few cyclists; the brief glimpse of the three cyclists along the sea wall was imprinted on his brain and he felt that if he saw them again on their bikes he would recognise them. Dialling his mobile phone he checks with the other watchers around the town, all is quiet and no obvious candidates have shown; much to his distress.

Dippa admits that the chances of retrieving the money could be slim; if the three cyclists used their wits and kept quiet about their find they could get away with it.

The sight of a smiling Stef driving towards him makes his sixth sense shout aloud in his head. The fella has to be the happiest person he has seen this morning, even the kids at the bus stop seemed subdued, but this fella seems to stick out.

Dippa watches him approach the junction as the fella with smiling face skids to a halt at the white line; his mind is definitely not on his driving. The smiling driver pulls out wide into the road missing an oncoming delivery van by a few millimetres. Driving erratically along the road for a few hundred metres before he finally gains full control, convincing Dippa that he is right. He writes down the car number plate into his phone and starting up the engine drives to the seafront in search of coffee.

Stef's thoughts come back to earth when he nearly hits the van and struggling to put on his seatbelt he weaves along the road; only regaining full control when it is fastened. He drives to the garage and fills the car with petrol, still wearing a broad smile he pays the attractive attendant telling her to keep the change. Feeling as if he is on top of the world he drives away from the garage and makes for the television and electrical warehouse in the next town.

As Stef enters the huge warehouse he looks around at all the wonderful things he can now buy; computer, X-Box, surround sound music system and of course a new television! Walking over to a wall covered in different sized televisions he makes his way to the largest – it is a fifteen hundred millimetre flat screen in HD and costs eighteen hundred and ninety nine pounds. Stef wishes he had brought more money with him, but does wonder how he would fit it in the car. Disappointed he looks at the next size down which is a twelve hundred millimetre

screen in HD, admittedly the screen is smaller but Stef is impressed with how thin it is (about fifty millimetres) and the slim surround makes it look like it is all screen. The price will leave him just enough change for a pack of cigarettes at nine hundred and forty nine pounds, but he does not care and goes to find a shop assistant.

With an even broader smile Stef pulls up outside his flat and turns the engine off, getting out he walks up the path and opens the main door wide. Stepping inside he unlocks the flat door and swings that open wide as well. Whistling happily he goes to his car and opens the back door, leaning in he grasps the enormous cardboard box firmly and slides it out. Supporting the underneath, he leans it against his chest and walks unsteadily towards the front door. Careful not to trip on the step Stef manoeuvres himself sideways through the doorways and puts the box containing the television onto the couch. Walking quickly he goes and shuts the car door and locks it and runs back up the path and into the house shutting the doors behind him.

Impatiently he rips open the cardboard box and takes out the television putting it on the floor, ignoring the instructions he takes out the remote control and wiring and throws the empty box out into the back garden. Coming back into the lounge he disconnects the old television and puts it in the corner of the room, deciding to mount the new television he goes in search of his tools.

Dippa drives slowly along the road, seeing Stef's car parked at the side of the road he curses his missed opportunity in seeing him return. Convinced somehow that Stef is one of the cyclists he drives past and parks around the corner. Turning the engine off he gets out

and shutting the door gently he walks back in the direction of Stef's car. No alleyways or back entrances give him any opportunity to see around the building Stef and Nicola live in and he continues walking. The area Stef and Nicola live in is very middle class; bungalows stand between large Victorian houses with equally large gardens and long drives.

Dippa walks along hoping for a sign or some indication of who has their money, arriving back at his car he gets in and drives to the main entrance road. Parking the car a bit further along than last time, but where he can still see who comes in and out, he picks up a newspaper and pretends to read.

Simon looks cautiously out of the window; all appears calm with no dodgy looking characters hanging about on the street corners and he suddenly decides to go out. He does need a drink he admits, which he can get from the shop on the corner and not have to go into the centre of town. Assuring himself that he has been over reacting by staying indoors he puts his jacket on. Going back into the bedroom he reaches under the bed and pulls the holdall out. Unzipping it he reaches in and takes two twenty pound notes from one of the bundles and puts them in his pocket. Zipping the holdall shut he pushes it back under the bed and closing the bedroom door firmly he goes out the front door and heads for the corner shop.

Keeping his head down he doesn't see the curtains move from an upstairs window on the other side of the road. Walking quickly he soon arrives at the shop, thinking it would be a good idea to get some food as well he picks up a wire basket and walks over to the freezers. Subconsciously he looks at the expensive prices and then laughs and shakes his head. Choosing

two of the most expensive microwave meals; Bombay Duck with all the trimmings and a Roast Turkey Dinner he approaches the counter to pay.

The young girl assistant greets him nervously but manages a smile as she starts to add up Simon's shopping on her cash register putting them in a carrier bag. Interrupting her he asks for two bottles of Jack Daniels; she totals these and asks for Simon's money, not giving him the bottles of whiskey which are behind her.

Simon hands over his twenty pound notes and she looks at him expectantly; realizing that he has not given her enough money he reaches into his pocket and hands her a five pound note. Taking the money the girl gives him his change and reaches behind her for the bottles of Jack Daniels; handing them to him Simon puts them in his bag and leaves the shop.

As Simon walks along the road he looks at the people around him. There are not many about this late in the afternoon and he sees no one he recognises. A young couple stand and argue near his front door and keeping his head down he ignores them as he reaches it and puts his key in the lock. Unlocking the door he walks in and shuts it firmly drowning out the arguing couple.

Delighted with his success he hurries up the stairs and goes into the kitchen, putting the food in the freezer he gets a large mug from out of the cupboard and fills it to the brim with Jack Daniels. Picking up the mug he drinks half in one go and refills the mug to the top, taking it into the lounge Simon sits down on the couch and turns the television on.

As Simon enters his flat Eric and Carol continue the argument for a few more moments until Eric holds up his hand for Carol to stop. Reaching into his pocket he

takes out his mobile phone and pushing buttons holds it to his ear; "Yeah man we found him, you coming down?" he asks. Listening to the voice on the phone he nods his head a few times and with an 'Ok' pushes a button and puts the phone back in his pocket.

"What's he say?" asks Carol.

"We gotta go back to the flat and wait for him there."

"For how long? I'm getting fed up with this, all day we've been hanging around in that smelly flat."

"Whose friends are they, yours aren't they? They are not mine."

"They are not mine either, but Stella is a good customer with us."

"Yeah your right there, Dippa said he won't be long he wants to see Steve first but he said we gotta wait 'till it's dark anyway so we still gotta few hours; and he said to make sure you stay straight!"

"Me, what about you?" Carol shouts back.

Eric smiles; "Me too."

"Come on then let's get off the street." says Carol grabbing hold of Eric's arm she pulls him along the road to Stella's flat.

Dippa's face changes as he hears Eric's words on the phone, the smile that forms on his face is rare as Dippa hardly smiles or laughs unless someone is getting hurt. Dialling his phone he talks briefly, merely giving orders to whoever he is speaking to. He disconnects the call and dials again; giving the same orders he adds 'bring the tools' and hangs up. Starting the engine he drives away and heads for the towns seafront. Parking the car in a large car park he grudgingly puts money into the meter and takes his parking ticket. Laying the ticket on the dashboard he shuts and locks the door. Pulling his

baseball cap down he walks through the back streets looking downwards so that the peak of the cap covers his face until he stands outside Stella's flat.

Dialling his mobile phone he barks into it that he is outside and hangs up. Impatiently he waits and when Eric finally opens the door Dippa walks in quickly pushing Eric aside, hard!

Eric hits the wall with a thump and his head moves sharply backwards hitting the wall with a crack; Dippa stands in front of him with fists clenched; "Where you been? I've been standing out there for ages, I pay you to do a job and that is to keep an eye on the street."

"Sorry Dippa, I was in the toilet and Carol's in the kitchen making the tea."

"Get up there now." Dippa orders in a very unfriendly voice.

Eric, rubbing the back of his head says nothing and climbs the stairs quickly, one day he thinks; he is going to hurt him back just as *hard!*

Dippa follows slowly behind and reaching the top of the stairs looks into the kitchen to see Carol standing in front of a boiling kettle. Entering the front room that overlooks the street he sees Eric sitting at the window and, he assumes, it is Stella laying on the couch snoring softly.

"How long you been away from the window?" Dippa demands.

"Only a few minutes, anyway he ain't going anywhere. He bought two bottles of Jack Daniels a little while ago and he's probably getting pissed."

"You'd better be right, Curly Pete and Razor Mick are on the way and they won't be happy with you if that fella's not there when they go pay him a visit."

Eric turns pale; Razor Mick got his nickname because he carries a cut-throat razor sewn into a pocket that is in

the lapel of his jacket. Razor Mick, though tall and skinny, looks what he is, a nasty piece of work. He had been stopped and searched by the police many times; and not one of them had ever found the vicious blade.

The favourite use of the cut-throat by Mick is to cut the cheeks of the unfortunate victim. He could pull out his blade in a split second and with two swift swipes the jaw would hang open. With an enormous amount of blood pouring out, the victim has no choice but to hold their jaw closed as best as possible.

Curly Pete's speciality is brute force; he is a stocky individual about 1.8 metres tall and weighing a hundred and thirty kilos, that is comprised mainly of muscle and bone. Working out in the gym everyday he is a force to be reckoned with, never using any kind of weapon and by the use of muscle alone he is able to snap an arm or a leg in an instant. Eric knows that Steve only uses these two when the odds are stacked against him and he does not look forward to what trouble is going to come!

"If I knew you were gonna bring them two into this I wouldn't have volunteered; Mick don't like me." says Eric in a scared voice.

"Yeah, and I heard why as well, you should have kept it in your trousers."

"I didn't know she was his misses; she came onto me!" answers Eric in a shaky voice.

"Don't antagonise him, this job is more important than your petty squabbles."

"Petty?" exclaims Eric; "It's likely he'll cut me; he said he would next time he sees me."

"We'll find out soon, they should be here in about half hour." says Dippa with a big smile.

Eric stares at Dippa wishing he was somewhere else; "You don't need me now, anyway the fella's at home

and I'll show you which one it is and you can do whatever.”

Dippa laughs; “We need you on this one.” he says, the tone of his voice indicating that there is to be no argument from Eric.

Carol comes in from the kitchen carrying two steaming plates of spaghetti bolognese, seeing Dippa she smiles; “Hi Dippa, do you want some supper?”

“Hi Carol, yeah thanks that smells great.”

“He can have mine, I ain't hungry.” offers Eric generously.

“Why not? You hassled me to cook this.” says Carol indignantly.

“He's had some bad news and lost his appetite.” laughs Dippa reaching out for Eric's plate.

“What's that?” demands Carol looking Eric in the eyes.

“Razor Mick's on his way.” he answers staring at the floor.

“Oh, but he's not coming to see you is he?”

“Well he will do when he walks in the door.” answers Eric in a scared voice.

Dippa laughs around a mouthful of spaghetti, enjoying Eric's discomfort.

“I'm glad you think it's funny.” says Carol angrily to Dippa.

“Don't worry about it, he won't do nowt, well not until the jobs finished.” he laughs.

“You bastard Dippa, I've a good mind to take that supper back.”

“No, don't do that this tastes great.” laughs Dippa putting a huge forkful of spaghetti in his mouth.

Carol looks at him in frustration, her man might get seriously hurt when that nut-case gets here; and Dippa thinks its funny!

Dippa eats quickly as he'd had nothing since breakfast.

He wasn't worried about what would happen to Eric when Razor Mick and Curly Pete got here. Mick had been suspicious of his wife for a long time and had finally caught her with another fella in bed together months ago. Razor Mick had tortured them both, so the story went, before cutting their throats and dumping them out to sea. Dippa knows Razor Mick's attitude to Eric is not going to be what Eric expects. He laughs at Eric's discomfort as he cleans his plate and asks Carol where the coffee is?

Carol looks at his laughing face; "Make it yourself." she snaps.

Dippa stands up and carrying his empty plate into the kitchen he refills the kettle with water and turns it on. Standing in the doorway to the lounge and with a put on polite voice asks if anyone would like more coffee?

Carol nearly chokes as she tries to swallow a mouthful of spaghetti, regaining her breath she manages to control her voice and decline as politely, Eric stares moodily at the floor not appearing to hear.

Dippa smiles and goes back into the kitchen and makes himself a cup of coffee. Walking back into the lounge he sits down on a big cracked leather armchair and sips contentedly.

Twenty minutes pass before Dippa's phone rings; listening for a few seconds he says; "I'll send Eric out to find you." and pushes a button disconnecting the call.

"They are waiting for you at the corner shop." Dippa says looking at Eric.

"Why don't you go and meet them then?" asks Eric.

"The fella we want to talk to knows what I look like; and I'm *telling you*, unless you want me to have a word with Steve to have a word with you?" Dippa answers with a superior smile on his face.

Eric stands up, Razor Mick is scary but Steve was in a completely different league, Eric had seen him put five tough bikers in the hospital because one of them owed him money, they learnt that five against one wasn't enough! Eric puts his jacket on and with a final look at a worried Carol and a smiling Dippa he opens the door and descends the stairs.

Chapter Five

Nicola is glad when the clock finally shows it is time for her to go home. The day has been especially long and difficult, with everyone complaining about just about everything and she wished she *had* taken the day off. The walk home is slow as she feels tired but glad to be away from the hospital; she has three days off now and will be glad of the rest.

Turning the key she opens the Flat door to be greeted by the new television blasting out a music channel. Nicola feels her face flush with anger as she looks at the enormous television and shouts for Stef to '*Get in here!!*'

Stef appears from the kitchen; "You like it then?" he asks in a cheerful voice.

"Where did you get this, and why?" she asks in a trembling voice that is filled with anger.

"You gotta admit you did want a new HD TV, except it ain't working right as I gotta upgrade the dish."

Nicola looks at Stef trying to repress the smile that is forming on her lips; the new television looks amazing and even without the HD dish the picture looks brilliant.

"Like it don't ya?" Stef laughs.

"You bastard Stef, if we get caught you won't have a new telly."

“Yeah, but we got one now; do you want a coffee?”

“Please.” replies Nicola, the tiredness of the day being echoed in her voice. She is too tired to argue with Stef and sits on the couch, picking up the remote control she starts to channel hop marvelling at the quality and clarity of the picture.

Stef walks in with a mug in each hand; “Do you mind, I was watching that.” he says in an indignant voice that is hard to back up as he is smiling so broadly.

“Yeah, right.” answers Nicola not taking her eyes from the screen.

Stef puts the coffee onto the table and sits down beside Nicola, putting his arm around her he leans forward and picks up the controls to the DVD player; “Here try this.” he says as he passes her the remote control.

Nicola ignores him for a moment as she continues channel hopping, seeming annoyed by the interruption she takes the remote control and pushes the play button. The face of The Predator stares back at her in glorious colour and Nicola sits back in shock. Stef bursts into laughter delighted at his joke; and is rewarded with a painful punch on the arm.

“I hope that you weren't seen when you bought that?” Nicola asks nervously nodding her head towards the new television.

“Not that I saw, don't worry about it.” assures Stef.

“Well I am worried; promise me you won't spend any more money, for at least a month.”

“You worry too much, we could do with a new car, we can get another one without spending too much. I saw a nice Celica on the way back, it was only eleven grand.”

“NO.” Nicola shouts in fear and anger; “*Please* Stef let's wait a while, I don't want to come home one afternoon to find you dead on the floor; and the money

gone.”

“What's more important then, me? or the money being lost?” asks Stef with real indignation in his voice.

“Stop it, this is serious, I have been thinking today just what kind of people we have stolen the money from?”

“Haven't stolen anything, they shouldn't have left it lying around, anyway it's mine now, and yours.”

“Yes, and let's keep it, *please* Stef.”

“Yeah Ok, but I'm sick of that car, as long as we get another one soon; Yes?”

“If we are still here and if it's not a Celica.”

“Ya know I've always wanted one, now's the chance.”

“No Stef, we must stay sensible and pretend we don't have any money to waste, you can have a new one when we get to Australia.”

“A new one, I hadn't thought of that, is that a promise?”

“If you promise not to spend any more money until we are sure we can safely.”

“You annoy me sometimes especially when you are right.” agrees Stef with resignation.

“I am scared Stef, really scared I don't want to lose you, especially now.”

“Why now especially?” Stef asks in a gentle voice, looking into Nicola's eyes he can see the fear in them.

“Now we can go to Australia, everything we have dreamt of these past years can be real. A nice house, with a swimming pool and big veranda and in the sun!” Nicola exclaims with a worried smile.

“A *new* one?” Stef asks with a smile staring deeply into Nicola's eyes.

“Yes I promise, but when we get to Australia.”

“You got a deal.” Stef agrees, the look of fear in Nicola's eyes is real and the deep love that he feels for her motivates him to agree. Not wishing Nicola to know his true feelings he prefers her to think he is motivated

by the car; "A black one of course." he says with a huge smile.

"Of course." Nicola replies returning the smile. Knowing Stef for many years now she knows that tone of voice and knows he *will* keep his word.

The street is crowded with parked cars now the working day is over as Eric steps out onto the path. Looking up at the sky he sees that darkness is approaching and with hardly a cloud against the fading blue it promises to be a cold one. Eric zips up his jacket and more than a little scared he heads for the corner shop.

A few hundred metres from the shop Eric sees Razor Mick sitting on the wall of a flowerbed staring at him. Razor Mick has short combed back brown hair forming a quiff at the front and is wearing a shiny black leather jacket. Tight jeans cover his skinny legs making the shiny steel toe capped shoes on his feet look five sizes too big. Looking to his left he says something to someone Eric cannot see as he stands up showing his height to be well over two metres. Curly Pete comes around the corner of the shop and looks at Eric. Curly Pete is a head shorter than Razor Mick but makes up for this in bulk. Wearing a grey T-shirt that strains tight under the pressure of his muscles, he looks huge and scary. His blue jeans seem to be under the same strain and Eric wonders if wearing such tight clothes hurts?

Razor Mick and Curly Pete walk towards him; Eric stops and waits, heart beating fast and too scared to look at Razor Mick he stares at the pavement.

"Hello Eric." says Razor Mick in a friendly voice.

Eric is surprised at the tone of his voice and looks up at him in confusion mumbling a 'Hello'. Curly Pete looks as friendly and smiles and nods his head towards him.

Razor Mick approaches Eric with outstretched hand for him to shake. Eric looks into his eyes searching for any deceit in his behaviour and seeing none nervously extends his hand; which Razor Mick grabs hold of firmly and pulls Eric towards him.

Eric's heart beats fast as he is pulled forward and expecting a punch he closes his eyes tightly.

"Take it easy Eric, I ain't gonna do anything to you." says Razor Mick in a strange gentle voice.

"I swear I didn't know it was your misses, honest Mick I got more sense than to cross you." says Eric in desperation.

"Yeah, I know that now, Steve told me all about it after she disappeared with her boyfriend." Razor Mick says with no emotion to his voice as he lets go of Eric's hand.

Eric looks at Curly Pete who is still smiling at him and relaxes; "Thanks Mick, shall we go? Dippa's waiting."

"Lead on." says Razor Mick with an exaggerated wave of his arm.

Eric walks along the road with Razor Mick and Curly Pete following closely behind, reaching the door to Stella's flat he puts the key in the lock and opens the door standing aside to allow them to pass; "It's at the top of the stairs" he says as Razor Mick and Curly Pete push past him and climb the stairs.

Standing in the doorway Eric looks up the road as the dark of the night turns a street lamp on. A gang of maybe twenty youths, most wearing 'Hoodies' loiter outside the corner shop. He recognises two of them as they are customers that he sees regularly and he relaxes and looks in the other direction; all is quiet and he lets his thoughts drift. The presence of Razor Mick and Curly Pete can only mean that somebody is going to get hurt; bad!

Eric has been happy until now working with Steve and

Dippa; business has been good with their connections and the flow of cocaine has been consistent for a couple of years now. His personal involvement has been small with only having to do two or three deliveries a week. This is the first time something had gone wrong and the presence of the two muscle boys upstairs can only lead to bigger trouble he fears.

Reluctantly Eric goes back indoors and shuts the door, climbing the stairs he hopes that his and Carol's involvement is now over. Walking into the lounge he sees that he has lost his seat to Razor Mick at the window. Curly Pete lays on the couch next to a still sleeping Stella, leaving the only comfortable chair to Dippa. Eric stands in the doorway hearing Carol moving about in the kitchen and he goes to see what she is doing.

Carol is washing cups and plates in the little sink and does not hear Eric enter the room, he sits down on a hard backed chair at the table. Taking his tobacco tin out of his pocket he drops the tin onto the table making Carol jump.

Carol turns away from the sink her face pale with fear; "You made me jump, where have you been?"

"Only stood outside for a while; not a lot of room to sit in the lounge."

Carol looks deep into his eyes; "Dippa told me he was only winding you up about Mick. How long have we got to stay here? That Razor Mick gives me the creeps."

"Dunno, with those two here I guess Dippa plans to go pay this fella a visit tonight and there will be no reason for us to hang around."

"Sooner the better, do you want a coffee? I'm making them one."

"Yeah thanks, got any of that spaghetti left?"

"No, Dippa had the rest when you went out, do you

want me to cook you something?"

"Depends what Dippa decides, I don't want you to get halfway through and I get sent out on another damn errand."

"Why don't you ask him? He did eat your supper after all."

Eric stands up and goes into the lounge, Dippa is talking on his mobile phone and Razor Mick asks Eric where the coffee is?

"It's on the way, are you going visiting tonight?"

Razor Mick gives Eric a hard stare as if it's none of Eric's business but nods his head; "Just waiting for it to get a bit darker. You will have to stay here and keep an eye on the street for us, in case of any visitors."

"And I want you at that window *all* the time we're in there." orders Dippa as he puts his phone onto the table.

Eric looks Dippa in the eyes; "How long do you reckon you'll be?"

"As long as it takes, ah here comes the coffee." Dippa answers as Carol walks in carrying a cup in each hand.

Passing a cup to Dippa and Razor Mick she silently goes back out into the kitchen returning almost immediately with a cup each for Curly Pete and Eric. She hands them their coffee and stands at the table still staying silent.

"You don't like this do you?" Dippa asks her.

"You are right there, if you don't succeed in getting your money back what happens then?"

Dippa smiles knowing that Carol's main concern is for herself; "We will, you will still get supplied, whatever happens."

Looking at Razor Mick and Curly Pete she continues; "What happens if the police get involved, you won't be able to help me then."

"As long as you and Eric keep your eyes open while

we're in there; make sure you keep by the window.” orders Dippa.

They sit and stand quietly drinking their coffee lost in their own thoughts until Dippa's phone rings, picking it up Dippa says 'Yes.' and listens to the voice on the other end. Pushing a button he puts the phone back onto the table and looks at Eric; “Natalie's at the door go and let her in will you?”

The question is more of a statement and Eric obediently puts his coffee cup on the table and goes down the stairs and opens the door; Natalie stands close to the door and walks in as he is still opening it.

Natalie is about the same height as Eric at one metre eighty centimetres tall with close cropped black hair. Wearing a low cut blouse and tight fitting jeans Eric finds it difficult to believe that Natalie is a lesbian, but he does not feel the same aversion against her as he does of males of the same persuasion.

Handing him a big laundry bag she smiles and says 'Hello.' and walks up the stairs, Eric follows her up the stairs and into the lounge.

“Hi Nat,” greets Dippa “You got everything?”

“Yes mate, got a few different sizes in case Pete has put on weight since I seen him last, Hi Pete” she says looking at Curly Pete and grinning broadly.

“Hi Nat, been a long time.”

“Yeah gotta be about a year now, how yer keeping, still putting on the weight then?”

“Gotta keep me strength up, you going with anyone?”

“You took a bit of replacing but yes, I been going out with Sheila coming up for six months now.”

“Sheila, I remember her I thought she was married?”

“Yeah she was for a little while and then she met me, she looks after me very well.” replies Natalie.

“That's great to hear, I always wondered why you

preferred hanging out with the girls and that you were never completely happy with me, now I know why.” Curly Pete laughs as his face turns red with embarrassment.

“Who are you going to beat up tonight then?” Natalie asks.

“Best you don't know, thanks for the overalls and stuff it's been great to see you again, maybe we will meet again?”

“Yes, maybe we will.” answers Natalie, with a nod and a smile she looks at everyone in the room and turns and walks out the door.

“When we doing this Dippa?” asks Curly Pete.

Dippa stands up and walking across to the window looks up and down the road; “It's dark enough and there is no one about, how about now?”

“Save all this hanging about, let's see what Natalie brought us.” answers Curly Pete. Opening the bag he pulls out several pairs of new blue paper overalls and looking at the size on the labels he chooses a pair and passes the rest to Razor Mick.

Looking through them Razor Mick takes a pair and puts the rest beside him; “These will fit.” he says as he starts to put them on.

Curly Pete's overalls fit perfectly and reaching back into the bag he pulls out a short crowbar, bolt cutters and a steel shafted claw hammer; “Just the job.” he says in a cold voice and puts them back in the bag.

“I'm ready.” says Razor Mick as he zips up his overalls.

“I want both of you looking out the window; and you are to phone me if any problems Ok?” orders Dippa to Eric and Carol.

“I better go and pee then before you go, oh and by the way it's the one with the faded red door that's set back a bit from the rest, eleven doors up on the other side of

the road.” replies Eric as he turns and walks out the door.

“How long is this going to take?” asks Carol.

“Maybe ten minutes or it might take all night.” Dippa says as he stares hard into Carol's eyes.

“Don't you want a pair of overall, you might get your clothes messed up?”

“That's Pete and Mick's job; I wouldn't want to spoil their fun.” Dippa replies with a laugh.

Carol looks at Dippa's smiling face, he appears to be looking forward to seeing someone hurt, whereas Curly Pete and Razor Mick are straight faced, almost seeming unhappy. Money problems have occurred before where people have borrowed and not paid back. She can recall Razor Mick's and Curly Pete's services being called on several times in the past and they always got the money, one way or another.

“We ready then?” asks Dippa.

“Lead on.” replies Curly Pete as he and Razor Mick follow Dippa out of the door.

Simon drinks deep of the Jack Daniels and belches contentedly as he puts his feet up onto the coffee table and takes another large swig, emptying the mug. Refilling his mug with more Jack Daniels he starts to search the sports channels hoping to find a cricket match. Five channels later a smile breaks out on Simon's face as he tunes in to India versus Sri Lanka and taking another large swallow settles deeper into the couch. The match is exciting to watch but the whiskey makes his eyes blur and he soon falls asleep in a drunken stupor.

Dippa slides a thin piece of shiny metal between the front door and frame feeling for the lock, using the

crowbar he forces the door apart and with a final push and wriggle at the lock he opens the door. Curly Pete and Razor Mick follow him in quietly and shut the door behind them they push past him as they climb the stairs.

Simon's inner door is locked with the same kind of lock as the main front door; but Curly Pete doesn't wait for Dippa. He takes a run at the door and putting his shoulder to it forces it open. The door opens with a crack of splitting wood and mighty crash as it hits the inner wall. Curly Pete rushes in with Razor Mick hard on his heels as they run into the lounge.

Woken by the noise Simon's instinct as he stands is to grab hold of the nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniels.

Curly Pete runs straight up to him intending to punch him out cold; Simon still very drunk sees Curly Pete as a blur, but the alcohol has not slowed his reactions as he swings the bottle at the blurred head in front of him hitting it hard. Curly Pete goes down hard and fast and hits the floor with a bang shaking the whole building as Razor Mick rushes in with razor drawn.

Simon turns to face him as the blade lights up, reflecting the light from the television. Stepping back Simon swings with the bottle hitting Razor Mick on the shoulder breaking the bottle in two; and Razor Mick's collar bone. Simon pushes the broken bottle into Razor Mick's face as hard as he can and twists it pushing it down into his neck. Razor Mick screams as he falls to the floor clutching his bleeding face. Stepping back Simon does not see Dippa enter the room or Curly Pete lying on the floor and he trips on Curly Pete's legs hitting the floor with a thump. Dippa, seeing his opportunity steps forward quickly and hits Simon hard on the head with the crowbar knocking him out.

Dippa stands back as Simon falls to the floor and looks at Razor Mick who is twisting in agony as the blood

pours from his face soaking his new overalls. Grabbing hold of a cushion from the couch Dippa tries to pass it to Razor Mick who reaches out feebly as he falls back onto the floor, the blood soaking into the carpet.

Dippa, more concerned that Simon may wake up looks around for something to tie him with. Seeing the curtain chord he pulls a small knife out of his pocket and walking across the room cuts a piece off and ties Simon's hands together.

Checking Curly Pete's pulse, he breathes a sigh of relief and crosses the room and picks up Razor Mick's wrist. No pulse beats beneath his finger and the blood appears to have slowed in its gushing from the huge gash on his face. Moving his finger across Razor Mick's wrist, Dippa searches desperately for a pulse. By pressing really hard he feels a faint beating and he lays Razor Mick's wrist down gently and walks back to Curly Pete.

Picking up his wrist he feels a pulse and can also hear Curly Pete breathing, going over to Simon he sees his eyes starting to open. Dippa runs into the kitchen and searches through the cupboards; finding a roll of black plastic sacks he runs back into the lounge. Tearing off a bag he folds it roughly lengthwise several times and binds Simon's legs at the ankles. Tearing off another sack he ties his knees together and double secures Simon's wrists with more of the plastic sacks. Satisfied, he returns his attention to Curly Pete who is still out cold on the floor. Bending down Dippa gets hold of Curly Pete's shoulders and shakes him calling his name.

Dippa feels Curly Pete's muscles tense as he starts to come around and Dippa helps him to sit up.

"That's the third time I've been hit with a bottle, where is he?" Curly Pete finishes angrily.

"Over there." Dippa says looking at Simon tied up on

the floor.

“We got him then, where's Mick?”

“He's behind you, I think he's dying, that fella shoved a broken bottle in his face and neck, looks like he got the jugular.”

Curly Pete leaning heavily on Dippa stands up and walks over to his friend, bending down he picks his hand up and feels for a pulse on his wrist.

Dippa is right, there is no pulse and Razor Mick is dead. Blood from his face and neck soaks the carpet beneath and Curly Pete pulls the cushion from Razor Mick's hand and slides it gently underneath his head; “He was a good friend, he always said he would go first.”

“What are we going to do with him, we can't leave him there.” says a stressed Dippa, he never did like Razor Mick and feels no emotion at his death.

Curly Pete though regarded Razor Mick as a brother and is filled with emotion for the loss of his friend, he looks around the room his gaze settling on Simon; “We've got a job to do, have you had a look around yet?”

“Not had a chance.” Dippa answers as he walks out of the room and into Simon's bedroom. Searching through the wardrobe and cupboards finding nothing he looks down at the bed. Getting on his hands and knees Dippa looks underneath and amongst the empty cardboard boxes and suitcases he sees the holdall. Standing up quickly he runs around to the other side of the bed and bending down reaches underneath pulling the holdall out, Unzipping the bag he looks inside at the neatly bound bundles of notes. With a smile and a laugh Dippa picks up the bag and carries it into the lounge. Throwing the bag down hard onto the big coffee table in triumph he says excitedly; “I knew it was him, just knew

it.”

Curly Pete who is still kneeling beside Razor Mick looks up at Dippa's excited face; “Is it all there?” he asks not sharing Dippa's excitement.

“No, it only looks a quarter full.”

“Find a chair and tie him to it.” he orders looking towards Simon's already bound form.

Dippa obediently walks out into the kitchen and sees several hardback chairs clustered around it, grabbing hold of the top of the nearest one he drags it into the lounge and places it beside Simon's head. Grabbing hold of Simon roughly by the shoulders Dippa struggles as he tries to sit him in the chair, Curly Pete gets up and pushing Dippa aside sits Simon hard onto the chair; “Tie him to it.” he orders gruffly as he steps back giving Dippa room.

Dippa retrieves the roll of black plastic rubbish sacks from where they had rolled under the table and peels one off. Twisting the bag length wise he grabs hold of Simon's already bound hands and ties them tightly to the back of the chair. Securing the ankles the same way he starts to tie two sacks together; “What are you doing?” asks Curly Pete.

“I'm gonna tie his legs as well, one ain't enough.”

“Don't worry about that, he ain't going anywhere, go get some water it's about time he woke up.”

Dippa does as ordered and goes back into the kitchen, finding a dirty mug in the sink he fills it with cold water and goes back into the lounge.

“Wake him.” orders Curly Pete in a cruel voice.

Dippa throws the water into Simon's face following it with a hard slap; “Wake up you bastard.” he shouts.

Simon's head moves back from the force of the slap as his eyes open wide, seeing Dippa in front of him he lunges forward not realising he is tied to the chair and

falls forward and hits the floor with his face; hard!

“Pick him up.” orders Curly Pete.

Dippa drops the mug onto the floor and tries to sit Simon upright. Simon is still dazed from the fall and offers no resistance but he is still too big and heavy for Dippa, Curly Pete pushes him aside again and sits Simon upright; Curly Pete bends forward filling Simon's vision. Grabbing hold of Simon's hair he twists it viciously and pulls his head back hard; “You just sit there and be calm, we are going to have a little talk.” he orders in an angry voice.

Simon stares angrily back and strains at the plastic sacks and curtain chord, not able to loosen any of the tough binding he relaxes his body.

“We can do this easy or hard it's up to you mate.” Curly Pete says staring Simon in the eyes. Simon says nothing, the anger within him fading as he realises he is at the mercy of these two thugs who stand before him. Looking down at Razor Mick's body he vaguely remembers him running towards him and swinging the bottle.

“Yeah that's right, you killed him.” says Curly Pete his anger rising; “If you don't tell me what I want to know; that's what I'll do to *you*.”

“Who was with you when you found our money?”

Dippa asks in a cold voice.

“I was on my own.”

“We know that's a lie; there were two others with you.”

Curly Pete grabs hold of Simon's hair and twists it viciously; “You'd better tell us or I will hurt you, *bad*.”

“I ain't scared of you mate; hurt away.” answers Simon bravely.

Curly Pete draws back his fist as Simon's mobile telephone rings and lights up from where it had fallen on the floor.

Curly Pete laughs and putting down his fist walks over to the telephone and picks it up; "Who is Stef then?"

"Just an old mate, he probably wants to go for a beer."

Curly Pete looks at the phone as it stops ringing; "Maybe he was one of the friends you had with you?" he asks menacingly.

"Told ya, I was on my own."

Walking back to Simon, Curly Pete suddenly raises his fist and hits Simon squarely on the jaw, knocking him unconscious.

"Now what are we going to do?" Dippa asks in frustration.

Curly Pete looks at Dippa with blazing angry eyes; "I am going to sit and calm down; you are going to count the money."

"Sure." answers Dippa, the anger in Curly Pete's eyes twists his stomach in fear and he quickly takes a bundle of fifty pound notes out of the holdall and starts to count.

Curly Pete sits down on the couch and looks at his dead friend. The cuts on his throat have stopped bleeding as the blood congeals and Razor Mick looks peaceful as if he is sleeping. Dippa drops the bundle of money onto the coffee table and reaches into the holdall for more. Quietly he counts stacking several onto the coffee table before he empties the bag. Checking each bundle for size he compares them to his counted ones.

When he has finished counting he looks at Curly Pete, too scared to interrupt him in his grief he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a packet of cigarettes, lighting one he offers the packet to Curly Pete.

Curly Pete looks up at him, the grief he feels for his friend can be seen in his eyes; "No." he snaps at Dippa, "How much is there?"

"Just about a third."

Curly Pete smiles, but there is no humour in his eyes;

“Yeah, split three ways, let him sleep I'll give Steve a call.”

“Now he's in trouble.” Dippa laughs looking at Simon.

Walking out of the lounge into the kitchen Curly Pete calls Steve on his mobile phone, the phone rings once; “What's happening?” asks Steve.

“We got big trouble here, the bastards killed Razor Mick but we do have the holdall with about a third of the money in it.”

“What you done to that geezer?”

“We got him tied up, he ain't going anywhere, could do with a bit of help if you got the time?”

“Yeah, on me way Pete.” answers Steve disconnecting the call.

Curly Pete puts his phone back in his pocket and looks through the cupboards for something to drink. Finding only crockery and old jars of jam and marmalade he opens the refrigerator door and looks inside; at the back behind a large tub of margarine and what looks like yesterdays dinner on a plate he see a bottle of beer. Leaning in he takes out the bottle and knocks the lid off using the top of the fridge door and slams it shut. Drinking gratefully he walks back into the lounge and sits down on the couch looking at Razor Mick's body on the floor.

“Is there any more beer?” asks Dippa, penetrating Curly Pete's grief.

Curly Pete looks up with grief covering his face, staring Dippa in the eyes he shrugs and returns looking back at Razor Mick.

The look in Curly Pete's eyes sends a cold shiver through Dippa's body and he hurries out into the kitchen. Searching through the cupboards and refrigerator Dippa sees he is out of luck. Returning to the cupboards he takes out a large mug and fills it with cold water from the

tap. As he slowly sips the water he stares out of the window at the roof opposite. A sorry looking grey pigeon huddles amongst the chimney pots and is the only sign of life; and Dippa wishes he was somewhere else. Dippa sits at the table not wanting to go back into the lounge with Curly Pete he smokes a cigarette, sips at his water and waits.

Dippa does not have long to wait before he hears a shout from the lounge; "Go and let Steve in."

Obediently Dippa stands and tripping on the folded carpet near the front door he descends the stairs and opens the door to Steve. Following Steve's hurrying form up the stairs Dippa wonders what he is going to do; especially to the fella tied up on the chair.

"Stay there." orders Steve as Dippa reaches the flat door - Steve shuts it in his face, giving him no choice.

"Where are you mate?" asks Steve as he enters the flat tripping on the folded carpet just inside the door.

"In here man." answers Curly Pete from the lounge.

Steve follows the sound of Curly Pete's voice and walks into the lounge, seeing Simon tied to the chair he smiles coldly and looks down at Curly Pete and Razor Mick; "Sorry about your friend, Pete, I know you were close; this Geezer and his friends will pay."

Curly Pete looks up at Steve, the fire of revenge now dampened by the loss of his friend. Steve understands and reassures Curly Pete; "I'll take over now if you want, we need to get Mick out of here, Barney is on his way he'll help you."

"And do what?" asks Curly Pete with anger in his voice.

"Whatever you want." replies Steve in a soothing voice.

Curly Pete stares at him the anger fading; "Sorry man, I don't want him dumped like you usually do with your problems." The last body he had helped get rid of with

Steve was dumped out at sea, weighted down with concrete blocks.

"Your decision," answers Steve with a sad smile; "Is this the money?" he asks as he picks up the holdall.

"Yeah, Dippa found it hidden under the bed, he is the one who counted it."

Steve looks inside the bag and puts it back down on the table; "That fella put up a fight then?"

"Yeah, he's tough; killed Mick and knocked me flying, he didn't see Dippa come up behind him, if he had I don't think we would be talking now."

"What did Dippa hit him with?"

"A crowbar, anything lighter would have bounced off I reckon."

"Yeah, he looks one tough son of a bitch, he been out all the time?"

"No, he came round for a while. I think he will take anything from us and won't split on his friends. One I think is called Stef who rang but we didn't answer it, he reckoned it was just his mate wanting to go for a drink."

"Is this his phone?" asks Steve as he picks up Simon's phone from the table.

"Yeah, the name Stef came up when it rang."

"Ok, let me worry about it now, that sounds like Barney's van outside." Looking at Curly Pete, Steve says as gently as possible; "Do you want me to clean him up a bit before you take him out on the street, or do you want to?"

"I'll do it." answers Curly Pete in a determined voice as he stands up and walks out into the kitchen.

Steve follows him out of the lounge and walks to the front door, opening it he sees Dippa waiting patiently; "Go and open the door for Barney will you mate?"

"Ok, is Curly Pete all right?"

"Yeah, he's coping, hurry up will you?"

“Sure.” answers Dippa as he walks down the stairs, opening the front door he sees Barney walking across the road towards him. Barney is tall and skinny, like the body he has come to collect. Wearing a smart blue suit jacket and almost new jeans he does not look the type to do any wrong. His short cropped blonde hair makes him look more like a business person rather than a crook.

Dippa opens the door wide for him to enter and gives a friendly nod; “Upstairs mate, cream coloured door.” Barney, giving a wry smile brushes past Dippa and taking two steps at a time hurries up the stairs. Dippa closes the door and decides it will probably be better for him to stay out of the way for a while and sits on the bottom step and waits patiently.

Steve answers the gentle knocking on the door; “Thanks for being so quick mate, Pete is just cleaning him up a bit and then we'll get him out of here.”

“Didn't want to burst in, where's the fella who did it?”

“He's in there,” answers Steve indicating his head towards the lounge; “You leave him to me.” he orders.

“Don't want no help then?”

“Maybe, but your job is to look after Curly Pete, take him wherever he wants to go and then call me.”

“Yeah sure, hope you save some for me.”

“Let's see if Pete's ready.” orders Steve as he turns and walks into the lounge. Barney follows close behind and they find Curly Pete has laid Razor Mick on the couch and is wiping the blood from his face with a blue patterned towel.

Simon twists in the chair when they enter, his face has a new bruise on his right cheek, and it looks like Curly Pete has done more than clean the blood from his friend whilst the room was empty.

“You all right?” Steve asks and Curly Pete nods his head in acknowledgement; “We'll give you a hand to get him out if you want?”

“I can manage.” answers Curly Pete as he puts the towel onto the table and gently picks his friend up from the couch.

“Would be good if it looks like he can walk for when we get out on the street.” Steve gently suggests.

Curly Pete carries Razor Mick out into the hall; “Open the door someone?” he shouts.

Steve hurries to the front door and opens it wide allowing Curly Pete to go past.

“Do you need some help on the stairs?” asks Steve to Curly Pete's retreating back as he descends the stairs carrying his friend as if he is no weight at all.

Curly Pete ignores him or does not hear as he carries on down the stairs.

Barney glances at Simon showing no emotion as he leaves him alone and tripping on the folded carpet on the way out follows Steve out the door; “Don't shut it, just pull it too.” orders Steve as he follows Curly Pete down the stairs.

Barney does as he is ordered and goes down the stairs to help. Curly Pete is holding Razor Mick upright and is trying to put his arm over his shoulder. Dippa steps forward from where he had been standing by the front door and getting hold of Razor Mick's hand helps Curly Pete get it in the right position.

“Go and get your van open and open the passenger door if all is clear, Dippa you go with him.”

Dippa opens the door enough to get his slim body out and looks up and down the street. Apart from an old woman with a brown scruffy looking rat of a dog the street is empty of people. Dippa holds up his hand for Barney to wait as a large white van drives slowly along

the street. When the van passes Dippa waves Barney forward and falling in step with him they cross the road to Barney's van. Barney unlocks the passenger's door and opens it wide. Leaning in he throws his denim jacket which was on the seat into the back and looks across the road to see Steve standing at the front door.

"All clear is it Dippa?" Barney asks.

Dippa looks up and down the street slowly and nods his head that all is clear.

Barney sticks his thumb up to Steve who leans back saying something to Curly Pete, pushing the door wide open Steve goes inside and getting on the other side of Razor Mick helps Curly Pete walk him out to the van.

The sound of The Rolling Stones playing Paint it Black suddenly interrupts the quiet of the street as an upstairs window several doors down is opened, allowing the music to escape the room.

"He can't hold his drink, his missus is gonna be well annoyed with him." laughs Barney for the benefit of the neighbours who may be watching and listening.

"Yeah, he won't be allowed out for ages." agrees Steve as he lets go of Razor Mick allowing Curly Pete to pick him up and sit him on the van seat.

Barney hurries around to the drivers' side, opens the door and clambers in putting his hand out to steady the still form of Razor Mick.

Curly Pete pushes his dead friend along the seat and climbs in beside him and shuts the door.

"You got him?" asks Barney as he slams the door shut. With an acknowledging nod from Curly Pete he puts the key in the ignition and starts the engine; "Can we put some seat belts on please? We don't wanna get pulled." Curly Pete nods again and puts the seat belt around Razor Mick before putting on his own.

"Thanks." says Barney as he puts his seat belt on,

putting the van in gear he checks his rear view mirrors and with a wave to Steve and Dippa drives slowly up the street.

“Right, we got a job to do.” Steve tells Dippa as he puts his hand in his pocket, pulling out a ten pound note he hands it to Dippa; “Go and get me a sausage and chips, I’m starving, have some yourself if you want?”

“No thanks Steve, I’ve lost me appetite, all right I won’t be long.” he answers taking the money from Steve’s hand as he turns and walks away in the direction of the chip shop.

Steve walks back across the road and enters Simon’s flat shutting the door quietly behind him. Taking the stairs two at a time he enters Simon’s flat proper tripping on the carpet on the way in he walks along the narrow hall into the lounge.

Simon is still where they had left him tied up and he stares angrily at Steve. Bending down Steve picks up Simon’s mobile phone noticing that the screen reads ‘missed call’. Pushing buttons he smiles; “Stef seems desperate to talk to you, that’s the second time he has called you isn’t it?”

Simon stares back angrily, saying nothing.

“Easy or hard Pal, it’s up to you.” threatens Steve.

Simon strains at his bonds a look of pure hatred covering his face, Steve picks up the holdall; “Well this isn’t yours is it?”

“Yeah it is I found it, if you wanna leave your stuff laying around for people to find what do you expect?”

“Where’s the rest of it?” Steve asks in a threatening voice.

“Dunno mate, that’s all there was in there, minus forty quid for me Jack Daniels and bits and pieces.” replies Simon defiantly.

“Maybe Stef will call again.” says Steve as he walks towards the window. Pulling back the curtain a little he looks in the direction of the chip shop and sees Dippa walking down the street towards him carrying a large white paper bag. Ignoring Simon he walks out of the lounge and down the stairs to let Dippa in.

“Nice one.” Dippa says as Steve opens the door, handing him the paper bag he reaches into his pocket, pulling out the change he attempts to hand it to Steve who has already started to climb the stairs. Dippa shuts the door and follows Steve up the stairs.

As Dippa enters the flat he trips on the folded carpet and can hear Steve in the kitchen searching the cupboards. Looking in the lounge he looks at Simon and walks out into the kitchen; “What are you going to do with that fella?”

Steve looks up at him as he tips his sausage and chips onto a large white plate; “Seen any tomato sauce?” he asks.

“Yeah, it's in the fridge.” replies Dippa as he walks over to the refrigerator and opens the door, reaching in he pulls out a red plastic bottle and hands it to Steve.

“Thanks Dippa, I dunno yet, gotta give this one a little thought.” he answers as he pours tomato sauce over his chips. Putting the lid back on he hands the bottle back to Dippa and sits down at the table and starts to eat. Dippa puts the bottle back into the refrigerator and slams the door shut; “You want a drink with that?”

“Yeah, good idea, coffee with two sugars.”

Dippa fills the kettle and puts it on to boil, washing two mugs in the big sink he prepares the coffee.

Chapter Six

“Still no answer?” asks Nicola.

“No, I don't know what's happened to him.” answers Stef as he pushes a button on his mobile phone.

“I hope he's all right.”

“Yeah, am sure he is, ya know he likes a drink he's probably pissed, I'll give him a call in a while.”

“I do like this telly though I'm not so sure you should have bought it.”

“Why not?” answers Stef belligerently.

Nicola looks Stef in the eyes knowing the tone of voice and the argument that will surely follow if she continues. She does not feel like arguing, it had been a tough day at the hospital and all she wants to do is sit and rest; “Make me a coffee will you? I'm knackered.”

“Make it yourself I ain't your slave” replies Stef harshly as he sits on the couch.

Nicola's face flushes with embarrassment and she looks down at the carpet not wanting any kind of confrontation; she is far too tired.

Stef looks at Nicola seeing his attempt at humour fail miserably, with a pronounced sigh he stands up; “You want it made with all milk?” he asks gently.

“Yes please, darling.” Nicola smiles as she looks up at him, her face drawn and pale.

Stef walks into the kitchen and the sound of him making the coffee as loud as he can fills the air. Nicola smiles wearily, it sure has been a hard day; most of the staff are off with the flu and Nicola feels as if she has done six peoples work in one day! Closing her eyes she sits back on the couch and is instantly asleep.

Stef walks back into the lounge, seeing that Nicola is asleep he makes an angry noise in his throat and sits down opposite her in the armchair. Putting the coffee

onto the table his brow creases into a frown; he admits to himself that he is very worried about Simon. Taking his mobile phone out of his pocket he calls again, after five rings the answer phone informs him that he is unable to answer the call and would he like to leave a message? Stef disconnects the call with an angry push of his thumb and shifts in the chair in agitation. Deciding that he can wait no longer, he stands up and puts his telephone into his pocket. Picking up his car keys from the table he walks softly across the floor and opens the door. Trying to be as quiet as possible he shuts the door gently and turns and opens the main door. Closing that as quietly he walks down the path and unlocking the car door he gets in and starts the engine. Not putting his seat belt on he drives slowly away, after a few hundred metres he puts his seatbelt on and not seeing the shadowy figure inside the green Astra estate car watching him he puts his foot down and accelerates fast along the road.

Steve looks up from eating his chips when he hears Simon's mobile phone ringing from the lounge; "Go get that will you mate? Don't answer it." he orders Dippa.

Dippa gets up from the table and hurries into the lounge, Simon has moved closer to the table and Dippa can see him straining at the black plastic that holds him; "Ha no way mate." Dippa shouts as he grabs the back of the chair and tries to pull it away from the table. The legs bite deep into the thick carpet and Dippa strains as his face turns red and veins bulge from the effort. Giving it up as a bad job he picks the phone off the table and goes back into the kitchen as the phone falls silent.

"What was the name that came up?" asks Steve.

"Stef." replies Dippa as he sits back down putting the phone in front of Steve.

“He is persistent, you'd better go keep look out of the window in case we get a visitor.”

“You think we will?” asks Dippa nervously.

Steve looks Dippa in the eyes; “Never did thank you for knocking out that geezer in there, heard it was you.”

Dippa flushes with pride and with renewed confidence stands and walks into the lounge.

Steve finishes his meal and washes it down with the last of his coffee, pulling a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket he takes one out and puts it in his mouth.

Lighting it from a cheap plastic lighter he stands up and walks into the lounge.

Dippa stands by the window looking along the street, Simon twists angrily on the chair as Steve's eyes focus on him; “That was your mate Stef on the phone, he seems well desperate for you to go out and have that drink with him.” Steve says sarcastically.

Simon stares back, the anger in his eyes plain to see. Steve feels uncomfortable under the angry gaze and feels that he is going to get nowhere with the man in front of him. Looking towards Dippa he asks; “See anything?”

“Not what you want, that old woman with the scruffy dog is coming this way but that's about it.”

“Plenty of time, if it's the one you think it is he's gotta come from the other side of town.”

Dippa turns towards Steve in surprise, he had forgotten about the smiling fella he had seen this morning; “I got James keeping an eye up there, hang on.” he says as he takes his mobile phone out of his pocket and dials a number. Holding the phone to his ear he stares at Steve with optimism; “Yeah it's me, has anyone gone out recently up there?”

Dippa listens to the voice at the other end of the phone nodding his head, with a big smile on his face he says;

“Yeah you might as well go home if your missus is giving you grief. I'll see you tomorrow sometime thanks for your help.” and pushes a button disconnecting the call. Triumphantly he looks at Steve; “Yeah, that fella I saw this morning has just driven past him.”

“Well done, get back on that window.”

Dippa obediently turns back towards the window and looks along the street in both directions. The excitement and fear returns, twisting his stomach and he hopes Steve handles things a bit better than Razor Mick and Curly Pete had managed to do.

Stef takes the turning into Simon's street and looks anxiously for a space to park the car; the street is full forcing him to drive to the end and into the next street. With no parking spaces in the next street either Stef is forced to drive along the seafront and luckily, finds a space next to the pier. Locking the car he walks quickly back in the direction of Simon's flat. The public bar on the seafront heaves with people and the sound of a live group fills the air with electric guitars and fast drumming; explaining the difficulty with the parking!

Stef crosses the street and approaches two rough looking men who stand at the corner to Simon's street. The bald headed man looks ugly and dirty; the grey khaki shorts and battered work boots look as old as he is and his friend looks similar with dirty grey shirt and jeans. Stef wonders if they are watching the street, or is he just getting too paranoid? he walks past them and along Simon's street.

Realising that it was a mistake to walk down here if his suspicions are correct Stef puts his head down and tries to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. As he approaches Simon's flat he cannot resist looking up at the window. The curtain appears to be drawn back a

little; and he can see someone watching him!

The crouching figure is not Simon as Simon does not have blonde hair, and neither do any of his friends, male or female. Stef quickens his pace not realising that the blonde watcher recognises him as the smiling motorist from this morning!

“Steve.” hisses Dippa from the window.

Steve gets up from the couch and strides quickly across the room, standing behind Dippa he peers over his shoulder in the direction Dippa is looking.

Stef hurries along the road with a bad feeling starting to fill his body, his sixth sense screams that he is being watched and *how stupid* it was to walk along the street, when he knew it is being watched!

Stef breaks into a run and crosses the street so that he is out of sight from the watcher, he reaches the corner and not looking behind him continues running.

“That’s the one from the other side of town.” Dippa excitedly exclaims as Stef breaks into his run.

“Get after him.” shouts Steve answering the ring of his phone; reaching into his pocket for his mobile phone he sees the name ‘Cheesey’, pushing a button he holds the phone to his ear; “Yes mate.” he says as he starts to walk out of the flat after Dippa.

“Hi Steve, this is Cheesey, erm I dunno if you should know this but there’s a Geezer running down the street in your direction, wasn’t sure whether to phone you or not?” he stupidly asks as Steve reaches the front door and erupts out onto the street; “Get after him, cut him off.” Steve shouts into the phone and runs after Dippa’s retreating back.

Cheesey looks at his phone not sure what he has heard; “What he say?” asks Graham.

“I think he wants us to help catch that Geezer.” says Cheesey with a confused look as he sees Steve come

running out of Simon's flat and run along the street after Dippa and the running man. Not sure he is doing the right thing Cheeseey breaks into a run after them with Graham a few steps behind him.

Stef increases his pace when he reaches the High Street and dodging between the pedestrians he runs down the street towards the bus station. If those two fellas who were standing on the corner run along the street they will cut him off Stef thinks as he is forced out onto the road by a group of young girls who are blocking the pavement.

Stef increases speed with a clear road ahead and realising that if those two fellas have been sent to cut him off at the junction he detours and runs into the petrol station. Running along the side wall he stops just short of the street and peers around the corner; all is quiet and the two fellas on the corner have gone.

Putting his head down Stef runs out into the street and running as fast as he can reaches the seafront. Not stopping for the slow moving cars he runs out into the road nearly getting hit by an old woman driving a car that is far too big for her as she over reacts and screeches to a halt. Reaching his car he unlocks the door and jumps in, starting the engine with a roar he puts the car into reverse gear and backs out into the road. A squeal of brakes tells him that he has missed whoever is coming and with no more thought reverses right out into the road.

The driver of the car he nearly hit, a young lad in a red Peugeot gesticulates at him angrily. Stef barely gives him a glance as he shifts the car into first gear and roars up the road.

Dippa slows as he reaches the High Street, years of

smoking have done their damage and he puffs and groans like an old man. Seeing Stef dodging between the pedestrians inspires him to break into a run and he arrives at the petrol garage with Steve close behind him just as Stef disappears around the corner.

“Don't worry, Cheesey and Graham will get him.” puffs Steve as he runs past Dippa. Emerging onto the street he sees Stef's distant form going around a corner to the seafront. Looking about he can see no sign of Cheesey or Graham and has to stop to catch his breath.

“Where are they then?” asks a breathless Dippa behind him.

“Knowing Cheesey they are running the wrong way.” shouts Steve as he runs after Stef.

Dippa follows reluctantly behind, he is finding it difficult to breathe and he suddenly feels a deep weariness inside him.

Steve reaches the seafront as Stef is driving away and reaches into his pocket for his mobile phone, it is not there and must have fallen out when he was running. Angrily he waits for Dippa to catch up; “Give me your phone.” he demands.

“I haven't got it, left it back at that fellas flat.” is a reply Steve does not want to hear.

Simon strains at the plastic that binds him and feels it weaken and stretch a little more. Now that he is not being watched he is able to put more effort into getting out of this predicament. The warmth of his body helps as it softens the plastic sacking; the chord that Dippa used first was badly tied and loosens along with the plastic. Blood starts to seep amongst it as Simon wriggles his wrists, rubbing them raw and breaking the skin. The blood helps; providing a lubricant and Simon pulls with all his might and manages to pull his right

hand out. With an exaggerated sigh Simon rests for a few seconds before pulling his left hand free. Untying his bound feet he stands and lurches forward towards the door. Tripping on the folded carpet he grabs hold of the door frame and steadies himself before he heads out the door.

Hanging onto the banister rail Simon manages to get down the stairs and shut the front door. Sliding the heavy bolts at the top and bottom of the door he sits back on the bottom step and catches his breath.

Appreciating his good fortune in escaping his bonds visions of the front door being kicked in flood his mind; as a hoard of thugs rush in. With a jump he stands up and hurries back up the stairs, going into his spare room he pulls down two big shelves that line one wall. Books and ornaments fall to the floor with a crash as Simon hurries out of the room. Carrying the shelves downstairs he attempts to reinforce the door by jamming the shelves up against it. The gap proves too large to be useful and Simon turns and runs back up the stairs. Going back into the spare room he picks up his heavy metal toolbox and turns it upside down as he tips all of the tools out onto the floor.

Taking the empty toolbox downstairs he uses it to bridge the gap between the planks and bottom step of the stairs jamming them in tight, forming an effective barricade. Not entirely satisfied he runs back up the stairs and gets his battery powered screwdriver from under the bed in the spare room. Looking down at the mess of tools on the floor he sees several large wood screws lying amongst them. Grabbing two he hurries back down the stairs inserting the screwdriver bit into the chuck as he goes. Reaching the front door he bends down and pushing one of the screws firmly into the bottom of the door and at an angle of forty five degrees,

he screws the heavy door into its frame.

The second screw follows, screwed in firmly close to the lock before Simon is satisfied, standing back he admires his work and beats a hasty retreat up the stairs. Shutting his inner flat door firmly, Simon trips on the folded carpet and goes back into the spare room in search of more screws. Searching through the pile of tools he can find only one more that is big enough to do the job and he hurries out the door into his narrow hall. Placing the heavy screw near the lock like the front door below, he screws the door firmly shut. Feeling that he can do no more, Simon searches his flat for weapons. The hammer and crowbar left by his recent visitors are ideal and he places them on the big coffee table, ready for use.

Going to the window he pulls the curtain back as a mighty bang comes from the direction of the front door. Simon peers down to see Steve looking up at him; anger contorts his face into pure hatred and ugliness and Simon steps back from the window as if he has been physically struck.

Gathering his thoughts and relying on his defences he pulls back the curtain and looks down into the street. Steve seems to be having a heated argument with the bald headed man he had seen earlier and he drops the curtain down. Turning back into the room he suddenly needs a drink and looks down at the coffee table; the holdall of money sits opened next to a strange mobile phone.

He sees his phone on the floor and walks over and picks it up and dials a number, anxiously he looks around the room as the phone rings; "Simon!" shouts Stef into the phone "You all right Dude?"

"Yeah am Ok man, have bolted and screwed the doors, no way are they getting in here again. But you

and Nic have gotta go somewhere else they know where you live man.” Simon says in a stressed voice.

“What do you mean, they know?” shouts Stef into the phone.

“We were seen making our getaway yesterday, they've had the town staked out looking for us and they stopped me last night along the seafront.” confesses Simon.

“I knew you weren't telling me something.” shouts Stef.

“Sorry man but they already had their suspicions about you.”

“Me? What are you talking about?” replies Stef in a frightened voice.

“Yeah, they've had your road staked out since dawn, seems you were the only one with a smile on their face this morning.”

Stef casts his mind back to this morning's trip out to get the new TV and now does remember someone sitting in a car, one that is not normally there. Stef curses his stupidity remembering that his thoughts had been on money and recalls his sub consciousness telling him that the car and driver were out of place.

“I do remember him now from this morning.” Stef admits.

“You gotta move man, go to Nic's sister's until it's safe, no way are they getting in here I'm safe for a while.” Simon reassures.

“I'm just pulling up outside now, we'll call you as soon as we are clear, I'll get help.” Stef assures as he disconnects the call.

Simon puts the phone back onto the table and goes into the kitchen to get his other bottle of whiskey. The bottle still stands where he left it earlier on the worktop and he unscrews the lid. Opening a cupboard he takes out a small tea cup and fills it to the brim. Putting the cup to his lips he drinks it in one go and quickly refills it,

carrying cup and bottle he goes back into the lounge and sits down on the hard back chair he had been tied to and he looks at the mess that surrounds him. The blood from the fella he had bottled has turned black and forms an ugly stain on the carpet. Holding his cup to the air he gives a silent toast to his god for helping him as he puts the cup to his lips and drinks again.

Steve runs back to Simon's flat with Dippa trailing behind; he remembers that he had left the front door wide open when he ran out and he has visions of it being shut on his return. Quickening his pace and with anxiety giving him more adrenalin he leaves Dippa far behind and reaches the *shut* front door. With anger clouding his judgement he runs at it and kicks it as hard as he can, hoping to kick it open. The door remains firmly shut and several passersby give him strange looks and hurry past. Steve ignores them, his anger calming until he sees Cheesey and Graham approaching. His anger is replaced by frustration as Cheesey's concerned face approaches him; it is unfair to blame him for not understanding what he meant by 'Cut him off.' he argues to himself, but his anger wins as he shouts in a terrifying voice to Cheesey; "What do you mean by running after us? I told you to cut him off." Cheesey's face turns almost white at Steve's anger towards him and he blusters in defence; "I wasn't sure what you meant, so thought it best to try and catch you up."

Steve stares at him in frustration; this is why he didn't like using him as *every time* this fella misunderstands what is said to him. "We'd better get off the street, you might as well know where Stella's flat is." he says in resignation and walks along the path with his mind racing; what is he going to do now?

Dippa follows quickly behind and asks how they are going to get back into the flat?

Steve turns sharply towards him his face a picture of pure rage; "The bastards bolted or pushed something against it. I kicked it hard as I could and it was like kicking a brick wall, looks like you didn't tie him up tight enough."

"I tied him as best I could with what I had." replies Dippa defensively.

Steve really wants to take out his anger on Dippa as he feels he is to blame, feeling defeated Steve turns away from Dippa and walks along the street.

Cheesey looks at them in confusion until he realises they must be going to Stella's flat. With the colour returning to his cheeks he looks at Graham; "You'd better come." he says stating the obvious to Graham as they hurry to catch them up.

Steve looks up at Stella's window that overlooks the street as Eric steps back from it, hopefully to go and open the door for them. It would be good to have someone understand him a little, he wryly thinks to himself.

Turning he looks at Dippa behind him; "Do me a favour mate, see if you can find my phone will yer?"

"You really think I'll find it?" Dippa asks in a surprised voice.

"Never know and I could do with some luck right now."

"Sure, I'll go look." shrugs Dippa.

Eric opens the door for Steve as he approaches and with a curt nod Steve steps past him into the house as he climbs the stairs. Entering the lounge he can only see Carol; "Where's Stella?" he barks.

Carol stares at him her anger rising, who does he think he is? She thinks as she replies; "Stella doesn't want

anything to do with it, she's gone and wants us gone too.”

Steve looks at her, the harsh tone to her voice makes him realise he has offended her and he also realises as Cheesey and Graham walk in behind him that he needs all the help he can get; “Sorry Love, it's all going wrong.” he apologises in his best voice; “Where's Eric's phone?”

“Probably in his pocket, that sounds like him coming up the stairs.”

Steve turns to look towards the doorway, Cheesey and Graham stand awkwardly just inside the room looking most uncomfortable; “Take a seat for a few minutes will yer?” Steve snaps at them as Eric enters the room.

Cheesey flushes a deep shade of red at Steve's tone of voice and sits down quickly onto the couch. Graham looks at Steve as if needing permission, Steve ignores him; “Ah Eric can I borrow your phone please?” he politely asks holding his hand out.

Eric is surprised at Steve's tone of voice and automatically reaches into his pocket and passes Steve his phone.

“Nice one, thanks mate.” Steve says as he starts to push buttons; “You not got Barney's phone number?”

“Barney? I don't really know him I got Dippa's and only a few others.”

Steve searches through the phone in frustration not finding the numbers he needs and hands it back to Eric; “I will have to go home and get my spare phone.”

Turning to leave the room he sees Cheesey and Graham sitting on the couch; “Wait here until Dippa gets back before you leave and stay close. He has your number, I'll get him to ring you, thanks for your help.” he says as he walks out the door and down the stairs.

Cheesey looks surprised and confused at Steve's words and looks to Graham for help; “How long will

Dippa be?"

Graham shrugs in reply and stares at the blank screen of the television seeming to hope that someone will turn it on.

Cheesey stares at him and looks up at Eric and Carol hoping for enlightenment. With no words from either he looks at Graham and joins him staring at the television.

Carol is very uncertain of these rough looking characters sitting on the couch, she had only seen Cheesey from a distance before and she does not know who Graham is.

"What are your names?" she asks looking at Cheesey.

Cheesey looks away from the blank television screen seeming to be annoyed at the interruption, he answers gruffly; "I'm Cheesey, and this is Graham."

Graham nods his head at her and returns to staring at the television, "Cheesey! That's a strange name why do they call you that?"

"I got the name from work, I was having my cheese sandwiches as I normally have for lunch and a fella called me Cheesey; been called that ever since."

Cheesey replies seriously.

Carol is bored by Cheesey's explanation and can think of no answer to give him; Eric interrupts her thoughts as he asks Cheesey if he wants a can of beer?

Cheesey smiles, showing his dirty tobacco stained teeth; "Yeah I'll have one, do you want one Graham?"

Graham looks away from the television seeming not to have heard as he stares blankly at him.

"Yeah, he'll have one as well." orders Cheesey.

Eric goes out into the kitchen and opens the refrigerator door, reaching in he takes out two cans and slamming the door shut goes back into the lounge; "There you go." he says as he hands Cheesey and Graham a can.

Cheesey and Graham take the cans with big smiles and with no thanks they open the tins and take a large swig of beer and belch contently; almost in harmony!

“We gotta get out of here.” Stef shouts as he rushes in.

“What, what is going on?” Nicola asks as Stef wakes her from a deep sleep.

“Simon's had loads of trouble; and so will we if we don't get out of here.” shouts Stef as he runs into the bedroom. Emerging a few seconds later carrying the box of money he hurries out to the car and puts the box in the trunk.

“What's happening?” shouts a frightened Nicola from the front door.

Stef shuts the trunk with a slam and runs up the path; “Get that box with the driver's licences and the important paper work, we've got about five minutes.” Stef tells her as he enters the flat.

Nicola runs in front of him barring his way; “Not until you tell me what is going on?”

“We ain't got time for that I'll tell you on the way, better grab a few clothes.” Stef answers dodging to the side of Nicola he goes back into the bedroom and pulls a huge suitcase from under the bed. Opening the wardrobe door he starts to throw a few clothes into the case as Nicola enters carrying the box of paperwork. Throwing the box onto the bed she shoulders Stef to one side and starts to put her clothes into the case.

“Not too much, we can buy what we need, ready?” asks Stef as he starts to zip the case shut.

“When are we coming back?”

“To be honest Nic, I don't know.” Stef says as he zips the case shut and picking it up starts to carry it out of the room.

“I'll go and lock the back door.” Nicola tells him as she

picks up the box of paperwork and follows him out of the room.

Stef hurries out to the car with the heavy case and box as Nicola runs to the back door and locks and bolts it firmly. Shutting the kitchen window with a bang Nicola does not notice the window crack and break as it slams into the cast iron chicken that sits on the window ledge; that had been pushed too close to the window by Stef earlier in the day when he was looking for his lighter. Drawing the curtains as she goes Nicola unplugs the television and electronic equipment as Stef comes back into the lounge; "Ready?" he shouts unnecessarily.

"Yes, I suppose so." replies Nicola in a sad voice, somehow in the back of her mind she knew this was going to happen; but not so soon!

"Come on then." he orders as he holds the front door open for her, Nicola looks back sadly as she walks out.

"We've got all our personal stuff and we have more than enough money to replace everything." Stef says with little feeling.

Nicola looks at him thinking of all the other personal possessions she is leaving behind; the teapot from her mother, the clock from granddad, photographs of times gone by; Stef interrupts her thoughts by grabbing hold of her arm; "We haven't got much time." he says gently.

Nicola turns and walks out of the flat and down the path without a backward look. She stands by the car door not looking around as Stef locks the front door and runs down the path. Unlocking the car he gets in and starts the engine as Nicola gets in beside him; "Let's get out of here." he says as he puts the car into gear and he drives out of town.

Steve hurries down the stairs, peering across the road at Simon's flat before he steps out onto the street.

Several couples walk along arm in arm on their way home after a night out on the town. One of the girls has had too much to drink; shouting and laughing she acts the fool embarrassing her friends who try to encourage her along the road.

Walking away from them Steve goes in search of Dippa hoping that he has found his mobile phone. Reaching the High Street Steve retraces his steps from the chase earlier looking under cars and along the gutter as he walks. As he reaches the garage Dippa steps out from the big kiosk, arms loaded up with a giant sausage roll, sandwiches and large bottle of beer.

“Did you find my phone?” Steve shouts across at him.

Dippa drops the sausage roll and sandwiches, startled by the sound of Steve's voice. The truth was he hadn't looked very hard as he was more interested in filling his stomach; “No, I looked everywhere.” he lies.

Steve knows by the tone of Dippa's voice that he is lying to him and a feeling of helplessness floods through him. Suddenly he feels very alone and somehow vulnerable, feelings he is not used to; “Look again and then go back to Stella's.” he orders in an angry voice. The feeling of wanting to punch Dippa again and again must show on his face as Dippa turns a shade pale as he stares at him. Steve gets his anger under control and looks at Dippa demanding an answer.

“Yeah, sure I was going to anyway.” Dippa lies again.

“Your friend Cheesey and his mate are there, Cheesey's heart is in the right place but he ain't a lot of good when he's so pissed all the time. Is there anyone else you know who might do a better job just as lookouts?”

“No, not really, Cheesey's all right and he wants to help.” Dippa answers defensively.

The helpless feeling wells up inside Steve again; “Well

have a word with him and put him on standby, we'll call him if we need him" he says as he turns his back and walks back up the street.

Keeping his head down and looking everywhere for his phone Steve's head races in a whirl of thoughts; the main one being that not all of the missing money is his. He had yet to pass on this fact to his partners. In effect he is personally responsible for the holdall and to have left it this long before admitting the loss can only look bad on him. Steve hurries his pace home, he needs Curly Pete and some more muscle and his mind races through the people he can call.

Reaching his home Steve unlocks the front door and hurries into the spare room which he has converted into an office. Searching through the drawers in his desk he finally finds his spare phone and turns it on; the battery is flat.

Slamming the phone down in anger onto the desk Steve goes back to searching through the desk drawers. Pulling them out onto the floor in his anger he has pulled all but one out onto the floor when he finds the charger. With a 'Yes' of triumph Steve plugs the phone into the charger and pushes it into a wall socket. Turning it on, he waits impatiently for there to be enough power for it to turn on.

Slamming the phone down again he goes out into the kitchen and gets a bottle of beer out of the refrigerator. Slamming the door shut he removes the lid with the bottle opener on the wall and letting the top fall noisily to the worktop he walks back into his office.

Sitting down in his big chair Steve takes a long swig of beer and reaches out for the mobile phone. Turning it on he is delighted to see it light up and after taking another swig of beer he dials a number. Holding the phone to his ear he hears it ring twice until a voice answers; "Yes,

who is that?"

"Barney, it's me Steve, having to use my other phone, where are you man?"

"I've just dropped Pete and Mick at Mick's Aunties and am on me way back now, be 'bout an hour."

"I haven't got Pete's number, I need you to go back and bring him here as quick as you can."

"He may not want to come; he was pretty cut up about losing his friend I ain't never seen him so upset."

"Go back and ask him will you and if he don't want to, give him this number will you please?" Steve asks politely as he really needs Curly Pete by his side.

Barney has never heard Steve be so polite with him and in surprise he answers; "Yeah sure I'll turn round now, erm I would be happier if I could just give him your phone number and ask him to ring you urgent, and then you can ask him?"

"Soon as you can mate, how long before you see him?" Steve asks in that same polite voice.

"About ten minutes," Barney laughs; "thanks I'll get him to ring you off my phone soon as."

"Nice one mate." Steve says and pushes a button on his phone disconnects the call.

Dippa bangs on the front door to Stella's flat and looks along the street to Simon's flat as he waits for his knock to be answered. All appears quiet as the night closes in. It has been a long day and he had been on the go since dawn and badly needs to sleep.

"All right Dippa?" Eric asks as he opens the door.

"Yeah, fine" Dippa answers as he walks past Eric and heads up the stairs.

Eric steps out of the doorway and looks up and down the street, most people are going to bed now and apart from a lonely dog walker at the top of the street nothing

moves. Eric steps back inside and closes the door following Dippa up the stairs.

“We Ok in here?” Dippa asks as he enters the lounge; Cheesey and Graham are sitting on the couch watching the television. Carol sits by the window and looks him in the eyes; Dippa can see by her expression that she is not at all happy.

Eric walks in behind him and walks over to Carol and sits at the table, picking up a tobacco tin he opens it and starts to roll a cigarette.

Receiving no answer Dippa stares back at Carol; “You Ok?”

“Not really, you keep some strange company.” she replies indicating Cheesey and Graham who are still staring at the television.

Turning away from Carol, Dippa looks at Cheesey and Graham; “You two can get off if you want?”

Cheesey looks up at Dippa in surprise; “You sure you don't need us?” he asks appearing hurt.

“Well we will need you later, keep your phone on you and I'll give you a call.” Dippa looks at his expensive gold watch on his wrist; “Hey, if your quick you'll make last orders.”

Cheesey and Graham's faces light up at the thought of alcohol and both stand up together at the same time; “We'll go up The Prince 'till they chuck us out and then we'll go to the Harbour Bar coz they are open 'till two.” says Cheesey as him and Graham hurry out the door and down the stairs.

Dippa turns to Carol “What happened while I was away, they do anything?”

“Those two are just a couple of piss heads, they didn't do anything really except talk disgusting and swear every second word.” replies Carol angrily, admittedly she swore herself at times when she was angry or

upset. But the constant swearing and disrespect Cheesey and Graham had shown her had got her back up.

“Sorry about them, but they are harmless, all you had to do was tell them to shut up.” Dippa says in a matter of fact voice.

“That was why I put the television on, it did help.”

“Can I borrow your phone please Eric?” Dippa asks walking towards him.

“Where's yours then, you lost it as well?” asks Eric as he reaches into his pocket for his phone.

“Yeah, left it in me other jacket,” Dippa lies as he takes the phone from Eric's hand.

Searching through Eric's phone he pushes buttons and then holds the phone to his ear; “Hello Love, yeah I'm still down the town and I gotta wait here for Steve.” Dippa says into the phone.

Listening intently to the person on the other end Dippa nods his head several times; “Yeah I've lost me phone, can you ring them back and ask them to ring me on this phone, yeah this is Eric's. Best not ring mine any more, if anyone else rings get 'em to call this number Ok?”

Dippa listens for a few seconds more before removing the phone from his ear and pushes more buttons, putting it back to his ear he stares into space for a few seconds; “Where are you man?” he says his eyes locking with Carol's. Carol stares back and turns and looks out of the window ignoring him as she looks up and down the street.

“Yeah man I need you here, I am at Stella's, you know where that is?” Dippa listens intently and with a; “See you soon.” he disconnects the call and hands the phone back to Eric.

“I hope it's someone nice?” asks Eric as he takes his phone from Dippa's hand.

“Oh yeah it's Kemp, you know he's all right, I know you will be pleased to see him coz he's my lift home.”

“That is disappointing to hear you are not staying.” says Carol from the window sarcastically.

“Yeah Kemp's good, you've upset Carol enough for one night with your ogre type friends.” smiles Eric wryly.

Dippa laughs; “Hopefully Steve will phone soon, then I can go home.”

“That's the best thing you've said all day.” agrees Carol from the window.

“Ain't my fault everything went wrong.” Dippa says as he joins her looking out of the window; “That Geezer's a tough one.” he says as he looks at Simon's flat.

“What happens now?” asks Carol.

“Dunno, Steve's gotta round up some of the boys, but I don't know what he's gonna do. That front door looks the only way in, I've picked the lock once, but he's bolted it or barricaded it according to Steve. Steve reckons it'll take a battering ram to get through that and that ain't an option in this busy street; think we would make too much noise.” he finishes with a smile.

Carol stares at him with a serious expression on her face; “I need to pee.” she says as she gets up and walks out of the room.

Dippa stares at Simon's flat wondering just how Steve is going to sort this mess, the sooner he is home and out of this the better!

Chapter Seven

Stef slows the car and turns into the drive of Nicola's sisters, putting on the handbrake he turns the engine off; “It looks like she is in bed.” he says as he stares at the

house, as no lights show.

“She might be working, I've got a key but we'd better knock first.”

Nicola's sister is also a nurse, usually she only worked in the day but Nicola knew at times she was called in, especially when they were short staffed.

They get out of the car and shutting the doors quietly they walk along the path to the front door. Stef uses his fist to knock gently on the door; “There's no one in.” he says.

“Give her a chance will yer.” Nicola whispers harshly.

They stand at the door for a few seconds when Stef impatiently says; “Use your key; we need to unload and get the car out of sight.”

Nicola looks at him and comes to a sudden decision; taking her keys from her leather handbag she approaches the door. Turning to give Stef a disapproving look she inserts a key in the door and unlocking it opens it cautiously.

“We ain't got time for this.” Stef says as he pushes past her and enters the house, Nicola follows behind him; “Go check her bedroom, I'll start unloading.”

Nicola walks up the stairs to her sisters' room; the door is wide open and obviously empty. Stepping back, Nicola turns on the landing light and goes back down the stairs to help Stef.

Five minutes later Stef starts the engine and drives the car around the corner of the house. Seeing that the only place where the car will be out of sight from the road is the flower bed next to the shed, Stef drives across the carefully manicured lawn and parks it amongst the wallflowers; squashing the emerging Hollyhocks in the process. Stef gets out of the car flattening the flower bed further, shuts the door quietly and walks back to the house.

“I don't believe you did that.” says Nicola in horror as Stef enters the house. Nicola is looking out of the kitchen window at the mess Stef has just made of her sisters garden. Tyre tracks lead across the lawn to the ruined flowerbed; “Heather is going to go mad when she sees it.”

“She'll be all right about it, you wait and see.” answers Stef appearing bored with the subject.

“You can tell her.” Nicola smiles in reply.

“That's your job.” Stef tells her as he picks up the box of money; “I guess we will be in the spare room, I'll put this up there while you put the kettle on.” he says as he climbs the stairs.

Nicola gives no answer as she goes into the kitchen, filling the kettle with cold water from the tap she turns the kettle on and goes back into the hall to help Stef carry their belongings upstairs. As she picks up her suitcase Stef comes running down the stairs; “I'll do that, you make the coffee I'm as dry as a bone.”

“Sounds good to me.” smiles Nicola as she walks back into the kitchen.

A few minutes later a breathless Stef enters the kitchen and sits down at the table on a hard back chair. Getting his tobacco tin out of his pocket he starts to roll a cigarette.

“Now what?” asks Nicola as she puts a mug of coffee in front of him.

“I'll phone Simon again when I've drunk me coffee and we'll go from there.” replies Stef, with more confidence than he feels. The truth was that he did not know what to do next and he searches his memory for the right person to help them.

“Hello Pete?” asks Steve as he answers the ringing of the phone.

“Hi Steve, you need me to come back?” he asks, having already guessed why Barney had asked him to ring.

“Only if you want to, have you taken care of Mick?”

“Yeah, he’s at his Aunties, she wants a couple of days to get the family together.”

“You all right, can you spare some time to come back and help me?” asks Steve hopefully.

“Yeah, will be in the morning as I’ve got a few things to sort here first, where are you?”

“Thanks mate; yeah I’m at home ring me when you are outside.”

“I ain’t doing it for you, I owe that bastard.” says Curly Pete as he disconnects the call.

Steve puts the phone down on the table with a smile on his face, picking the phone up again he dials a number and holds the phone to his ear; “Hey Natalie need your help if you can.”

“Steve, things gone wrong?” asks Natalie in a cheery voice.

“Yeah, not so good to be honest, really need your help.”

“Yeah sure, what ya need?”

“Can you and Sheila come down here with your shooters tomorrow I got real problems?”

“Sounds like you have mate, can be with you first thing in the morning, where do you want to meet?”

“I’m still at the same place, come and knock on the door, if your early enough I’ll cook you breakfast.”

“Wow, you must have problems see you in the morning.”

“Nice one thanks, see you in the morning.” Steve pushes a button and dials again; the phone rings four times before a voice shouts; “Who is it?”

“Eric, its Steve everything all right there?”

“Oh, sorry man didn't recognise the number, yeah, all good here.”

“You still keeping an eye on that flat?”

“Ain't taken our eyes off it, think the fella's gone to bed.”

“That's good to hear, nothings gonna happen until the morning will you and Carol be able to keep watch overnight?”

“Yeah, can do if you want, we can take it in turns.”

“Appreciate it man I've got some people arriving in the morning, I'll come see you about ten, can you put Dippa on please?”

“Yeah, but before I do we got Stella coming about then, think she wants her flat back.”

“I'll talk to her, if she gets there before me tell her I got a proposition for her she will like.”

“Sounds good, here's Dippa.” Eric answers as he hands him the phone.

“Hi Steve.” says Dippa in a serious voice.

“You can get away if you want to mate, let Eric and Carol cover it and I'll see you at mine in the morning about nine if you can get out of bed.” Steve says in a sarcastic voice.

Dippa knows he is joking; “Well I'll have a go, cheers see you in the morning.” and disconnects the call!

Steve suppresses his anger at Dippa for hanging up on him but only for a second or two; angrily he stubs out the half smoked cigarette in the ashtray. Instantly regretting his move he takes another cigarette out of its packet and puts it between his lips. Dialling a number on his phone he lights the cigarette as he puts the phone to his ear. Breathing out a huge cloud of smoke he speaks into the phone; “Hi Barry, sorry to phone you so late.”

“Steve, coming in on your old phone must mean you got problems.” says the voice on the other end in a stern

manner.

Steve's stomach twists in fear at the tone of voice, Barry is the main backer along with two others who put the money together to buy the huge amounts that they do. Steve's contribution money wise has always been small as he was the one taking the risk in getting it into the country. This was the first time he had got Dippa to meet the boat, and right from the start things had gone wrong.

“Yeah you could say that, we didn't meet the boat this time, we did the usual drop but we knew something was wrong when they were late in coming. When they did show they had a police launch chasing them and the police were everywhere.”

“I hear you lost my money, how is it you are not telling me that?” asks Barry in a threatening tone of voice.

“It's not totally lost, I know where it is and I should get it back tomorrow.” answers Steve, now really scared; how does Barry know? As far as Steve was concerned he was the only one who knew about Barry, Rob and Phil, the people who supplied the money. He was the only one who ever met them but had always suspected that Barry did not trust him and often wondered how it was that Barry seemed to know what was going on. His words confirm Steve's fears and his mind races as to who is informing on him as Barry's voice interrupts his thoughts; “I'll be down to see you in the morning with Rob and Phil, make sure you are at home.” he says as he hangs up the phone.

Steve takes his phone from his ear and stares at the floor, his mind a whirl of thoughts; who is it that is informing on him? Dippa seems the obvious candidate but Steve feels he hasn't got the intelligence to be able to keep that sort of thing from him. He sorts through his mind on the people it could be and realises he hasn't got

a clue as to who it is. Now that he is aware that he is being watched Steve feels confident that he will soon find out who it is.

The thought of Barry and his other backers coming to see him knots his stomach and he hopes that they arrive when everybody else does! Satisfied that he can do no more he stands up and walks across the room to where he had thrown his jacket on the floor. Picking it up carefully he brushes the dust off with his hand and drapes it onto the back of a chair. Forgetting to turn the lights off he makes his way to his bedroom and lying on the bed without undressing he closes his eyes and is instantly asleep.

Simon smiles as he looks down at the fellas' phone as it lights up and starts to play rap music; that is the third time it has rang in the last five minutes. Simon holds his glass up in a silent toast to the phone and drinks deeply. Going to the window he opens the curtains a fraction and looks along the street. All seems quiet apart from a gang of youths hanging about outside the shop. As he is closing the curtain, movement from an upstairs window catches his eye; cautiously pulling the curtain back enough he sees a blonde haired girl blow a cloud of smoke into the room. The flash of the lighter as she lit her cigarette was what caught his eye and he gets the feeling that she is sitting there to watch him.

Standing back a step but still holding the curtain back he watches the blonde girl, she appears to be talking to someone in the room and every now and then she would look out into the street *and in the direction he is standing!* At one point Simon seems to feel their eyes meet as she stares at his window and he is glad of the net curtain and of being deep in the room.

Simon's arm starts to ache where he is holding the

curtain and waiting his opportunity when the girl looks back into the room he slowly drops the curtain and massages his aching arm.

Stepping back into the lounge he grabs hold of the chair he was tied to and puts it close to the window. Going into the kitchen Simon gets several clothes pegs from the washing basket and puts the kettle on to boil. Making a strong mug of coffee Simon goes back into the lounge and puts the mug of coffee next to the window near his chair. Still feeling the effects from the amount of whiskey he had drunk he takes a sip of the hot coffee, if his suspicions are right he needs to sober up!

Turning off the lamp he approaches the curtain and eases it back gently, the street light directly outside his flat must reflect off the window, he hopes. The lamp had been on when he had seen the blonde girl and she had given no indication that she had detected any movement. Feeling confident that he is right Simon eases back the curtain enough to see the girl and most of the street. The girl is watching the gang of youths at the shop; a police car stands by with blue light flashing as two policeman talk to the youths. Carefully Simon pegs the curtain back trying not to cause any sudden movement and sits down slowly on the chair.

“Is that Kemp in the street?” Carol asks Dippa from the window.

Dippa gets up from the couch and hurries to the window, looking down at the street he sees Kemp walking slowly along staring into the houses looking for Stella's door; “Bet he's forgotten where she lives, I'll meet him out there and see you tomorrow.” says Dippa as he walks across the room. Picking up his can of beer he leaves the room without a backward glance and descends the stairs. Carol does not here him shut the

front door and sees him as he emerges from the building. Walking up to Kemp they talk for a few seconds and walk back along the street to Kemp's car. Carol watches them as they get in and hears the roar of the engine as Kemp starts the car and drives out of sight.

"He gone?" asks Eric from the kitchen doorway.

"Yeah at last, make me a coffee will you? it's going to be a long night."

"Already doing it, you taking the first watch then?" asks Eric hopefully.

Carol looks at her man's tired face; "I'm happy enough here."

"Thanks won't be long." says Eric as he goes back into the kitchen, a few minutes later he comes out carrying a mug of coffee and walks over to the window; "As soon as you are feeling tired, wake me. We *must* keep a continuous watch, would be embarrassing if he slipped past us." says Eric as he hands Carol the hot mug.

Taking the mug from his hand Carol twists it quickly so that she can hold it by the handle; "I don't like this Eric, we'll end up in jail if Steve carries on the way he is."

"Yeah I know what you mean love, I've been trying to think of a way to get out of this, it's a shame it's the weekend. Now we've got two days before we can use the excuse we have to go do some work."

"I wonder what this offer is that Steve has for Stella?" asks Carol curiously.

"Dunno." smiles Eric; "I'm going to bed, wake me in a few hours, or before if anything happens." he tells her as he goes into Stella's bedroom and lays down on top of the bed.

Simon is woken by the ringing of his phone, too nervous to want to sleep properly he had stopped

watching the blonde girl and lain on the couch and the long day had finally taken its toll. Leaning forward towards the coffee table he picks up his phone seeing Stef's name on the screen; "Stef, you all right Dude?" he asks with real concern.

"Yeah we're good, how are you?"

"There's been no attempt to get in apart from a kick on the door and that was hours ago. I am being watched from a flat down the road a bit so don't come near Dude."

"How are we going to get you out of there then?" asks an agitated Stef.

"I am Ok for a couple of days, got enough supplies apart from the whiskey which is getting low."

"You say you are being watched, who's watching you?"

Simon decides to come clean with Stef and tells him everything including killing the fella with the bottle and the blonde watcher. Stef listens in shocked silence to Simon's words and feels at a loss as to what to do. The gang they had taken the money from appear well organised; and their seemed to be a lot of them!

"Don't worry Dude I am secure here." Simon assures Stef when he does not reply; "It's a shame the money is here or it would be simple, I could call the Old Bill."

"Hey, you've just given me an idea." shouts Stef excitedly into the phone; "Why don't you get the money out of there, and then you can call them?"

"How am I going to do that, throw it out the window to you?"

"No," laughs Stef "have you got a big enough cardboard box you can put the money in and some brown paper?"

"I gotta box, dunno 'bout brown paper?" replies Simon in confusion not understanding what Stef is getting at.

Stef laughs again gaining confidence in his idea; "You

do trust me don't you Si?"

"What you on about?" asks Simon starting to lose patience as he still does not understand what Stef is driving at.

Stef senses the change of Simon's mood and replies seriously; "Put all your money in a box, wrap it up and address it to me. We are at Nic's sisters, and I'll send the postman or a courier to pick it up. If we pay full whack and have same day collection you won't have to stand at your door for hours waiting."

Simon is impressed with Stef's idea, no way would the gang attack a postman, and he was right about a pick up time. Simon imagines in his mind unscrewing and unbolting the door as the postman arrives for his parcel. He hands it to him and the postman returns to his van and drives away before his watchers have time to do anything about it.

All that is needed now is to trust Stef with all his money.

Stef waits silently on the other end of the phone for Simon to reply, what seems like several minutes Simon thinks of his options; "Where *exactly* are you going to live in Australia?" he asks in a light hearted voice.

"I think under the circumstances you should decide to come with us?" asks a still serious Stef.

"They won't have me, though I could do with a holiday." replies Simon sounding tired.

"Box the money up and wrap it with something and weigh it on your bathroom scales, I'll phone you in the morning to get it organised." orders Stef.

"Will do Dude." replies Simon in a cheerful voice and disconnects the call.

Putting the phone down onto the coffee table Simon stands up emitting a long sigh at the thought of the work ahead. Going into his bedroom he carefully walks

across in the darkness to his wardrobe. Stretching his arms high above him and standing on tip toe he pulls down a large cardboard box. Dropping it down quickly onto the bed he turns it upside down and empties out the books and old ornaments. Not concerned that several of his precious ornaments get broken Simon walks back into the lounge and starts to take out the money from the holdall. Stacking them neatly the money fills the box to three quarters full, Simon goes into the kitchen and picks up the big carving knife from its wooden rack and walks back into the lounge. Cutting the box down to size he folds it neatly and looks around for some sticking tape, finding an old roll of brown parcel tape amongst the mess in the spare room he searches around for the Christmas wrapping paper from last year. After a fruitless search of the spare room and his bedroom he gives up in disgust and decides to improvise. Walking back into the lounge he tapes up the box neatly at the joins leaving enough blank spare cardboard to write the address. Taking the box into the bathroom he puts it on the scales and weighs it carefully, carrying the box back into the lounge he writes the weight down on a corner of the box in black felt tip pen. Satisfied and thinking it wise to leave the address to the last moment Simon sits back contently on the couch and rolls himself a cigarette. Looking at the small amount of whiskey he decides against pouring himself a drink as he contrives a plan to get out of here.

Steve is woken by the constant ringing of his door bell, guessing who it is so early he gets out of bed and still in his boxer shorts runs down the stairs to open the door. As he swings the door open Barry, Rob, Phil and a huge fella push their way in; "Wake you up did I?" asks Barry sarcastically. Barry is smartly dressed in an expensive

dark blue three piece suit that strains at the huge bulk beneath it. Over two metres tall he is an imposing figure, as are his companions. Rob is the oldest, wearing an old khaki jacket and coarse woven tweed trousers he looks to be about sixty years of age and looking like a retired military man with his upright posture and apparent confidence in himself. A head shorter than Barry he looks more threatening as his blue eyes appear to lack feeling and he has the bulk to enforce his will.

Phil looks out of place amongst his huge friends; long black hair covers a thin unshaven face that reaches down to skinny bony shoulders that are covered by a thick linen grey shirt. Faded blue jeans cover his thin legs making his size twelve white trainers appear even larger.

Steve does not know who the muscle is with them, walking in as if he owns the place he stares straight ahead as he walks past Steve. Weighing at least two hundred and fifty pounds and well over two metres tall he seems to fill the hall with his bulk. Wearing an ill fitting grey three piece suit he stands as still as a statue waiting for Steve to answer.

“Yeah I was asleep” admits Steve as he shuts the front door; “you want coffee?”

“I know where it is, you get dressed.” answers Barry as he makes his way to the kitchen with the others following.

Steve is annoyed at the attitude of his visitors as he heads up the stairs face twisted in anger; this is his house after all!

Going into the bathroom Steve washes quickly and pees gratefully, walking back into his bedroom he dresses in clean jeans and white T-shirt. His visitors noisily make coffee in the kitchen and Steve picks up his

mobile phone and dials Barney's number; "You on your way?" Steve asks as the phone is immediately answered.

"Morning Steve, yeah be with you in about an hour mate." replies Barney cheerfully.

"Faster if you can please, I got some unwelcome guests, dunno if they are carrying but be nice if you can be when you get here. I'll put the door on the latch so you and Pete just walk in nice 'n' quiet like." Steve tells Barney speaking softly so that they cannot hear him in the kitchen.

"Pete wants to know what's going on?"

"The main money men are here, they want their money or a piece of me with the muscle they have brought." answers Steve with an angry edge to his voice.

"Fast as we can mate." answers Barney as he disconnects the call.

Steve quickly dials another number, the phone ring seven times when the lady on the answer phone tells him to leave a message. Steve disconnects the call with an angry push of a button. Dialling again he holds the phone to his ear as he steps out onto the landing. Subdued voices can be heard from the kitchen as Steve steps back into his bedroom, on the fifth ring the phone is answered by an angry female voice; "This better be good, whoever you are?"

"It is, its Steve get your asses down here, I'll make you breakfast soon as you do."

"Sorry mate didn't recognise your number, you need us to come to yours now?" asks Natalie.

"Yes, need your company; I got some unwelcome guests here."

"On our way, Sheila ain't gonna be happy getting woke up this time of day."

"I might need her in a bad mood, you as well" Steve

tells her.

“On our way; quick as we can.”

“Door is on the latch, just walk straight in.” Steve orders as he disconnects the call, putting his phone in his pocket Steve hurries down the stairs and into the kitchen.

“You took ya time” says Barry in that same sarcastic voice as Steve enters.

His 'guests' are clustered around the table each with a mug of coffee in front of them. Steve makes a point of looking at the steaming mugs; “Didn't you make me one then?” he demands, feeling confident now that his friends are on the way.

Barry is surprised at the aggressive response and takes a few seconds to answer; “Sorry, didn't know if you wanted one or if you liked tea in the morning.” he lies.

Steve ignores him as he puts water in the kettle, turning it on to boil he gets a large white mug from the cupboard and still with his back to his visitors prepares his coffee.

All at the table are silent as they look towards Barry for him to make the next move, Barry watches Steve as he makes his drink; “You want to tell us what has happened to our money?”

Steve turns around towards the table and stares at the muscle they brought with them; “Who's your friend, aren't you going to introduce me?”

Barry stares back at Steve, the look in Steve's eye makes Barry realise his error in bringing Dave. When Barry heard about what went wrong and that the money had gone missing he had reacted in anger and phoned Dave to come along to get it any way he could. If that meant hurting Steve, so be it, he felt no loyalty, this is business and he wants the money he has invested or

goods to the value.

“Sorry Steve, how rude of me this is Dave, thought you might need some extra help.” he lies.

Steve keeps staring at Barry not believing him and Barry shifts uncomfortably in his chair until Steve takes his eyes off him and looks at Dave with a false smile; “Yes, could do with a little help on this one but don't think you'll fit the bill.”

“What do you mean mate?” asks Dave in a threatening voice.

“Need brains rather than brawn, I got all the muscle I need.” answers Steve sternly. Taking his eyes off Dave he stares at Barry effectively ignoring everyone else at the table.

Dave's face turns a pale shade of red, the colour deepening as he starts to stand up from the table; “You calling me stupid mate?”

Steve stares back at him his anger rising, looking Dave up and down he again locks eyes with Dave; “By the looks of your muscles it looks like you work out, and use them muscles to get what you want?” Steve asks, more demanding than asking.

“I get asked to do some work now and again.” Dave angrily replies, the force of Steve's will making him answer and adopt a submissive role.

“You didn't get asked along to do some work on me then?” Steve demands again forcing his advantage.

Everyone at the table seems at a loss what to do and they all stare at Steve and Dave; “Dunno if it's you I've been asked to come down for, but you are going the right direction if you want to?” asks Dave in an angry voice as he stands up from the table, his face starting to flush red.

“Sit down will yer.” Barry shouts as he feels the situation is getting out of control.

Surprisingly Dave sits back down and stares at Steve; “You'd better change your tone of voice mate, you don't sound very friendly.”

Steve stares back and smiles broadly; “Can't blame me for that fella, this is *my house* after all.” Taking his eyes off Dave he stares at Barry and Rob and Phil, they all shift uncomfortably in their chairs, Rob picks up his coffee and sips noisily.

“Calm down will yer Steve? we are all here to help you sort this mess out.” lies Barry in a soothing voice.

Steve knows he is lying and decides to wait for reinforcements before forcing the issue, taking a drink of his coffee he looks down at his 'guests'; “Anyone want more coffee?”

Swigging the last of his coffee Dave extends his empty mug towards Steve; “Yeah, I'll have another one please mate.” he asks in a polite voice.

“Sure,” replies Steve as he takes the mug from his hand; “Anyone else?”

“No, not for me, would prefer you telling me what happened?” asks Barry in a stern demanding voice.

“Thought you knew all about it?” replies Steve his anger once again rising, the thought of one of his friends informing on him makes the anger within him stronger, flushing his face with a shade of red.

“Maybe you can tell me your side?” asks Barry reflecting Steve's anger.

Steve tells them of the botched meeting with the boat and of Dippa and Cheesey getting stopped by the police as Barry interrupts; “I thought it was you who met Ingrid and checked all was good, why these two other fellas?”

Steve holds his hand to his jaw; “Had a filling come out and had to go to the dentist. Dippa's been with me every time so he knows the score. In fact if it weren't for Dippa's quick thinking the Old Bill would have it all now,

he saw them coming and hid the bag in the reeds. Lucky he did as they searched him and Cheeseys gear and made them move on. It was an hour before they could get back and by then these other people had taken it.”

“What other people?” demands Barry.

Steve tells them of Simon and the killing of Razor Mick, the chase after Stef and of being met by a shut door on his return to Simon's flat. All at the table listen intently; shocked by the death of Razor Mick they respectively wait for Steve to bring them up to date.

“What happens now then?” asks Phil when Steve stops speaking.

“As I say, we've got the place staked out and he's barricaded the door, anyway he ain't going anywhere; sure you don't want any more coffee?” asks Steve with a confident smile.

Simon is awoken by the ringing of his phone; it feels like he has only been asleep for a few minutes instead of hours. Angrily he stares at the screen, it is Stef calling;

“Morning Dude, what you do wet the bed?”

“Thought you needed waking up,” laughs Stef “You got that package ready?”

“Yeah all sorted Dude best you ring CJP Couriers to pick it up as every day the van calls down the road to some bird, I think she got a catalogue going or something. Anyway you can set your time by the van as it calls on her every morning at ten past eleven, make it better for me Dude as I can be ready for him.”

“Sounds good, don't know their number do you?” asks Stef.

“No, not a clue mate you'd better get on it before the van leaves.”

“Yeah, no worries I'll call you when I've sorted it, what's

the parcel weigh?"

"Well it's only a rough guess as me bathroom scales aren't the best but it said 25kg."

"That'll do, call you back soon as." says Stef as he disconnects the call.

Simon stares up at the ceiling, the excitement of the coming day making him wide awake. Throwing back the cover he gets off of the couch and makes his way towards the shower.

"That's brilliant." says Stef into the phone as he writes the name down of the young lad who he is talking to; "I got your one hundred percent guarantee on that have I?" Stef listens with the smile on his face broadening; "Thanks mate, really appreciate it." he continues in his friendliest voice and disconnects the phone.

Dialling again he listens to the ringing tone as it continues until the lady on the answer machine starts to ask him to leave a message. Disconnecting the call he dials again, and again with still no answer, now very worried he puts the phone onto the table and rolls a cigarette.

Halfway through the cigarette he dials again and slams the phone back onto the table in frustration when the call is not answered. Stef stands up and fills the kettle from the cold water tap and plugs it in to boil. Preparing two mugs with coffee and sugar he goes back to the table and picking up his phone dials again; still no answer!

The water in the kettle boils and Stef turns it off and pours the water into his mug, not wishing to wake Nicola he leaves her prepared mug and gets milk from the refrigerator. Making himself a wonderful tasting coffee he sips appreciatively and returns to the table. Putting the mug of coffee onto the table he picks up his phone

and dials again. On the third ring, Simon's cheery voice answers with an 'ello'.

"Where you been Dude? I have been trying to ring you for ages."

"Was in the shower Dude, what's occurring?"

"Shower? You must have been really dirty you've been ages, thought something had happened to you." says Stef in an agitated voice.

"Big day ahead of me gotta be clean." laughs Simon.

"Yeah, you are all sorted for pick up on this morning's van."

"Nice one Dude and when that's sorted you can come and get me."

"Come and get you, are you mad there's an army out there waiting for you." answers Stef in a scared voice.

"No worries Dude," laughs Simon "I got it sorted."

"It better be good Si"

"Yeah, I've thought about it, be real easy if you can get hold of a different car Dude."

"What you got in mind?" asks a worried Stef.

"Give it a few hours after the money has been picked up then you can come and get me, wear a big hat or something. If we time it right you can ring me on your mobile when you are driving up the street and I can be out of this door in a second. They are watching me but they are a good four or five hundred metres along the street; by the time they realise what's happening you'll be speeding up the road." Simon finishes triumphantly.

Stef is not so convinced; "Let's see how the parcel pick up goes first and what happens after."

Simon laughs with confidence; "It will work Dude, no way are they gonna try and rob the van driver, hey I gotta put some clothes on I'll ring you after the pick up."

"Take care Dude." answers Stef as he disconnects the call.

“What's happening?” asks Nicola in a worried voice from the doorway.

“Simon's all ready for the pick up, but he wants me to go get him afterwards.”

“Are you mad Stef? You'll get killed.”

“When's your sister home?”

“If she's on the night shift they finish at eight so about twenty minutes.” answers Nicola looking up at the clock on the wall.

“I'm gonna need to use her car.” Stef says with a thoughtful expression on his face.

“Don't think she will agree to that if you are going to use it to get Simon.”

“Can't think of anything else at the moment, do you want a coffee?”

Chapter Eight

“Hello the house.” shouts the female voice as the sound of the front door opening reaches Steve and his guests.

“Come on in, we are in the kitchen.” shouts Steve in reply as he reaches for the kettle and starts to fill it with water.

“Hi Steve.” says Natalie as she enters the kitchen with Sheila following closely. Natalie is dressed in a tight fitting electric blue blouse that shows the black bra and ample breasts that they try to contain. Her faded blue jeans are skin tight and show off her muscular legs and firm buttocks.

Sheila is similarly dressed in a tight fitting red blouse unbuttoned to her small breasts that are covered by a pale blue bra. Her blue jeans fit loosely around her legs

and end with black trainers on her feet.

“Hi Nat, Hi Sheila,” greets Steve in a cheerful voice
“you want coffee?”

“Good idea,” replies Natalie looking at the men seated
around the table; “do you want us to wait in the front
room?”

“No, no need, this is Barry, Phil, Dave and Rob.” Steve
says indicating each at the table as he says their name
with a nod of his head.

“Hiya.” says Natalie as she raises her hand and gives
them a small wave; Sheila nods her head in general at
the table not appearing interested.

Steve makes Sheila and Natalie's coffee and hands
them their steaming mugs; “Pull up a chair and join us at
the table.”

Natalie takes the mug from Steve's hand and walking
towards the table she picks up a chair from against the
wall and seats herself between Barry and Dave.

Sheila does not look so keen as she takes the mug
from Steve; “Sit in my seat, I'll get an extra chair.” Steve
offers as he turns and walks out of the kitchen.

Sheila walks slowly towards the table and empty chair;
Phil and Rob move their chairs to give her more room as
she sits uncomfortably at the table. Her dislike for men
is intense and to have to sit at a table surrounded by
them makes her skin crawl.

Phil and Rob sense her dislike and move their chairs
as far away as possible as Steve enters with another
chair and beaming smile; “You all right there Sheila?”

“No, I'm hungry you got any bacon?”

“Yeah plenty of food in the fridge; help yourself.”

“You are not going to cook it for me then?” she asks
not mentioning his promise of cooking them breakfast.

“Would be a pleasure, one rasher or two?” Steve asks
with a smile.

Sheila stands up quickly from the table and walks across the kitchen to the refrigerator. Opening the door she looks inside; “No, I'll do it while you are talking to your friends.” she replies in a joking sarcastic voice, glad to have some distance between herself and the men at the table.

“Do me some as well will you Sheila? Two rashers, fried egg and toast please.” asks Natalie in a sweet voice.

Sheila does not answer as she busies herself preparing the food, Steve returns to the table and sits down; “Got a few more on the way and then we'll get down there, I'll just phone make sure they are on the alert.” he says as he takes his phone out of his pocket. Dialling a number he holds the phone to his ear, the phone rings twice and Eric answers in a cheerful voice; “Morning Steve, hope all good with you?”

“Yeah fine mate, any sign of life across the road?”

“No, all is quiet, you coming down to give us a break?”

“Yeah we're just waiting for Barney and Curly Pete and then we'll be with you.”

“Nice one am getting itchy feet sitting around here, feels like we've been stuck in here for weeks rather than a few hours.”

“Be 'bout an hour mate, any word from Dippa?”

“No, not a word, he lost his phone though didn't he?”

“Yeah that's right,” answers Steve sourly recalling his own loss; “phone his missus will yer and I'll meet him there at Stella's in an hour.”

“Will do mate and I'll send Carol up the shop to get some milk as we drank it all, unless you wanna get it?”

“No, send Carol.” orders Steve as he disconnects the call. “All good there; fellas still in his flat, we just need to figure out a way to get in.”

“Thought you had it all figured?” asks Barry with an

edge of worry to his voice.

“Not entirely,” admits Steve, “his share of the money is still in there and he knows where the rest is.”

“You couldn't get him to talk before, what makes you think he will be any different?”

Steve laughs and looks at Sheila who is busy at the cooker, the bacon hisses and spits as she turns it over in the hot frying pan; “That's why I asked Sheila to join us, you like to hurt men don't you Sheila?” Steve asks raising his voice so that she can hear above the noise of the cooking.

Sheila turns towards him a cold unpleasant smile forming on her lips; “If you say so dear.” she replies a touch of excitement to her voice.

Steve and Natalie laugh amongst the worried faces at the table. Even Dave looks concerned at the expression on Sheila's face and silently vows not to upset her, as it looks like she enjoys hurting; especially men!

“How long are Curly Pete and Barney gonna be?” asks Barry impatiently.

“They are on the way, by the time Sheila and Natalie have eaten they'll be here then I'll take you down there.”

“Be a bit of a crowd by then.” says Barry sarcastically.

“We don't all have to go at the same time, I'll take you down and the others can follow a few at a time.”

Barry does not like this idea as it means he will be on his own with Steve, Barry feels very unsure of Steve since his arrival this morning. There was a change in Steve's attitude towards him that he felt the reason was more than bringing Dave along; “Sounds good.” he lies and nods his head in agreement.

“That sounds like Heather,” says Nicola as the sound of a car coming up the drive penetrates the silence; “she is going to go mad when she sees what you have done

to her garden.” Nicola continues accusingly.

“Best you tell her everything, I'm going to use the toilet.” says Stef as he starts to walk out of the lounge.

“Yeah, that's probably the best thing you can do is hide, you coward.” shouts Nicola to Stef's departing back as he runs down the hall.

Nicola hears the slamming of a car door and peers out of the window. Heather starts to walk towards the front door and is halfway along the path before she notices the ruined flowerbeds and lawn. Turning quickly she retraces her steps and goes for a closer look, as she reaches the flowerbed the look of shock on her face makes Nicola run out to explain.

Hearing Nicola approaching her Heather turns to face her, looking more upset than angry her thin pinched face looks pale and her eyes are filled with tears; “Was it you driving or Stef?” she asks in a shaky voice.

“It was Stef, we are sorry to do this to you but we are in so much trouble I didn't know who else to turn to.” replies Nicola echoing Heather's shaky voice.

Heather looks at Nicola and can see that she is upset to, and it appears much more serious than a ruined flowerbed; “We had better go inside, where's Stef?”

Nicola laughs nervously; “You know what he's like, he's hiding in the toilet in case you get violent, he knows how much you love your garden.”

Heather turns around to look at the mess of her garden and Stef's car parked behind the shed; “Looks serious, what have you been doing?”

“Shall we go indoors, I'll make you a nice cup of coffee and tell you all about it.” says Nicola as she grabs hold of Heather's arm and starts to lead her towards the front door.

“If you are in trouble with the police it's best you don't tell me, and leave, *now*.” replies Heather firmly. She

may be a lot smaller in build than Nicola, this being highlighted by her tight fitting nurse's uniform, but mentally she has always been stronger than her sister.

"No, no trouble with the police, we wouldn't have come if that was the case." replies Nicola with a touch of anger to her voice.

"Yeah, silly question I know that you would not jeopardise my job." says Heather as they reach the front door, opening the door Heather turns to Nicola; "I am going to get changed while you make me a coffee." she smiles as she starts to head up the stairs.

Nicola makes her way to the kitchen and prepares three cups as Stef comes out of hiding and stands behind Nicola; "Is she Ok?" he asks softly.

"Yeah it's safe for you to come out now." Nicola says with a smile.

"When you've told her, tell her I need to borrow her car later on, I'm gonna tidy the garden a bit." Stef says not meeting Nicola's eyes.

"What and put her in danger?" asks Nicola indignantly.

"No, I gotta plan and anyway she could do with a new car, we'll buy her one tomorrow if today goes well."

"What are you going to do?" asks Nicola the fear returning to her voice.

"I'll tell you later." says Stef softly as the sound of Heather's footsteps on the stairs reach him. Stepping past Nicola he opens the back door and quickly steps out into the garden.

"That sounds like Barney's van." says Sheila as the sound of a vehicle pulling in to the drive can easily be heard at the silent table. Whilst Sheila and Natalie ate their breakfast an uncomfortable silence fell on those around the table. The seriousness of the situation and the amount of money involved did not lead to idle

chatter.

The sound of Barney's van comes as a welcome relief and Steve gets up from the table and walks to the front door, opening it wide Barney's worried face looks towards him; "You Ok mate?"

"Yeah all cool so far, you can put that back in your van for the moment." replies Steve indicating the sawn off shotgun that Barney holds along his right side.

Barney looks disappointed as he turns and walks back to the van; Curly Pete passes him and looks towards Steve. The grief on his face for the loss of his friend looks to have aged him by ten years.

"You feel up to this Pete? I know Razor was like a brother if you feel you'd rather be with him and his family I gotta a little help here now." he says gently indicating his head towards the house.

"You are forgetting I gotta score to settle." Curly Pete tells him harshly as he tries to walk past Steve.

Steve steps quickly in front of him blocking his way, the mood Curly Pete is in he is likely to want to fight anyone; "Got some people in there you not met before, I'm not sure about all of them, let's see how it goes?" Steve asks politely.

"Yeah sure, you are the boss." assures Curly Pete as he brushes past Steve and enters the house.

Steve hurries behind him with Barney on his heels, Curly Pete appears to have a sixth sense as to where everyone is as he walks straight into the kitchen. Standing in the doorway he looks at each person in turn seeming to size them up.

"Hi Pete." greets Natalie in a cheerful voice; "Hi Barney." she greets with a smile as he and Steve enter the kitchen.

Steve introduces everyone by name around the table his eyes resting on Dave as if he is expecting trouble.

Dave's back stiffens and he stares back in defiance. Steve looks at Barry; "We ready then? he asks; "we are going down to the flat, best we don't all go at once I'll give you a ring when I get there. Help yourself to tea and coffee or whatever." Steve says to the room in general.

Everyone nods in agreement as Barry stands up from the table, following Steve out the door he walks out into the early morning sunshine; "We'll go in your car, hey, looks a good one." Steve tells Barry with a smile as he walks over to his shiny black Mercedes.

Barry does not appear to like the idea but nods in agreement and walks over to his car, unlocking the door they get in; "Rob's got some business to attend to and he'll catch up with us later." Barry tells Steve as he starts the engine and drives out into the road and following Steve's directions heads towards the town.

"How much longer we gotta wait?" asks Carol impatiently.

"They'll be here soon; while you are waiting you can run up the shop and get a couple of bottles of milk." Eric orders in a similar impatient voice as he watches out of the window.

Carol stares at him eager to take out her frustration on him; or anyone! The waiting and watching had finally got on her nerves and all she wanted was out. Looking at the expression on Eric's face she sees that he feels the same way and a twinge of guilt runs through her; "Do you want anything while I'm up there?" she asks in a form of apology.

Eric turns and looks at Carol a faint smile forming on his lips; "No thanks, just be as quick as you can."

Carol walks into the bedroom for her purse and jacket, putting on her jacket quickly she holds her purse firmly

and hurries down the stairs and steps out onto the street. Young mothers pushing prams and doing their best to control their offspring as they hurry to the nearby playground crowd the pavement and Carol finds it safer to walk in the street to the shop!

Eric stares moodily out of the window as he watches Carol negotiate the other people on the street and returns his gaze to watching Simon's flat. All is quiet and had been since Eric had been watching; these past six hours he had observed no sign of life at the flat. The view from the bay window on the second floor gives him a good view of the bosoms of the young ladies who pass beneath him. Normally he would find the view entertaining, even exciting, but he stares down with little interest. The sight of Carol returning from the shop weighed down by two heavy carrier bags makes him look back towards Simon's flat. Slight movement of the curtains shows that he is being watched also and he wonders how the fella is going to be able to get out of there with the army of people arriving to stop him.

The sound of Carol opening the front door and her heavy footsteps on the stairs brings him back to reality and he looks back in the direction of the shop for any sign of the promised help.

"When's Dippa getting here?" asks Carol as she walks into the lounge.

"I can't get an answer, have tried Donna's phone a few times, it appears to be switched off." answers Eric from his vigil at the window.

"Steve ain't gonna be happy if he's not here when he arrives."

"Yeah, there's been enough grief I'll try again, Eric picks up his phone from the table and dials a number. The phone rings three times before it is answered by a sleepy sounding Dippa; "Hello who is it?"

"It's Eric mate, Steve's on his way you'd better get yourself down here quick I've been trying to ring you for over an hour it's halfway through the morning." Eric tells him in exasperation.

"Oh right, I'll have a quick coffee and a smoke and I'll be with you."

"No time for that mate, you can do that here, get here fast will yer!" Eric demands.

Dippa swears in frustration; "On me way." he assures as he disconnects the call.

Dippa arrives a few minutes before Steve and Barry and opens the front door for them with a smile as he stands to one side to allow them room to get in.

"How long you been here?" asks Steve as he starts to walk up the stairs with Barry close on his heels.

"Ages." Dippa lies with a wry smile offended at Steve's attitude and he can't help noticing he has not been introduced to Steve's friend. Dippa closes the front door and follows them up the stairs and into the lounge.

Steve walks across to the window and leans in front of Eric so that he can see up and down the street;

"Anything happened?"

"Quiet as a grave, mate." Eric replies softly, not telling Steve of the moving curtains and the awareness of the fella they are watching.

"You and Carol can get away for a while, I'll ring you when I need you, when's Stella getting here?"

"Sometime this morning she never gave a time."

"Ok we'll take over now; Dippa make the coffee will ya?"

Dippa had just got himself comfortable on the couch and frowns in disapproval as he obediently stands up and makes his way to the kitchen.

"How many sugars Barry?" Steve asks.

"Two please, Dippa is it? Yeah thanks mate." replies

Barry in his friendliest voice.

Dippa nods in acknowledgement as he goes into the kitchen, he knows he is getting fed up of being ordered around and vows to get away from Steve and his gang, somehow.

“As you can see we got a good view of the street with these bay windows, that fella can't make a move without us knowing about it, as that is the only way in and out.” Steve tells Barry looking towards Simon's flat.

Barry gets up from the couch and joins Steve at the window, looking in the direction of Steve's gaze he asks; “Which one is his?”

“The one that's set back a bit from the rest; with the faded red paint door and those big square bay windows, on the other side of the road.”

“That's quite a way up the street mate be difficult to catch him if he ran the other way.” Barry says, not so convinced that Steve *does* have everything under control.

“I'll give the others a ring in a little while; he'll have a job getting away from ten of us.” Steve laughs.

“We'll see you later then.” Eric says as he and Carol come out of the bedroom and make their way to the doorway.

“Yeah, I'll give you a ring mate, thanks for your help.” says Steve with a confident smile.

“Give us a few hours to sleep before you do please.” laughs Eric as he follows Carol out the door and down the stairs.

Steve and Barry watch Eric and Carol walk along the street towards the town; “That Carol's a bit of all right, first time I've seen her.” admits Barry.

“Yeah she's a looker, makes me jealous of Eric coz she's loyal with it.” says Steve as he watches them turn the corner and walk out of sight. Steve absently watches

as a white van pulls up a few doors down. The young driver wearing a bright, almost fluorescent blue T-shirt, jumps out the cab and knocks loudly on the door. The door is opened quickly by a middle aged lady wearing a white bathrobe. Stepping back inside she comes back out carrying two large cardboard boxes. Handing them to the driver he awkwardly passes her a clipboard of paperwork as he takes them from her. Writing her signature she hands him back the clipboard and shuts the door in his face. Steve smiles as the young driver goes to the back of his van, opening the door he throws the parcels in and slams the doors.

“Coffees here fellas.” Dippa says as he walks in carrying three steaming mugs, putting them down onto the little coffee table he settles down onto the couch and starts to roll a cigarette.

“Nice one mate which is which?” asks Steve as he approaches the steaming mugs.

“Any one, they all got two sugars.” replies Dippa as he runs his tongue along the cigarette paper.

Steve picks a mug from the table and sits down in the huge armchair; “Come and get your coffee mate, I’ll give the others a ring.” he says as he takes his mobile phone out of his pocket and dials a number.

“Good idea.” agrees Barry as he takes a mug from the table and sits beside Dippa; “We’ve not met before, I’m Barry.” he says as he extends his hand towards Dippa.

Dippa takes Barry’s hand and gives it a firm shake; “You known Steve long? I’ve not seen you before.”

Dippa asks.

“I’m one of his silent partners you might say.” smiles Barry as he lets go of Dippa’s hand.

“Pleased to meet you, I’ll be glad when this mess is over, my missus ain’t at all happy she wanted to go shopping today.”

“Yeah, mess is the right word, you got any idea what Steve's got planned?”

“No, not a clue that front door is bolted shut, we're not gonna be able to force our way in.” Dippa says appearing defeated.

“Be the end of him if he can't get it sorted.” Barry tells Dippa in an emotionless voice sending a shiver up Dippa's spine, the tone of voice implying Steve will be dead.

Steve talks on his mobile phone unaware of the conversation in front of him; “Yeah start making your way down now, ask Curly Pete to lock up on his way out.” he orders as he disconnects the call, looking Barry in the eyes confidently he smiles; “They gonna come down in twos and threes then we'll get it sorted.” he says in a firm voice, picking up his mug of coffee he takes a drink; “Give us ya baccy Dippa.” he orders stretching out his hand for Dippa to pass him his tobacco tin.

Simon looks out of the window, his heart beating with excitement as he looks out for the delivery van. He sees Dippa arrive, his red baseball cap set at a jaunty angle makes him look dopier than the 'hard' look it is supposed to give.

Steve he recognises when he is still far up the street, the suit jacket and jeans look to be the same as he was wearing the day before and Simon's eyes harden at the memory of his mistreatment yesterday. Remembering his escape and barricading the door puts a cold smile on his face. Feeling safe he allows his anger to rise and he dreams of revenge. Going into the kitchen he makes coffee and a slice of toast, spooning the marmalade thickly he takes a bite and picking up his coffee he goes back to his vigil at the window.

Dreaming of palm trees and golden sandy beaches

Simon munches contentedly on his toast as he dreams of a happy life. The white delivery van distracts his thoughts as it pulls up outside the (assumed) catalogue ladies house. As the driver jumps out, Simon runs out of the flat tripping on the carpet in his excitement as he nearly knocks himself out on the door frame. Using the electric screwdriver he opens the door and descends the stairs unsteadily as he holds onto the banister rail firmly and reaches the hall with his head still spinning.

Putting the electric screwdriver down onto the floor he kicks away the tool box and pulls the shelving away from the door, leaning it against the far wall. Bending down he picks up the electric screwdriver and starts to unscrew the lowest screw that holds the door shut. The knock on his head and the panic affects his vision and he sees everything in a blur. Feeling, more than seeing, he takes out the screw and throwing it on the floor he unscrews the one near the lock.

Unbolting the door he stands back a little and tries to look through the small pane of frosted glass of the door. He can make out the shape of someone walking past when the van pulls up out front. Unlocking the door Simon takes a chance and opens it wide as the young driver walks towards him. The bright fluorescent blue of his T-shirt makes him look unreal and Simon bends down and picks up the heavy cardboard box of money; "There you go mate, any paperwork for me?" he asks trying to smile.

The driver detects his nervousness and passes him his clipboard; "If you can sign the top one please and keep the copy."

Simon takes the clipboard as he passes him the box and pulling out the pen that is jammed under the big clip that holds the paperwork, he quickly signs his name. Tearing off the copy from underneath Simon hands him

the clipboard; "Nice one Dude, you have a great day."

"And you mate." the driver smiles as he takes the weight of the heavy box, turns and struggles back towards his van. Anxiously Simon looks along the street and smiles in relief when he sees no one he recognises. Looking up at the window of the flat where the watchers are he cannot see any movement and he gets the feeling it is going to be a good day. The slamming of the vans back door makes Simon look sharply towards the van in alarm; "See ya." shouts the driver as he disappears around the side of the van and jumps in. Slamming the door shut he starts the engine and drives slowly along the street. Simon steps back hurriedly and shuts the door and bolts it. Picking up his electric screwdriver he searches around for the screws he had thrown down in such a hurry. Finding the biggest one he screws it into the door and on into the frame as tight as he can. Satisfied that the one screw and the bolts will be secure enough he makes his way back upstairs and into his flat.

Steve rolls a cigarette from Dippa's tin and hands it back to him: "Got a light?"

Dippa passes him his lighter as he takes his tobacco tin from Steve's outstretched hand, Steve lights the cigarette with a smile and blows out a big cloud of smoke with a contented sigh.

"Someone better keep an eye on the street, Dippa you take a turn for a little while, I wanna talk to Barry." Steve orders as he takes another drag of his cigarette.

Dippa gets up reluctantly from the couch and picking up his tobacco tin and mug of coffee walks over to the window and peers out at the street below.

"Anything happening?" Steve asks.

Dippa makes a point of looking up and down the street,

the only movement is a white delivery van driving along the street and the old woman with her scruffy dog; “No all quiet.” Dippa sharply replies annoyed at being ordered around.

“Keep an eye out for the others, should be Sheila and Natalie you see first, let 'em in when you do.”

Dippa makes no reply and stares moodily out of the window as he watches the dog pee against a car wheel as the old woman lets it carry on, making no effort for it to stop.

Steve looks Barry in the eyes, feeling confident with his friends on the way he pushes his luck by demanding; “Tell me about this Dave fella, why did you bring him?”

Barry is annoyed by Steve's attitude towards him and stares back at him coldly. He had felt Steve's hostility towards him underneath the smiles and wondered if Steve was being honest with him with this crazy story. For that is what it appeared to be and he fears that his money is already lost. Steve's attitude towards him had changed, the delay in telling him that things had gone wrong and his attitude on the phone last night had made Barry suspicious and that was his real reason for bringing Dave. He was the one with the connections and still the main contributor in their smuggling operation and he considered himself the boss and he was becoming mad enough to consider it time to remind Steve who is *exactly* in charge here; “He's here to help me if I feel I need it.” Barry says in a firm voice.

Though Barry hasn't said the words Steve knows that Dave is here, for him.

The coldness and strength in Barry's voice makes Steve twist in his chair in agitation, he feels scared, very scared. Being scared is not a feeling he is used to and he puzzles over it. Reminding himself that the room will soon be filled with *his* friends and Barry will be badly

outnumbered does not quench the fear that fills his belly; "You know me Barry I'm a bit nervous of strangers, but if you say he's all right?" he says seeming to finish half way through the sentence.

Barry stares him in the eyes seeming to be able to read his mind, dismissing him by breaking the gaze and reaching for his coffee mug Barry takes a drink and looks at Dippa.

Dippa had stopped looking out of the window aware of the undertones to the conversation he had followed it earnestly. Barry's cold eyes when they meet his has the same effect as upon Steve; he feels scared, very scared! Breaking the stare instantly Dippa looks out of the window and sees Sheila and Natalie walking arm in arm along the street; "There's Nat and Sheila, I'll go let 'em in." he says in relief, giving him the excuse to get away from those cold eyes. He steps away from the window quickly and almost runs across the room and down the stairs.

Simon watches the arrival of Sheila and Natalie as he chews on his piece of toast. Seeing them walk along the path and straight through the door without having to knock shows they are expected and he wonders how many more are on their way. Feeling a lot more confident now the money is out of the way he phones Stef; "How we doing Dude?" he asks, when the phone is answered on the first ring.

"All good thanks Dude, we got an extra partner now as Nic told Heather everything and anyway we're gonna need her help in the next few days to get out of this."

"Talking about getting out, you got any thoughts on getting me out of here?"

"Yeah, I got a great idea, has the money been collected yet?"

“Yeah the van called about twenty minutes ago with no problems, I don't think they even saw it, well no one came running out.”

“I'm gonna get you out the same way.”

“What wrapped up in a cardboard box and dumped in the back of a van?” asks Simon in a horrified voice.

“No, no,” laughs Stef “though sounds a good idea.”

“How then Dude?” demands Simon not appreciating the joke.

“I'm gonna drive up to the front of your flat and your going to get in and then we drive away up the street.” Stef tells him filled with confidence.

“Just like that?” asks Simon incredulously.

“Yes, just like that, I'll be in Heather's car you remember what her car looks like?”

“Silver Hatchback, in it?”

“That's right except it won't be all silver, I'm gonna paint the number plates with mud so they can't be recognised, in fact that's what I'm doing now but it looks a bit obvious so I'm gonna cover the rest of the car, so it looks like I've driven in a muddy field.”

“What you just gonna pull up and toot your horn?” asks Simon not convinced.

“We can do better than that with our mobile phones, I can phone you when I'm round the corner and we can keep the line open and you tell me when it's clear.”

Simon thinks through what Stef is suggesting and pictures it happening in his mind; “Sounds good Dude, but there is a lot of people across the road watching me. They see you drive up the street they gonna be on you like a tonne of bricks.”

“That's the idea of using Heather's car and I'll be wearing a disguise.” laughs Stef.

“A disguise, what a long beard and plastic nose?” asks Simon a little sarcastically. He likes the idea, but his

stomach is knotting with that familiar feeling of fear, bringing doubt.

“You'll love it” laughs Stef; “main thing you gotta do is remember Heather's car, coz you won't recognise me.”

“I'm intrigued,” laughs Simon nervously; “problem being is those people across the road, they are watching me but not that close at the moment but more are arriving, what is exactly your plan?”

“What I said, I'll park up round the corner and phone you, that flat is a little way along the street, you'll be in the car before they know it and we'll be gone.”

“Providing they don't stake the street out it might work.” says Simon reluctantly.

Stef laughs; “Trust me Dude, it'll work. I'm gonna need another hour before I can get to you, grab your vital stuff and put it in a bag as you won't be going back for quite a while, best you think about moving Dude.” advises Stef.

“I've already thought of that, no way can I stay here, they know where I live!”

“Get yourself sorted and I'll ring you just before I get to town.”

“Ok Dude, I'll be ready.” Simon confirms a little nervously and disconnects the call. Movement catches his eye along the street as he sees three fellas standing outside the flat of the watchers. Simon does not recognise any of them but recognises the two girls who come out of the flat as the ones who went in a few minutes ago. They talk briefly to the three fellas as they pass them on the path, the three fellas continue into the flat as the girls start to walk in Simon's direction.

Arm in arm they wander slowly along until they are opposite Simon's flat when the brunette with the pageboy haircut takes her phone out of her pocket and pushing a button starts to talk. Her friend sits on the garden wall opposite as the brunette talks and laughs

into her phone.

Simon steps back from the window a little so as not to be seen; no way is he going to be able to get out of here with them on the street!

Chapter Nine

“That looks like Barney and a couple of other fellas coming along the street, you want me to let 'em in?” asks Dippa from his vantage point at the window.

“No.” answers Steve; “Sheila and Natalie can go out on the street for a while in case that fellas gonna do a runner.”

“He'll have a job, especially if he wants to take the money with him; that bag weighs quite a bit.” laughs Dippa.

Steve scowls and his face turns red in a flush of anger at Dippa giving it away and reminding him that they had the heavy bag in their possession yesterday.

“Yeah we'll go down there for a while, we don't wanna get done for loitering, how long do you want us to stay out there?” Sheila asks Steve with beaming smile.

“About ten to fifteen minutes would be good, shouldn't think you'd get done for loitering but there may be nosey neighbours, let the others in will you?” Steve asks though it is more of an order.

“See ya in a bit.” Sheila smiles as she stands up and follows Natalie out of the door, noisily they descend the stairs and open the door; “Hiya, they are waiting upstairs, we're gonna enjoy the fresh air for a while.” smiles Natalie as she walks past Barney, Phil and Dave, with Sheila close on her heels. Sheila does not smile as she has to past the three men a lot closer than she likes

due to the narrow path. The manly smell, especially of the after shave one of them is wearing, makes her want to throw up. Glad to get past them she grabs hold of Natalie's arm and gives it a gentle squeeze; "What are we going to do out here?" she asks.

"You can phone Amanda as we need to sort out what we are going to do tonight, I would hope that we would have finished here by then."

"Good idea." agrees Sheila, taking her phone from her silvered leather handbag she dials a number and stops walking directly opposite Simon's flat; "Hiya." she says cheerfully into the phone as Natalie makes herself comfortable on a garden wall.

"Come in, come in." Steve invites as Barney shows himself in the doorway.

"Hi Steve, Dippa." greets Barney as he walks into the lounge followed by Phil and Dave.

"Grab a seat if you can, I'll take over at the window and Dippa will make you a cup of coffee." says Steve as he stands up and walks over to the window. Dippa stays seated and looks out of the window pretending not to have heard.

Dave pushes past Phil and sits down on the couch next to Barry, Phil steps smartly across the room and sits in the armchair recently vacated by Steve as Barney walks over to the table and sits down on a hard backed chair.

"Coffees all round, I'll take over here." Steve orders as he sees Dippa making no effort to move.

Dippa looks up at him pretending to have just heard; "I don't think there's enough clean cups." he complains as he stands up and starts to walk slowly across the room.

"Maybe you should try cleaning some." Steve says sarcastically as he looks out of the window. Sheila and

Natalie are still opposite the fellas flat and he watches idly as a big 4x4 tries to park in a space big enough to fit a bus. The lady driver shunts backwards and forwards, the vehicle obviously too big for her to handle as she struggles and eventually parks about three hundred centimetres from the kerb and gets out and slams the door. Seeing her parking from a different angle she realises she has parked too far from the kerb and gets back in and starts the engine. Shunting backwards and forwards at least a half dozen times she finally puts on the parking brake and turns the engine off. Jumping out she appears a little happier with her parking; it being about two hundred centimetres from the kerb. She locks the door and walks along the street towards the town straightening her clothes as she walks.

Steve looks away from the window and fixes his gaze on Barney; "When the girls come back you and Dippa can take a little turn out there. Go and stand where they are for a while to let him know there is a few of us keeping an eye on him."

Barney stands up and walks over to the window, leaning forward he looks along the street and seeing them standing opposite Simon's flat he looks back at Steve; "Bit obvious ain't they?"

"Only to him I hope, we'll let him know just how many there is of us and then we'll go and have a little talk."

Barney looks at him surprised and shocked at Steve's solution as does everyone in the room as they stare at him with dismay; "You honestly think he is going to even answer the door to you, let alone talk?"

"Yeah, we'll show him that he can't get out without going past us and he can't stay in there forever." Steve answers confidently.

"What are you going to do then if he don't answer the door?" asks an annoyed Barry.

“Break it down.” answers Steve in a matter of fact voice as if breaking down the door is no more serious than putting sugar in his coffee.

A knocking at the front door distracts them from any more argument and Steve, pushing Barney out of the way looks out of the window; “It’s the girls, you and Dippa wanna go take a turn?” Steve orders Barney.

“What about my coffee?” asks an indignant Dippa from the kitchen doorway.

“You can take it with you, don’t keep ‘em waiting.” orders Steve as he looks back out of the window at the street below.

Dippa feels his anger rise inside him and smiles coldly at Steve’s back. With the crazy idea he had about knocking on the door Dippa knows Steve’s days are numbered. Holding onto his coffee cup he walks out the door with Barney several steps behind him.

“Are you serious about just knocking on the door?” asks Barry as Barney leaves the room.

“Not really,” answers Steve not taking his gaze from the street; “I expect we’ll have to smash our way in, Dave and Curly Pete will have the muscle for that, a couple of bangs and they’ll be in.”

“What you got a battering ram on the way then?” asks Barry in a sarcastic voice.

“Yeah I have, you’ll like it when you see it.” replies Steve, giving Barry a wry grin he returns his attention back to watching the street.

“Look at the state of you.” laughs Nicola as Stef enters the kitchen, his clothes and face covered in mud.

“I kicked the bucket over.” replies Stef sheepishly as he makes his way towards the sink.

“You can’t wear those clothes, best you have a shower and I’ll put you some clean clothes outside the door.”

Nicola is dressed casually in black T-shirt and faded blue jeans; "I've already emptied the cases, I've left a lot of my nice clothes behind; I'm going to need some more especially as we are going to a party."

"Party? what party?" asks Stef as he scrubs his hands vigorously with a hard scrubbing brush.

"We must be, you've packed your party clothes."

"That's how I'm gonna get Simon out."

"What by dressing him up?"

"I'm gonna be the one dressing up, you wanna go sort me out some jeans and the party T-shirt." Stef finishes with a grin as he dries his hands on a towel.

"Sure." answers Nicola not too happy with Stef's explanation she obediently goes up the stairs as Stef heads for the shower.

"That's Curly Pete." Steve tells the three in the room as he gets up from the window and walks across the room; "I'll let him in." he continues as he runs down the stairs.

"What the hell are you doing?" demands an angry Phil of Barry when Steve leaves the room.

"We'll see what he does first, sounds crazy but if we can get in through that door without attracting too much attention we stand a good chance of getting our money back."

"Only some of it according to Barney, and you notice Steve ain't mentioned that."

Barry looks towards the doorway as if Phil will be over heard; "Yeah I know he ain't telling us everything, when we find out we'll take over." Barry says in a hushed voice as the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs reaches them.

"All right lads?" asks Curly Pete as he walks into the room.

"Yeah fine, where's Steve?" asks Barry.

“He's gone up to see Dippa and Barney then he said something about knocking on the door.”

“You think he will honestly answer the door?”

“No, but I think Steve's hoping he'll talk to him, maybe the fella will see reason.”

Barry gets up from the couch and walks quickly over to the window and looks at Simon's flat; the drawn curtains give nothing away and he looks down at Steve, Barney and Dippa. Dippa's red baseball cap seems to shout his presence, as does Steve in his expensive suit jacket and faded jeans. To Barry's heightened mind they look an unlikely group of friends. This is confirmed when a smartly dressed lady, wearing a crisp bright blue jacket and matching skirt comes out of the door they are standing and sitting in front of. Staring at them along the short path with obvious suspicion she starts to walk slowly towards them. Not aware of the hostile woman behind them Barney and Dippa continue sitting on her wall until Steve sees her approaching and ushers them along the street a few houses along.

Barry frowns at the scene below as movement from the hostile lady's place shows her going back inside and coming back out again pushing a pram out of the door. Pushing it just beyond the doorway she puts the brake on and goes back inside; the pram looks empty from Barry's vantage point and he can see no movement or baby.

Puzzled he continues watching and pulls the net curtain back to get a better view. A few minutes later the well dressed lady emerges carrying a small black and brown Yorkshire terrier. Carefully she lays the little dog into the pram, Barry cannot hear the words but he can see her lips moving as she talks to the dog. Tucking it in with a bright yellow patterned blanket she goes back inside her house.

Barry watches fascinated by the lady's strange behaviour he does not see Simon's curtains open a fraction as Simon gets a better view himself of this new watcher who he had only glimpsed earlier.

Another Yorkshire terrier is brought out and put into the pram as gently as the first, Steve, Barney and Dippa seem to loiter uncomfortably waiting for the strange woman to go before they do anything. The well dressed woman comes out carrying a third Yorkshire terrier and Barry hears her slam the front door. Putting the final little dog into the pram she talks and fusses over them before finally releasing the brake. Pushing the pram proudly in front of her she steps out into the street and across to the other side, all the time staring at Steve and especially Dippa as they stand in a silent group, staring back at her!

Barry curses in annoyance as Phil joins him at the window; "Look at them idiots all we want is some paranoid neighbour to phone the Old Bill and it will all be over."

"What they doing?" asks Phil.

"Standing there staring at that weird women, she's already worried coz they were standing outside her house; she probably thinks they are going to burgle her or something."

"Yeah she don't look too happy." agrees Phil.

Once she is across the street she walks in the opposite direction to the town and Barry gets the feeling that she will be coming back, soon.

As the lady takes her eyes off them and continues along the street Steve turns his attention back to Barney and Dippa; "You go back to the flat, I'll be along in a minute." he tells them as he starts to cross the street.

Arriving at Simon's door he pushes his shoulder against it as hard as he can to test its strength, the door

is still locked solid, but does not appear as secure as yesterday when he gave it a flying kick. Knocking firmly on the door he takes two steps back and looks up at Simon's window. The twitch of the curtain shows him that he has been seen. Looking up at the window he shouts in a loud friendly voice; "Open the door will ya fella – at least talk to me."

The curtains remain closed and Steve knocks firmly on the door again, this time the curtains are drawn back a little and Steve can see Simon's bruised face peering down at him.

"You can't stay in there forever mate, as you have seen there are a few of us, why don't we come to some agreement? Will save a lot of time and you avoiding a visit to the hospital, we're gonna get in and you won't be able to stop us." shouts Steve confidently.

Simon looks down at him blank faced, brushing back a bit of hair from his eyes with his hand he carries on the movement and closes the curtain.

"You got half an hour mate then we're coming in." shouts Steve as he turns and walks along the street to Stella's flat.

Simon steps back from the window and walks into the lounge, picking up his mobile phone he calls Stef. Stef answers immediately; "You all right Dude?" he asks with real concern.

"Yeah am still good, they've been patrolling the street and just tried hammering on the door. I wouldn't answer it but the geezer, one of them from yesterday, asked me to be reasonable and when I wouldn't answer him he got a bit excited and shouted he was coming in anyway and has given me a half hour."

"Is there anyone on the street now?"

"Hang on," replies Simon as he walks across to the

window and easing the curtain back he looks up and down the street; “No, no one I can see of that gang, just a few shoppers on there way to town.”

“Well, you saved me a phone call as I'm about five minutes away just coming up to the roundabout now, are there any parking spaces?”

“No, the street looks full though it could all change by the time you get here.”

“I gotta hang up traffics getting bit busy, call ya in 'bout two minutes when I'm round the corner and be ready!”

Simon does not get the opportunity to reply as Stef disconnects the call. Looking around the room Simon picks up Dippa's phone and throws it into a small rucksack with his passport and important paperwork. Putting the rucksack in the centre of the coffee table he goes around the flat and switches everything off at the plugs. Emptying the refrigerator contents into the bin and pouring the milk down the sink he smiles with satisfaction as he bends down and opens the cupboard under the sink. Leaning in he finds the stopcock and turns the water off, quickly he runs into the hall and after tripping over the carpet he opens the little cupboard and turns off the gas at the meter.

Going into his bedroom he walks across the room to the window and eases the curtain back and looks along the street. All is quiet with no sign of any of the gang and he wonders if it is really the geezer's intent to leave him alone for half an hour to think about it?

Simon laughs at the thought of slipping out without them even seeing him. Anxiously he looks at his phone in his hand willing it to ring; he has to wait for only a few moments before the screen lights up with Stef's name and Simon pushes a button before the sound of the ring; “Where are you?” Simon shouts into the phone in his excitement.

“Everything all right?” asks Stef, misreading Simon's excited voice as fear or worry.

“Yeah it's great Dude, I honestly think they are going to leave me alone for about half an hour, as there is no one on the street.” he says excitedly looking at the time displayed on his mobile phone.

“That's cool coz I'm just round the corner just pulling off the High Street, about ninety seconds away I reckon, is the street clear now?”

Simon looks out of the window and laughs when he sees the well dressed lady with the three Yorkshire terriers in her pram across the street beneath him heading for her home; “The mad lady who lives opposite has just come back, now is the time if ever, I'll get the door unscrewed and phone you.”

“No you won't,” shouts Stef; “stay on the line, I wanna know your every move from now on.”

“Good thinking Dude.” says Simon as he goes into the lounge and picks up the little rucksack. Throwing it over his shoulder Simon hurries out of the flat, tripping on the folded carpet he shuts the door with a slam and runs down the stairs. Picking up the electric screwdriver he hurriedly unscrews the single large screw; “I done it.” he shouts excitedly; “ready when you are.”

“Go back upstairs and check the street just in case. We don't want to run right into them, watch out for me as I'm pulling up at the junction now. Soon as you see me tell me and check the street further up for any traffic. If it's still clear by the time you get to your front door I'll be there, just come out and jump in.” says Stef in a rush making it sound too easy.

Simon goes back up the stairs and looks out of the bedroom window, the lady opposite fusses over her dogs outside her gate and Simon looks towards the gangs flat. All is quiet, in fact it's perfect with the

neighbour outside as a witness; "All clear, go for it." Simon shouts into his phone as he sees a very muddy silver car at the junction; "I see you on me way." he says as he runs out the door, without tripping on the carpet, slamming the door shut he runs down the stairs and unbolts the door.

Staring hard through the frosted glass he sees the silver car pull up out front, yanking the door open Simon shuts it quietly behind him and runs along the path. Opening the passengers' door he jumps in: "Go, go, go." he shouts as he slams the door and Stef puts his foot down and speeds away up the street with the neighbour opposite looking on in horror; well Stef is wearing a Rastafarian wig and bright yellow and red stripy woollen hat. Huge mirrored sunglasses cover his eyes and half his face and the bright yellow T-shirt with the large marijuana leaf stamped on it makes Simon go into hysterics.

Stef smiles beneath the mirrored glasses; "Hi man you wanna score some weed?"

Simon's hysterical laughter goes into overdrive at the sight of Stef and the relief in getting out of the flat safely. Turning around he looks back along the street and seeing no one other than his opposite neighbour, who stills stands shocked and dazed and stares in their direction.

Simon turns back round in his seat as Stef takes the corner heading for the seafront saying; "This'll be the best way out I reckon, the town was a bit congested in places. We gotta go slowly along here but at least we'll keep moving and it will keep us off the main roads for a while."

Simon gives a big sigh of relief as Stef turns onto the seafront; "I guess this is a good time to say thanks Dude." Simon says with a smile.

“My pleasure Dude, except that you can tell me everything when we get back to Heather's, and I mean *everything*. Just so I know what I am getting into this time.” Stef smiles – but the smile lacks warmth and Simon knows that Stef feels he is responsible. In embarrassment Simon looks out of the side window at the arcades and people enjoying themselves and leaves Stef to concentrate on his driving.

Steve hammers on the door in annoyance that the door is not being opened for him. The sound of footsteps thumping down the stairs prevents him knocking again. The door is opened wide by a sad looking Curly Pete; “Hi Steve, when we gonna get on with this?” he asks impatiently eager for revenge; “Lots of grumbling amongst your new friends.”

“Be about half an hour,” Steve replies as he starts to walk up the stairs; “has Alex been round yet?”

“No, what's he good for?” asks Curly Pete voicing his disapproval of Alex as he follows Steve up the stairs.

“He's only making a delivery, so be nice to him, it will only be for a few minutes.” orders Steve as he enters the lounge.

Barry and Dave are still seated on the couch with Phil sitting opposite them in the armchair and Steve agrees with Curly Pete that they do not look at all happy. Dippa sits at the window and stares out not acknowledging that Steve has entered the room. Steve can hear Sheila and Natalie in the kitchen, by the sounds they are making they are doing the washing up. He hopes they have the kettle on as his mouth is dry. Taking his phone out of his pocket he tells Dippa loudly; “Take my phone will you and give Alex a ring find out what's holding him up? I gotta pee and sit down for a while.” he says as he throws his phone in Dippa's direction.

Dippa turns away from the window at the sound of his name and neatly catches Steve's phone. Pushing buttons he dials Alex's number and listens to the ringing tone, after five rings the answer phone informs him that the call is unavailable and to try again later. Dippa looks down at the phone in annoyance and reaches for his tobacco tin.

Rolling a cigarette he does not see the muddy silver car pull up outside Simon's flat and Simon come running out, jump in and get driven away up the street.

Dippa lights his cigarette and dials Alex again; "Hello." says the voice after the first ring.

"All right mate, it's Dippa, Steve wants to know where you are?"

"Am about ten minutes away, I'm in me van and I'll pull right up outside Stella's coz I'll need a hand to unload."

"I'll tell Steve." Dippa says as he disconnects the call. Putting Steve's phone down onto the table he takes another drag of his cigarette and stares down at floor.

"You want me to take a turn at the window?" asks Barry sarcastically from his position on the couch.

Dippa looks at Barry his face flushing with anger, here's someone else who thinks they can push him around! Staring Barry in the eyes he blows out a big cloud of smoke, an angry reply on his lips. Just as he is about to speak Dave moves his head forward, the cold look in his eyes makes Dippa think twice about his answer. Suppressing his anger he makes an attempt at a smile; "No, you stay where you are, you look well comfortable there would hate to disturb you." replies Dippa in some sort of bravado, though his voice sounds more scared than sarcastic.

"Your right there mate, when's this delivery getting here?"

"About ten minutes the fella said and he said he's

gonna need a hand unload it coz he can't do it on his own." replies Dippa with a bit more confidence in his voice than he felt.

"Me and Dave will help him, you keep an eye out." orders Steve from the doorway of the bathroom; "Where's Barney?"

Dippa stares him in the eyes, the anger he felt a few moments ago rising again in his throat almost choking him. With difficulty he keeps his voice calm; "He had an urgent call from the missus, some things gone wrong at home." Dippa returns to watching out of the window and looks down at the well dressed lady and her three dogs, which are still in their pram and fails to notice the dirty silver car turning the corner at the end of the street. Looking in the other direction he sees a few people making their way towards the town, taking a drag of his cigarette he stubs it out in the ashtray and continues his boring vigil.

Reaching the edge of town Stef looks in his rear view mirror and lets out a whoop of triumph; "Looks like we made it Dude, there's no one following that I can see." Stef tells Simon with big beaming smile.

The smile tells Simon he has been forgiven for the moment and he smiles back in relief.

Stef looks at Simon's bruised face; "Looks like they roughed you up a bit?" asks Stef with real concern.

"Yeah they did a bit, especially when they first came in. I bottled one of 'em and put another one down before they knocked me out."

"Didn't torture you did they?" asks Stef in alarm.

"They were going to as I killed one of 'em, they weren't too happy about that."

Stef's face turns pale "I bet they weren't, think it best you tell the rest when we get back to Heather's; unless

there is anything you want to tell me that you are not prepared to tell them?"

"You sure you want me to tell the girls?" asks Simon in dismay.

"They are involved as much as we are in this, we had to tell Heather and she stands to lose as much as us if things go wrong with this gang."

Simon stares at Stef thoughts rushing through his mind; "Yeah, I guess you're right." he agrees reluctantly.

"That looks like Alex's van coming along the street." says Dippa from the window.

Steve stands up from where he had been sitting at the table and looks at Dave; "Gonna give us a hand mate?" he asks as he walks across the lounge. Dave looks at Barry, as Barry nods his head in agreement Dave stands up and follows Steve down the stairs.

Alex's dirty white van pulls up as Steve opens the door, putting on the hand brake Alex jumps out of the van and walks to the back and opens the doors. Alex is a tall skinny looking fella, a little over two metres tall and wearing a tight faded denim jacket and jeans that makes him look wiry, but tough. The long greasy hair and round steel rimmed glasses that sit on a very round dirty face gives him the appearance of never having washed. Steve walks along the path knowing that Alex works at a very dirty engineering firm. He only has to be there for five minutes before he is covered in dirt and grease and he does not feel the repulsion that Curly Pete and others feel towards him. Smiling broadly Steve approaches the back of the van; "Was getting worried about you; you should have been here a half hour ago."

"Sorry Steve, had a customer turn up just as I was driving out of the gate, had no choice but to listen to his troubles before I could get away."

“No worries,” smiles Steve “you made it in plenty of time,” Steve takes his mobile phone out of his pocket and looks at the time; “Well ten minutes.”

Alex smiles and looks at Dave as he approaches; “All right mate, you look big enough to carry it on your own.”

“What is it?” asks Dave curiously as he looks into the back of the van; inside is a long steel pipe about one and a half metres long and looks to be thirty centimetres in diameter. Two long tubular handles are welded opposite each other and the pipe looks to be packed with steel bars and concrete.

Dave laughs; “I don’t think I will mate that must weigh a ton?”

“Dunno what it weighs but it took three of us to get it in, mind you we don’t work out in the gym like you do.”

Dave gives no reply and looks at Steve; “Ready?”

“Yeah, we’ve only got to get it in the hall.” he says as he steps forward and grabs hold of one of the handles as Dave gets a firm grip on the other. Lifting it slightly and dragging it forward they brace themselves as they take its full weight; “This ain’t so bad.” says Dave as they walk along the path.

Steve however is finding it a lot heavier than he thought and he makes no reply as he struggles to keep abreast of Dave. Reaching the front door they feel the pressure released as Alex grabs hold of the back of the pipe and helps them through the door. Putting the huge metal pipe down carefully onto the floor they all stand and straighten in relief.

“I’d better move the van or I’ll get a ticket.” Alex tells Steve; “See ya later guys.” he smiles as he walks along the path.

Steve manages to catch his breath enough to shout a ‘Thanks’ as Alex gets into his van and drives up the street.

“Unless he's got it bricked up we'll be able to walk in with this.” says an impressed Dave.

The 'Battering Ram' does look impressive standing upright on the floor and Steve feels his confidence rise; “You and Pete on each side may be able to do it in one go.” he says hopefully.

“If Pete's up to it.”

“Don't let him hear you say that he'll insist on doing it on his own.” laughs Steve.

“Ok this is business after all.” smiles Dave as he starts to walk up the stairs, Steve shuts the door and follows Dave slowly up the stairs.

Chapter Ten

The ancient looking tramp dressed in hand me down old army clothes of green khaki jacket, camouflaged trousers and with a huge rucksack on his back pushes the old wooden gate and feels the latch give a little. Standing back he looks up and down the alley and seeing no one he looks up at the windows that overlook the gate. No staring faces or movement give him the confidence to push the gate with all his might. The rusting lock gives away easily and silently and the tramp steps inside the garden, pushing the gate back into its frame. Walking quickly he approaches the house keeping an eye on the surrounding windows. As he reaches the back door he tries to open it in a vain hope that it is unlocked. Disappointed that the door is locked he puts his rucksack down on the ground and takes a closer look at the side window. The window is made of roughly painted wood and the tramp notices the broken pane of glass. Putting his hand through the broken pane

he lifts the catch up and opens the window wide. Pulling himself up onto the window ledge he climbs in. Shutting the window behind him he goes to the back door and unlocks it, stepping outside he retrieves his large rucksack and steps back inside the flat and shuts the door.

Confidently he walks through the kitchen and into the lounge; he had watched the young couple leave earlier, loading their suitcases and bags and boxes into their car and drive away; so he knew that this place would be empty for at least a few days.

Putting his rucksack onto the couch he marvels at the new television before him and eagerly looks for the remote control. Pushing every button he finally comes to the conclusion that the television is not switched on. With a curse he crosses the room and turns the switch on at the socket; the television still does not work.

Realising that the couple probably turned off the electricity at the meter he starts to look through the cupboards. Finally finding the meter he turns the switch to 'on' and goes back into the lounge and turns the television on. Searching through the channels he finds the English news channel and turns the volume up. His main interest is the weather forecast and as the talk on the television is about the latest credit problems he starts to unpack his huge rucksack. Pulling out a rolled up tent he puts it down onto the coffee table and moves the armchair into the far corner of the room. Pushing the couch and coffee table to one side he takes the tent and unrolls it on the floor, taking out two bundles of thin fibreglass poles he starts to erect the tent in the centre of the room. Skilfully he slides the poles through loops sewn onto the side of the tent and with a strange twisting motion he flips the tent upwards snapping the poles into place and sits it squarely in the centre of the

room; with the door facing the huge television set.

“We ready then?” asks Steve.

“Who's gonna do this?” Barry asks from the comfort of the couch, the tone of his voice tells Steve that he is not going to be one of the first in.

“Just be me and the girls, Dippa, Pete and Dave, you and Phil can come over when we're in, if you are up to it.” replies Steve in a condescending voice, now not hiding his dislike of Barry.

Barry's eyes harden; “It better go right this time.” he says in a voice that matches the look in his eyes.

“It will, right we ready then? Steve asks focusing his gaze on Dave.

Dave stands up with smile and returns the stare; “When me and Pete ram the door best you stay out of the way, don't want you to get hurt.”

“Best you step well out the way if you do get it open as I want to be first up those stairs, be awkward if *you* got in the way.” Steve replies in a cold voice.

With threats exchanged Steve gets on with the business in hand, picking up Dippa's jacket from the back of a chair; “We're gonna need to borrow this to get across the road.” he tells Dippa, as he leans in front of him and looks out of the window and up and down the street.

“Looks all clear; except for that woman with the pram and dogs; looks like she's getting ready to go in.” Steve says as he walks across the room and out of the door.

The others follow him down the stairs and Dippa sees that Steve has used his jacket to cover the steel pipe. Dippa frowns in annoyance, as the pipe is dirty and rusty; a small circle of dirt and dry yellow flaked paint surrounds it from where it has been placed on the floor.

Steve opens the door and looks up and down the

street; all is clear apart from two yobs wearing Hoodies who wander towards him looking into the parked cars as they walk. Seeing Steve staring at them they put their heads down and quickening their pace, they hurry past him in the direction of the town.

“All clear.” says Steve in a hushed tone; “Come on then, keep together.”

Dippa steps out first and joins Steve at the pavement as Curly Pete and Dave come out of the doorway with the steel pipe between them. Natalie and Sheila follow closely behind as they all walk across the street onto the other pavement. Still keeping in a tight group they walk towards Simon's flat. As they approach, Steve turns back towards Curly Pete and Dave; “Aim it for the lock we'll cover you.” Looking up and down the street Steve nods his head; “All clear, go for it.” he says as he steps to one side, Dippa takes a backward step giving them room to pass as Curly Pete and Dave hurry forward and pointing the pipe battering ram at the lock, smash it into the door.

The door, being held only on the catch bursts open with a crash as Curly Pete and Dave rush in. Steve is hard on their heels and pushes past them as he climbs the stairs taking three steps at a time.

“What do you think you are doing?” shouts the lady with the three dogs from across the street.

“It's all right,” shouts Sheila in reply, “my friend lost his key.”

The lady does not look convinced as she stares past Sheila and Natalie as Dippa enters the hall and runs up the stairs after Curly Pete and Dave; “That's not what it looks like from here.” the lady shouts as she slams her front door and disappears from view.

“I don't like the looks of that, I reckon she's gone to phone the Old Bill.” says Sheila nervously.

“I think you are right, we'd better tell them upstairs.”
answers Natalie as she heads for the open doorway.

“It looks like they've been seen.” says Barry from his vantage point at the window.

“What makes you say that?” asks Phil as he gets up from the couch and walks across the room to the window. Peering out he can see Natalie entering the building opposite; “What's she doing? she's meant to keep watch on the street.”

“The neighbour opposite saw them break in; she's probably gone up to tell them. Sheila's still there.”

Phil can see Sheila leaning against the fence appearing to be casual; “She doesn't look very happy, do you think they need some help?”

“Dave is enough and he's got Curly with him, we'll wait here and see what happens.”

A few moments later Natalie appears in the doorway and walks along the path, grabbing hold of Sheila's arm they walk quickly in the direction of the flat.

Steve reaches the top of the stairs and gives Simon's door an almighty kick. The door remains firmly locked and as he stands back to kick again Curly Pete pushes in front of him, and with the desire of revenge giving him extra strength; he throws all his weight at the door. The door bursts open with the sound of splintering wood and a mighty crash as it hits the hall wall.

Curly Pete rushes in and runs into the lounge, seeing it empty he nearly collides with Dave in the doorway and brushes past him and runs into the bedroom. Steve stands just inside the doorway his face pale, he knows Simon is not here. Curly Pete turns and hurries out the door and looks in the spare room, kitchen and bathroom before he realises that the flat is empty.

As Curly Pete comes out of the bathroom Natalie rushes in; "Pete, I think that woman across the road has phoned the police. I am sure she saw you and Dave force the door open."

Curly Pete's face flushes a deep red and his eyes harden; "You'd better get out quick then, go back to Stella's flat and wait for us." he orders as he walks into the lounge.

Steve and Dave stand in the centre of the room, Steve looks pale and Dave looks angry; "You heard what Natalie said so we'd better get out of here. I take it you've looked around for the holdall?" Curly Pete asks Steve sarcastically.

Steve nods his head seeming too shocked or scared to speak; "Did you see any envelopes, like mail or something with this geezers name on it?" Curly Pete demands.

"No, n-nothing" stammers Steve seeming to lose all confidence.

Curly Pete growls at him and walks out of the lounge and into the bedroom, the sound of drawers being opened and thrown across the room show Curly Pete is not having any luck.

Dave turns the coffee table upside down, seeing no paperwork he pulls the couch away from the wall and looks behind. When only dusty carpet meets his gaze he slams the couch back angrily and looks Steve in the eyes; "I do hope that you have a large bank account somewhere."

Steve's pupils contract in fear and he starts to walk out of the room giving no reply.

"I asked you a question mate." Dave says as he steps in front of Steve blocking his way.

"Don't you think we should talk about this somewhere else?" he asks gruffly, Dave's attitude inflaming his

temper.

“He's right there.” says an angry Curly Pete from the doorway. For a second Steve thought that Curly Pete was going to take a swing at Dave but he seemed to think better of it as he turns and walks out the door. Steve hurriedly follows Curly Pete out of the flat with Dave close on his heels. Curly Pete stands to one side to give Steve and Dave room to get past and as they head down the stairs Curly Pete makes a rough repair to the catch by forcing it straight where it had twisted in the frame. Pushing the screws back in the best he can with his thumb he pulls the door shut and tests his handiwork by giving the door a shove. The door holds and satisfied, he runs down the stairs, as he descends he sees Dave and Steve waiting for him by the front door; “See if you can mend that catch will you so we can shut the door after us.” he orders as he jumps down the final three steps.

Dave responds immediately and looks at the catch; “One of the screws is missing and the other one in it is bent.”

Curly Pete searches the floor frantically and finds the screw up against the skirting board. Picking it up he crosses over to Dave and hands it to him; “Push it in best you can and then we'll give it a whack with the ram.” he says as he looks down at the metal pipe which is no longer covered by Dippa's jacket; “Where's Dippa?”

Dave takes the screw from his hand and tries to push it back; “He was gone when we got down here.”

Curly Pete picks up the ram as Dave turns to help him, they tap the screw in enough to hold the catch; “We'd better get out of here, you coming or you gonna stay here?” Curly Pete asks Steve.

Steve appears to be in a dream, he had not moved

from where he had been standing in the centre of the hall during the door repairs. His face pale and drawn he looks blankly at Curly Pete. Not waiting for an answer, Curly Pete grabs hold of his arm and pushes him out the door. Taking off his jacket he goes back into the hall and covers the ram; "Here Dave, give us a hand, we can't leave this here."

Dave steps forward and grabs hold of one of the handles as Curly Pete lifts the ram off the floor. Dave leads the way as Curly Pete shuts the door firmly behind them; Steve still stands where Curly Pete had left him still with a vacant expression on his face as he stares at them coming towards him.

"Move will you." Curly Pete orders as Steve's eyes come back into focus; taking several hurried steps backwards he turns and starts to walk along the street towards Stella's flat. Curly Pete can see Natalie and Sheila staring anxiously at them from the doorway of the flat and walking quickly with Dave hurrying along beside him they cross the street.

"Haven't seen the nosey woman since she shut her door." informs Natalie as they approach.

"We'll take a chance and leave this here, it's a bit on the heavy side." replies Curly Pete as he pushes past Steve and with Dave at his side they walk along the path and into the hall. Putting the ram in the corner Curly Pete retrieves his jacket and gives it a shake; "Back to Steve's place, we'll beat him up there." he says to Dave in a hushed voice.

Dave's eyes open in surprise at Curly Pete's words, looking up the stairs he seems undecided as to what to do.

"Up to you if you stay here, be safer if you came with us now in case the Old Bill turn up. Barry and Phil might as well wait here and see what happens; which is

probably why they are still up there.”

“Yeah, you are right no one has seen them.”

Taking the answer to be yes, Curly Pete walks out the door and hurries along the path. Steve leans against the gate pillar looking anxiously up and down the street. Natalie and Sheila are already disappearing around the street corner as Curly Pete reaches Steve; “We'd better get out of here as well.” urges Curly Pete as he walks past Steve and walks in the direction of the town. Steve and Dave hurry after him and they are soon lost to sight amongst the crowds of shoppers.

Barry watches all from the window, seeing Dippa hurry towards the town and the two girls heading back there way. When Steve appears in the doorway a few minutes later a worried look on his pale face makes Barry realise all has not gone well. With a sinking feeling in his stomach he watches Dave and Curly Pete come out carrying the ram covered with Curly Pete's jacket.

“What's happening?” asks Phil seeing Barry's face turn pale.

“They are all out a bit quick; it's beginning to look like the flat was empty which means we've lost our money.”

“I knew that yesterday when you got the call that Steve had asked for some heavy help, could feel it in me bones.”

“Yeah, deep down from the moment we got here I had the feeling that we were wasting our time. I hope that Steve is not going to prove to be difficult, the way I see it this is down to him.” Barry says, anger making his voice sound harsh.

“I'm with you there, we'll go visit him soon, if all stays quiet outside.”

Stef turns into the drive and pulls to a stop in front of

the house, putting the handbrake on he switches off the engine and breathes a sigh of relief. Simon gives a small chuckle as he opens the door and gets out of the car as the front door is opened.

"How'd it go?" asks Nicola from the doorway.

"Sweet," laughs Simon, "Don't think they even saw me leave." he continues with beaming smile.

Stef slams the door as he gets out and walks towards Nicola; "Yeah, we didn't see a soul, could have had time for a cup of tea."

"I'm glad you didn't, I'll go and make us all one now." replies Nicola as she turns back into the house.

"What now Dude?" asks Simon.

Stef looks at the mud covered car; "Best give the car a wash, may keep Heather sweet, then we'll go look for another car for us."

"I'll give you a hand Dude."

Steve unlocks his front door and steps inside with Dave and Curly Pete close behind him. Neither of them had spoken a word on the way to Steve's house and doubts about Curly Pete's loyalty towards him had filled his mind.

"What are you going to do now?" Curly Pete demands harshly confirming Steve's suspicions.

"Make a drink while we wait for the others." Steve answers as he makes his way towards the kitchen.

Curly Pete and Dave remain in the hall and Steve can hear them talking quietly to each other. If his suspicions were correct then that means he would be totally on his own. The girls could not protect him against those two huge fellas and he felt that Barney would be on their side too. Grim faced he fills the kettle with water from the cold tap and switches it on to boil as Curly Pete and Dave walk into the kitchen; "You want a coffee or tea?"

Steve asks pretending to be friendly. He feels tense and a deep anger is beginning to build inside him. He had been friends with Curly for years and regarded him more as family than a friend. For Curly to turn against him over one deal going wrong showed maybe how Curly had really felt towards him over the years. The sound of a car pulling in the drive stops these thoughts and Steve goes to look out the kitchen window. It is Sheila and Natalie, Sheila is getting out of their car when she sees Steve's worried face at the window. Putting her hand behind her she pulls out a shiny revolver and gives him a questioning look.

Steve holds his thumb up in agreement and smiles; "It's Sheila and Natalie, I'll go and let them in." he tells Curly and Dave as he walks out of the room, not giving them a chance to answer.

Reaching the front door he opens it wide and as Sheila and Natalie approach he holds his forefinger to his lips indicating they be quiet. As Sheila reaches him she passes a small black automatic pistol to him; "Thought you might need this?"

"You have saved my life, maybe best you turn around and go home."

"What and let you have all the fun? Me and Nat know what they got planned for you, they want their money."

"Hi Steve." greets Natalie in a happy voice.

"Hi Nat." replies Steve in an equally cheerful voice, suddenly he feels that he is going to get out of this and he feels a strong bond form between Sheila and Natalie.

Sheila enters the house and walks past Steve in the direction of the kitchen, as Natalie walks past she puts a reassuring hand on his shoulder; which feels more like a caress and Steve feels his confidence grow. Tucking the gun in the back of his waist band and covering it with his T-shirt he follows Natalie and Sheila into the kitchen.

Natalie shouts 'Hi.' in a cheery voice as she enters and sits at the table opposite Curly Pete as he and Dave say 'Hi.' back.

Sheila walks across the kitchen and leans against the worktop behind Curly Pete. Steve picks up his coffee and joins Sheila in leaning against the worktop. Curly Pete turns in his chair and looks Steve in the eyes sensing the change of mood and he feels uncomfortable with them behind him.

Steve looks away and picks up the remote control to the television, turning it on he tunes in to the Movie channel; Nick Nolte is playing king of the head hunters in the jungles of Borneo and Steve hopes this will keep everyone distracted while they wait for the others.

A half hour later the sound of Barry's Mercedes pulling into the drive can be heard above the noise of the television. Everyone in the room appears to tense up, they had not spoken a word between them since Steve had turned the television on.

Dave starts to stand up saying; "I'll go let 'em in."

"Sit back down, the doors on the latch and they can just walk in." Steve orders.

Dave sits back down and looks Curly Pete in the eyes, they make no movement but Steve gets the impression Curly Pete had said something to Dave. Being behind him he could not see his face. Natalie does not see the exchange of looks as she stares at the television, appearing fascinated.

The sound of car doors slamming is soon followed by the sound of the front door opening. Barry marches in as if he owns the place and stops and looks down at the table and locks eyes with Curly Pete. Phil appears quietly in the doorway, a sawn off shotgun in his hands that points casually in Steve's direction.

Steve is alarmed at the sight for a split second, until he

realises that if Phil was to fire that he would also hit Barry and everyone else in the room due to the spread of shot coming out of such a short barrel.

Barry locks his eyes on Steve; "Everything remained quiet after you ran away I think that this is all some kind of story and really you owe me and Phil and a few others a lot of money. You going to give it back, or do we have to take it?" the words softly spoken but filled with so much menace Steve's stomach tenses in fear and he feels like throwing up.

Regaining his composure he locks eyes with Barry; "I've lost all my money as well, you can't blame me, if the police hadn't been chasing the boat it would have gone as normal."

"We've all talked about that, we trusted you the job and you are responsible."

"I am not." Steve angrily replies, the last word ending in a shout.

Curly Pete and Dave stand up from the table as Phil steps closer pointing the double barrels at Steve's head.

Twisting in Phil's direction as Natalie stands she points a large chromium automatic pistol at his head and pulls the trigger. The bullet enters Phil's throat just below the ear and passes right through, embedding itself in the wall as he falls to the floor; the shotgun falling from his lifeless fingers. Turning swiftly she pushes the gun into Barry's ear and pulls the trigger again. Barry goes down as quickly as Phil to the sound of Sheila's gun being shot in the direction of Dave. The bullet smashes him in the face just below his nose but does not knock him down. Taking a step closer Sheila shoots him between the eyes and he falls backwards onto the floor with a mighty thump that shakes the foundations.

Everything had happened so quickly Steve and Curly Pete stand motionless shocked by what has just

happened. Natalie and Sheila point their guns at Curly Pete's head and look at Steve for approval.

"You've only got one side left now, why did you turn on me Pete?" asks Steve in a shaky voice.

"You got Mick killed, if it weren't for your mess up none of this would have happened."

"You can't blame me Pete, if they hadn't stashed the bag in the reeds the Old Bill would have found it, Dippa said they searched the car." Steve answers in a friendly voice; even though Pete had turned on him Steve still felt a strong bond between them.

Curly Pete stares at Steve seeming unaware of the guns that are pointed at his head. The crazed look in his eyes slowly fades and he looks down at Barry's still body. Angrily he kicks him in the head; "I was so upset about Mick all I could think of was getting that fella who did it. When he weren't there I got the feeling you had let him get away deliberately. Barry's been suspicious of the whole thing and you since the beginning of this mess and I guess I listened to him." Curly Pete appears to stop speaking halfway through the sentence the way his voice trails off as grief covers his face. Tears fill his eyes, something Steve thought he would never see. In a way he had looked up to Curly Pete over the years, which made the betrayal hurt more than it should. Sheila and Natalie still point their guns at Curly Pete's head look at Steve with questioning looks.

"How do you feel about me now?" Steve asks.

Curly Pete stares hard into his eyes; "I can see I was wrong but I don't blame you if you don't trust me anymore." Turning his gaze to Sheila he says in a calm voice; "I know that you would enjoy it the most, between the eyes will you, I've had enough of suffering."

Sheila smiles and raises her gun to aim it between his eyes, tensing her finger on the trigger her smile widens

as she starts to laugh; "You'd let me do it as well, wow you must be down." she finishes suddenly with deep concern.

Natalie lowers her gun and puts it in a deep pocket on the side of her jeans. Steve had wondered where her gun had appeared from and he relaxes sensing no threat from Curly Pete. Looking at Sheila as she lowers her gun Steve cannot resist saying; "Ahh Sheila, you like him."

"Not very much." she replies in a negative voice as she tucks her gun in her waist band behind her.

"Let's hope the double glazing worked and the neighbours didn't hear the shots, we were lucky that fella didn't fire his shotgun. Thanks Nat think you saved my life and you Sheila." says Steve grabbing her arm in a gentle caress.

Sheila turns a deep red in embarrassment and sits down at the table; "I'm a bit disappointed in you Pete, you honestly believed I was gonna shoot you, I thought you knew me better than that?"

Pete turns around and sits down at the table next to Sheila; "I wanted you to, it just doesn't feel right without Mick, I feel as if I am to blame."

"Don't mean you gotta join him, you've still got plenty of living to do and your first job is to suggest what we do with these bodies." Sheila laughs looking around at Barry, Phil and Dave who lay where they had fallen on the floor.

"That one's easy, we've got Barry's car here they'll have a little accident later on tonight, we need to burn it anyway."

"Why have we got to burn it?" asks Natalie as she moves Barry's legs away with her foot and joins them sitting at the table.

"Fingerprints, DNA traces, we'll burn it good with them

inside it as our hair or DNA will be present on their clothes. The Old Bill will know they've been murdered by the bullets inside them, unless you want to dig them out first?"

Natalie shudders; "No thanks, I need a new gun anyway."

"Yes we'll have to get rid of all the guns used, well yours and Sheila's, didn't you have a gun Steve?"

Steve pulls the gun out from behind his back and laughs; "These nice ladies didn't give me any chance to use it."

"Watch your mouth." Sheila snaps and then smiles.

Steve fills the kettle with cold water from the tap and switches it on to boil; "Any one for coffee or tea?"

"We ready then?" asks Nicola.

"Yeah I am, Heather's just coming Simon's gonna stay here." replies Stef as he starts to put his jacket on.

Heather comes down the stairs, dressed in a white tight fitting T-shirt and faded tight fitting jeans - she looks transformed now that she is out of her nurse's uniform; "All set?" she asks as she walks towards the front door.

"Right behind you." answers Nicola as they follow her out the door.

Heather's car now gleams in the weak afternoon sunshine where Stef had washed the mud off and then he and Simon had polished and waxed it, making it look almost new.

Heather opens the driver's door and gets in as Nicola sits beside her and Stef jumps into the back and sprawls himself across the back seat.

"Don't you go to sleep back there, I might need directions." says Heather as she starts the car and backs out of the drive.

Stef does not answer until she turns into the road and

drives forward; “Nic knows where we’re going and that’s a good idea.” laughs Stef as he puts a cushion under his head and closes his eyes.

“You know where we’re going though don’t you?” asks Nicola.

Heather laughs; “Yeah I know, there’s a few garages clustered together there, that’s where this one came from. If it’s the same fella he might give us a good discount, me being a good customer and all.”

“Worth a try.” agrees Nicola as Stef makes snoring noises from the back seat.

“If you don’t know how to snore quietly I’ll put my Kate Bush CD on.” Heather threatens.

Stef closes his mouth immediately and makes no reply.

Three quarters of an hour later Heather pulls up in front of the garage; we’re here.” she shouts to Stef as she puts on the handbrake and switches the engine off.

Stef sits up immediately showing he has been awake all the time and looks out of the window; “Lots to choose from here Nic.” he says as he gets out of the car. Nicola and Heather join him and they start to walk around the forecourt looking at the second hand cars that are for sale.

“How much money you got?” asks Heather.

“We thought we’d spend a couple of grand is all, as we want to save as much as we can for Australia,” replies Nicola with beaming smile; “and while we’re here we brought a couple for you coz you could do with another car, just in case.”

“In case of what?” asks a mystified Heather.

“In case your car gets recognised by them crooks.”

“Stef did a good job with covering it with mud, I think you are over reacting a bit don’t you?”

“Better to be safe than sorry and we do owe you for helping us.”

“That's what sister's are for, anyway I'd need my paperwork to trade this in.”

Nicola rummages in her brown leather handbag and pulls out the MOT certificate and registration documents to Heather's car, she hands them to her with a smile; “With the trade in you'll get a good motor for that.”

“I wondered what you were doing in my room before we left, now I know.” Heather says as she takes the paperwork from Nicola's hand.

“Please, it will at least put our minds at rest and as you've seen we've got a nice box full of money.” Nicola smiles broadly.

“I'll have a look though it might not pay for us to buy two cars from the same place, paying in cash like we are.”

“I hadn't thought of that, where's Stef gone?” asks Nicola looking around the forecourt. She catches a glimpse of Stef's back as he makes his way behind the building to look at the multitude of cars that are parked at the back in a huge field.

Stef is looking at a big black Honda 4x4 with shiny chrome wheels; “How much is that going to do to the gallon?” asks Nicola as she and Heather approach him.

“I don't think that matters.” laughs Stef.

“It does to me, I can see if I leave the finances to you we won't have anything left for Australia.” replies an agitated Nicola.

“I found it.” Stef states bluntly as if the money is now all his.

Nicola's face falls and takes a serious look, before she has a chance to answer Stef laughs; “Was only looking at it Dear, you've walked past the one we want.”

“*We!*” exclaims Nicola, “don't I get to choose?”

“You will when you see it, look behind you at the Clio.”

Nicola turns around to see a silver Renault Clio that is

in their price range and looks immaculate with the silver paintwork shining in the afternoon sunshine. Walking quickly with Heather by her side they approach the Clio, the car looks as good as new and the interior and seats of grey and blue and red squares look as if they have never been sat on.

“See what I mean?” asks Stef.

“I love it.” exclaims Nicola with a beaming smile.

“Good choice.” agrees Heather.

“I'll go get the keys, if it sounds Ok we'll buy it.” says Stef as he walks towards the office.

Nicola walks around the Clio admiring the sleek design and shiny paintwork, a few minutes later Stef returns with the keys and unlocks the door. Getting in he inserts the key in the ignition and turns it to start, the little cars engine starts immediately and Stef takes his foot off the throttle. The engine purrs in a regular rhythm with all cylinders firing perfectly. Considering the engine is cold Stef is impressed with the way it started so easy. Nicola opens the passenger's door and gets in beside him; “Sounds great, we buying it then?”

“Can't see why not.” Stef smiles as he turns the engine off.

Half an hour later Stef, with Nicola beside him drive away from the garage, Stef only managed to get one hundred pounds off the listed price as his heart was not into hard negotiating with the amount of money they had. Heather follows behind as they head for the next garage for Heather's new car – hopefully.

Chapter Eleven

“Where are we going to put these?” asks Sheila as she

steps over Phil's body on the way to the bathroom.

"We'd better put them in Barry's car before they stiffen up, I got some blankets we can cover them with until later." Steve tells Sheila's departing back as she hurries out of the room.

"I'll drive it around the back." volunteers Curly Pete.

"Good idea, give us a few minutes to move the dustbins and make some room." Steve says as he opens the back door and steps out into the yard. If Curly Pete was going to do a runner Steve felt that he would rather know now than later; giving him the opportunity to drive the Mercedes is the ideal way.

Steve moves the dustbins and old cardboard boxes out of the way. Seeing his precious Bonsai elm tree on the corner he walks over and picks it up and puts it under the kitchen window. The sound of the Mercedes starting up makes him stand and listen as Curly Pete manoeuvres the car, Steve smiles with relief when he hears the engine noise heading towards him.

Curly Pete drives slowly around the corner and Steve waves him forward until the Mercedes is immediately outside the back door. Curly Pete turns the engine off and puts the handbrake on and jumps out and walks towards Steve.

"Glad you didn't do a runner." smiles Steve.

Curly Pete looks embarrassed; "Didn't give it a thought, sorry for losing it back there, I just wanted revenge for Mick, and I still do."

"So do I, you aren't the only one, I think that's why I haven't been myself I didn't realise how much of a friend he was until he'd gone."

Curly Pete's grief covers his face and Steve thinks he is going to cry he looks so hurt and upset.

"Come on let's get these fellas into the motor before they stiffen." Steve says gently as he turns and walks

back into the house.

“All Ok?” asks Natalie looking concerned.

“Yeah, we're just more upset about losing Razor Mick than we admit, we'll be Ok, could you search these fellas before we dump them in the car please?”

“Yeah sure, do I get to keep what I find?” asks Natalie with a smile, as she stands up and walks over to Phil's body.

“Depends what it is, put what you find on the table and we'll go from there.”

Natalie searches through Phil's pockets taking out his wallet, some loose change, mobile phone and a letter inside a blue envelope. Putting them on the table she searches Dave and Barry and puts everything on the table as Curly Pete walks in the door.

Steve wonders where Sheila is as it must be ten minutes since she went to the bathroom; “Where's Sheila?” he asks Natalie.

“She's having a bath, she missed her shower this morning, don't mind do you?”

“Hardly.” laughs Steve relieved as to her whereabouts; “What we got here?” he asks as he picks up Barry's wallet. Taking out several hundred pounds in twenty pound notes he puts them on the table, pulling out the credit cards he puts them on the table and throws the wallet down. Doing the same with Phil and Dave's possessions he picks up the money and hands it to Natalie; “This is for you and Sheila, I'll burn the rest.”

Natalie takes the money and looks down at the pile of credit cards; “What a shame, but you are right, thanks.” she smiles as she starts to count the money. Phil seemed to have as much as Barry and Steve guesses that there must be several thousand pounds between them.

Natalie confirms this a few minutes later when she

finishes counting; “Two thousand four hundred and sixty pounds, thanks Steve,” she laughs loudly; “Are you sure? Considering the amount that you've just lost.”

“You are welcome; if it weren't for you I wouldn't be here to give it to you.”

“Doesn't mean we have become best friends and that you owe me and have to come round every Sunday for tea and lettuce sandwiches.” Natalie says softening the hard words with a smile.

“I usually go out on Sundays it will have to be a Saturday as I like the sound of lettuce sandwiches and to be eaten on the couch with little cups of tea.” Steve laughs, turning towards Curly Pete he looks down at Phil; “Start with the lightest shall we?”

“Yeah, if you want.” Pete shrugs as he walks over to Phil and starts to pick him up.

Steve hurries forward and between them they take Phil out and put him in the back of the car. Carrying Dave is a bit more difficult as he is a lot heavier, and Barry, who must weigh over a hundred kilo has to be dragged out through the door. Steve and Curly Pete push him onto the back seat with Phil and Dave and with a final push they slam the door shut.

“I'll go and get something to cover them with, I'm not expecting any visitors except for Dippa and Barney maybe and they don't have to know about this.”

“Yes, this will just be between me and you and the two girls.” answers Curly Pete coldly as he follows Steve back into the house.

“You should see the smile on your sisters face” says Stef as he looks in his rear view mirror as he drives away from the car sales garage with Heather in her new car following about fifty metres behind.

“So she should do, I'm really jealous, she got an

incredible deal.”

Heather had got an amazing deal with a two year old Ford Fiesta that only had twenty one thousand miles on the clock. Stef felt that the car dealer had given her more for her car than it was worth in the trade in, but he seemed delighted so he must have made money on the deal.

“What are we going to do when we get back?” asks Nicola.

“Have a cup of tea and something to eat would be good.”

“No! I mean what are we going to do now, have you thought about next week and the week after?”

“Yeah I've given it a lot of thought, we can't stay with Heather so we've gotta look for another flat somewhere.”

“Heather won't mind us staying; now Simon's got away, I want to go to Australia now!”

“We can't stay with Heather for too long as all the time we're there we're putting her in danger, especially if we get recognised by one of the gang and followed back to her home.”

“But they are over thirty miles away, the chances of bumping into any of them must be really slim.”

“Slim or not it might happen, I'm with you lets go to Australia, we've already filled in most of the forms though I bet we'll still have to wait for a month or more. We can't put your sister at risk for more than a couple of days and even then we'd better stay indoors as much as we can. That's why we gotta find somewhere else to live while we wait.”

“What about Simon?”

“His money should arrive day after tomorrow, best get a decision out of him then.”

“What are you going to do about our old flat?”

“Keep the payments going until we get out of this country, that way we won't have to let the letting agent know, or anyone else they can use to find us. Anyway I've got to go back and get my passport; it's stashed under the bedroom carpet.”

“You can't go back there.” Nicola exclaims in horror.

“No it's cool; I'm gonna park it on the private road and go in the back way.”

“And when are you going to do this?”

“I can't get it out of my mind so I am gonna go tonight.” Stef answers firmly.

Nicola knows that tone of voice and gives no reply as she looks out of the window; a field of sheep meet her gaze. The sheep look calm and happy as they feed on the grass and Nicola looks forward to the time when she can be as happy.

“It's getting dark, when are we going to do this?” asks Curly Pete.

“We need to do it soon as the weather forecast was for rain this evening and we can't afford to leave footprints, give it a half hour then we'll go.”

“Why don't we use the boat to get rid of them and we can still burn the motor.”

“Yeah I've been thinking about that Pete, even if we manage to dig the bullets out it would be obvious they've been shot as I'm sure they won't burn completely before the fire brigade arrives; and we don't want Old Bill poking around. They'll just consider the car was nicked and dumped by kids, best we take off the number plates and the identification plates.”

“I can do that, you got a drill?”

“Yeah, don't forget the ones inside the doors.” answers Steve as he goes in search of his battery powered drill.

Curly Pete is standing outside with the bonnet to the

car already opened when Steve steps out the back door. Handing him the drill and an old tobacco tin filled with different sizes of drill bits Curly Pete asks; "Have you got any mounted points, ya know a shaped grinding stone on a shaft?"

"I know what you mean the closest thing I've got is a three inch grinding wheel, will that do?"

"It'll have to, look." Curly Pete points his finger at the driver's door window where the registration number is engraved on the glass.

"I'll go find it." says Steve as he hurries back indoors.

Darkness covers the town as Curly Pete, driving the Mercedes, heads out towards the river. Steve follows closely behind with Sheila and Natalie sitting behind him on the back seat. Steve would have preferred that he and Pete go out on the boat on their own but Sheila had been most persuasive in saying that they would make good witnesses if things were to go wrong. They could also go out and get something to eat as well as have a drink. Steve felt that Sheila was more interested in getting something to eat than coming with them on the boat.

Half turning in his seat he asks; "Wouldn't you prefer I dropped you at the Pub while me and Pete go out, we'll only be an hour."

"Yeah, I'm starving and that Pub does good food, don't mind if we eat ours before you get back?" replies Sheila.

"Don't mind at all, to be honest I'm not very hungry." Steve answers as Curly Pete takes the turning for the river. Steve concentrates on driving around the corner before Sheila distracts him again; "You'll feel better once you've dumped them overboard."

Steve looks at her in the rear view mirror and smiles; "Hope so, I've not eaten since breakfast."

Concentrating on his driving Steve follows Curly Pete until the lights of the Public House appear out of the gloom. Taking his phone out of his pocket he pushes a button and speed dials Curly Pete who answers immediately; "I'm dropping Sheila and Nat at the Pub, see you at the boat." Steve says hurriedly into the phone.

"No worries, tell 'em to stay out of trouble." jokes Curly Pete as he disconnects the call.

Steve pulls up in front of the Pub; "Curly says stay out of trouble." he tells them with a smile.

"As if we would." laughs Natalie as they get out of the car and she slams the door shut.

Steve drives into the darkness after Curly Pete's fading rear lights. As boats start to line the riverbank Pete slows down to a crawl until he reaches Steve's boat.

Steve pulls in behind him and jumps out; Curly Pete has parked the Mercedes as close as he can to the little wooden jetty that is Steve's berth and Steve squeezes past and approaches his boat.

Steve had bought his boat, 'The Betty' from the proceeds of several drug deals about nine years ago. The Betty is a four metre long fibreglass boat with a small cabin that can sit four people comfortably. At first he had had to meet Ingrid or whoever was bringing it over about two miles offshore. They would be fishing and without having to come too close to each other they could exchange money and usually cocaine by floating it attached to a line down the tide to each other. This worked well until one time Ingrid was late due to Customs patrols on the other side of the Channel. They eventually met six hours later than planned and a storm blew up and they found themselves in serious trouble. The cocaine got wet and was mostly ruined so they had met on land after that.

Steve still liked to use The Betty for fishing and they had found it useful to get rid of unwanted people, like they were doing now. Steve steps onto The Betty and unlocks the cabin doors opening them wide and goes back to help Curly Pete unload the Mercedes.

All is quiet along the river this time of night and they quickly unload the bodies; which had stiffened into a sitting position and put them in the cabin. Unlocking the boot of the Mercedes Curly Pete picks up a concrete block in each hand; "We are lucky with the tide; about an hour before it turns."

"Yeah, high tide is 21.55hrs to be exact, yeah just over an hour." replies Steve looking at his watch in the darkness.

Loading the blocks quickly they are soon on their way downriver and reaching the sea Steve follows a deep channel for about a mile before he disengages the engine. Curly Pete has tied the blocks to each body; two at each of their feet and one block at their necks with thick nylon rope; "The tide is still coming in ain't it Steve?" he asks looking concerned.

"Yeah we still got about a half hour before high tide by the looks of it."

"What we gonna do? – they'll get swept in a ways before the tide turns."

Looking at his Global Positioning System, Steve's brow creases in concentration; "If we follow the channel out a bit further until we are nearly at the sandbanks. That would at least be better than sitting here waiting. If they get swept in from there it won't be far then before the tide will turn and take them right out."

Not waiting for an answer Steve guns the engine and puts it in gear, keeping a close watch on his GPS he navigates the boat further out to sea. Curly Pete sweeps the darkness ahead of them with a very large pair of

binoculars looking for any lights or signs of life, seeing nothing but the sea and blackness he sits down.

Soon after Steve slows the engine and pulls to a stop; "Here will be good." he says stepping forward and bends down to pick Phil's body up. Curly Pete jumps to help and they gently put Phil's body onto the stern half hanging over the water. Pulling out what looks like Razor Mick's cut-throat razor Curly Pete cuts Phil's stomach open, making a deep cut about a hundred millimetres long. Though rigour mortis had set in blood and liquid still oozes out as they lower the body into the black water. Barry and Dave follow as quietly, with Barry smelling especially awful when Curly Pete cuts him open. By cutting into the stomach cavity they were preventing the build up of gasses as the body decays and preventing the bodies from becoming too buoyant and floating along on the current or even floating to the surface. Also giving the crabs and shrimps a head start in stripping the bodies of flesh.

Curly Pete has taken the two guns apart and he throws the separate pieces into the water in different directions followed by Phil's sawn off shotgun as Steve throws an empty bucket into the sea that is tied to a long length of rope and fills the bucket with sea water. Pulling it back on board he and Curly Pete wash their hands and wash away any traces of blood that have spilled onto the deck. Cleaning the boat thoroughly they wash their hands again with fresh water and Steve turns the boat around and they head back to the river.

Stef sees the badly repaired window as he approaches the back door; a piece of glass about one hundred and fifty millimetres long had fallen out of the window and been badly repaired with a supermarket carrier bag. Someone had stuck the bag onto the window with black

tape; he hadn't done it and neither had Nicola.

Whoever has repaired the window is probably still in there screams a voice in Stef's head. Stef steps back quietly and thinks what to do, not sure who and how many are in their flat he walks quietly back to the car. Opening the boot the only suitable weapon he can find is the Jack to the car and wisely he closes the lid, gets back into his car and drives back to Heather's to get help.

"That was quick." says Nicola loudly from the front room as he steps inside the front door of Heather's house.

"Yeah, looks like we got squatters came back for Simon." says Stef with a smile as he enters the front room.

"Squatters?" screams Nicola.

"The kitchen windows been busted and repaired with a carrier bag." states Stef in a matter of fact voice.

"How many are there?" asks horrified Heather.

"Dunno, thought I'd come and get Simon then we'll go see." smiles Stef.

"Be glad to get out of here for a while, all Nic and Heather have been talking about is hospitals and annoying patients." laughs Simon as he stands up from where he had been sitting on the couch.

"I need a pee and to get a couple of bits from the shed." replies Stef as he makes his way out of the door towards the bathroom.

"What's he mean *a couple of bits from the shed?*" asks a worried Nicola.

"Expect it's dark in your back garden and he probably needs to get the torch." answers Simon seeming unconcerned, though his heart is already starting to race with excitement or fear.

Nicola knows that Simon is lying and putting on an act

pretending that it is of no concern and purses her lips in frustration. Simon does not give her the chance to ask any more as he hurriedly steps out of the room and heads for the back door. Turning the handle he steps out into the darkness as the sound of the toilet flushing reaches his ears. Making his way carefully he walks slowly along the path and reaches the shed as Stef comes out the back door.

“All right Dude?” asks Simon from the darkness as Stef approaches him.

Stef stops in his tracks and even in the gloom Simon can see his face go pale; “It’s only me Dude.” laughs Simon.

“You frightened the life out of me,” gasps Stef; “I wondered where you had gone.”

“Waiting for you Dude, what you need from the shed?”

“A big hammer or metal bar, I don’t mind which.” replies Stef as he unlocks the shed door.

“You need a torch?” asks Simon as Stef leans in and flicks a switch turning on the single dusty sixty watt bulb; “Maybe not then?” laughs Simon as he follows Stef into the shed.

“Ahh – this will do to start.” says Stef as he picks up a large metal hammer from a pile of garden tools that lay on the floor.

“Where’s mine then?” asks Simon looking down at the tools.

Stef leans down and moves a shovel to one side, picking up a round metal bar he passes it to Simon who smiles as if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth; “Here’s yours Dude.”

Simon takes the rusty metal bar from Stef’s hand; it is about four hundred millimetres long and twenty five millimetres in diameter. One end has been sharpened into a chisel shape and the other end is curled over

where it has been struck by a hammer many times.

Simon feels its weight and smiles; "Yeah, think this'll do it."

"Come on, sooner we get this over the better." urges an anxious Stef as he ushers Simon out of the door. Switching off the light he shuts and locks the door, handing the hammer to Simon he asks; "Wait at the car will you? I'll go put these keys back."

"Sure Dude." answers Simon as he takes the hammer and walks around the side of the house.

Stef opens the back door as quietly as he can; he can hear Nicola and Heather's worried voices from the front room. Putting the sheds keys down gently onto the worktop he closes the back door and joins Simon at the car; "Let's get out of here." says Stef nervously as he unlocks the car doors and gets in. Starting the engine and driving the car forward as soon as Simon sits down he quickly heads down the drive.

"What are you going to do now?" Natalie asks Steve as he finishes his pint of beer.

Steve and Curly Pete sat opposite her in a quiet corner of the Public House, Sheila had gone to use the rest rooms and the pub is fairly quiet of customers with just a couple of old men propping the bar up.

"I'll drop you back to yours and then me and Pete will get rid of Barry's car."

"And then what, without your business partners how are you going to get the money together?"

"I've known Ingrid quite a while, long before Barry and his crew came along."

"You are not thinking of asking her for credit, I've known her and her family a long time too and I wouldn't recommend doing that; not with the luck you just have had recently." warns Natalie.

“It'll be Ok; I have some money put aside for just such an emergency so I won't have to borrow it all.”

“I agree with Natalie, why don't you try to get a smaller amount? Borrowing from them is not to be recommended mate.” advises Curly Pete.

Steve stares at them both touched by their concern, he had heard how Ingrid and her family dealt with people who didn't pay their bills on time. He had dealt with them for more than ten years now and he felt he had a special relationship with Ingrid and that she regarded him as family. Not telling Pete and Natalie his thoughts he smiles a thank you as Sheila returns to the table; “I'm gonna run you and Natalie home, me and Pete have still got some work to do.” he tells her as he stands up.

“Fine with me, will we see you tomorrow?” asks Sheila.

“You might, I'll phone you about midday and we'll go from there.” he replies as he stands to leave.

“Sit back down a minute will you?” asks Natalie.

“What's on your mind then?” replies Steve as he sits back down at the table.

“Me and Sheila have some money put by and we think this is a good time for us to become partners.”

Steve stares at Natalie and Shelia feeling his anger rise, he had known for several years that Natalie and Sheila wanted to be big players. Many times they had offered money before and now they felt this was their chance.

“Save you borrowing from Ingrid” Sheila states simply.

“Partners? If I accept it means that we are equal partners and it does not mean you will become the boss.” Steve warns.

Natalie's eyes light up with triumph; “Partners.” she laughs extending her hand for Steve to shake to seal the deal.

Reluctantly Steve takes her hand and nods in

agreement, letting go of Natalie's hand he shakes Sheila's hand; "As long as you behave." he says firmly.

"Of course we will." laughs Sheila squeezing his hand hard.

Stef pushes the gate open and looks towards his flat; all is dark as if no one is home and he walks slowly along the path. Simon follows closely behind holding on tightly to his rusty chisel. Lights in the upper flats shine, indicating that people in both of the flats are still awake, Stef looks up towards them and looks back at Simon; "We'll have to try and do this as quietly as we can, we don't want them calling Old Bill."

Simon nods in silent agreement looking at his watch; "Your neighbours are up late it's nearly eleven-thirty."

"Oh yeah, the Polish people will be going to work soon, this will be a good time to do this as they make a lot of noise." replies Stef looking up at the lighted windows.

They quietly approach the back door and Stef puts his hand on the door handle, looking around at Simon he pushes the handle down; the door is unlocked.

"Ready?" asks Stef nervously.

Simon shrugs and smiles; "Go for it Dude."

Stef eases the door open and steps inside the kitchen with Simon close behind. The door to the lounge is closed and light shines underneath and through the keyhole. The light flickers and flashes and at first Stef, in his stressed state cannot understand what he is seeing until he realises it is the light from the television which has been switched on. No sound penetrates through the door and Stef and Simon walk softly towards it. Stef puts his hand on the door handle and pushes it down quickly and throws the door open and rushes in with hammer upraised.

Several steps in he stops suddenly and Simon bumps

into him in surprise; the television shows the same film; Predator, but with no sound. Pitched up in the middle of the room is a big green fishing tent, complete with two fishing rods resting in their stands. Underneath the huge tent a bed chair with bright alloy legs reflect the light of the television, making them appear to be moving. On top of the apparently moving legs a green sleeping bag has been stretched out and inside a fisherman, with a huge bulbous nose and tangled mop of hair snores contently!

Stef looks down at the sleeping form in confusion until the anger at having his home invaded stirs him to shout; "What the hell is going on here?"

Simon laughs behind him as the sleeping form starts to wake; turning over onto his side the fisherman frowns in annoyance and opens his eyes. He stares at the floor his face contorting into strange shapes as thoughts pass through his mind.

"What do you think you are doing?" shouts Stef.

The fisherman startled by Stef's shout jumps in surprise and looks up and locks eyes with him. His face goes pale with fear when he sees Stef standing over him waving the hammer about, as if he is going to use it!

Simon leans forward and tries to peer under the tent; his hair falls across his face obscuring his vision and all he can make out is a pale face with a huge nose and wide eyes.

"My mate asked you a question." he shouts at the frightened form lying on the bed chair.

"I, I n-needed a roof over my head for a few days." stammers the frightened fisherman.

"You can't stay here mate, you going to pay for the window you broke? It's called breaking and entering, you'll do time for this." threatens Stef his face flushing with anger.

The fisherman's face appears to turn pure white in the gloom cast by the tent at Stef's words and he sits upright; "I didn't break in, the window was already broke." he says defensively.

"Yeah, who broke it?" sneers Stef.

"I dunno, it weren't me, I mended it for you and all I've done is sleep here and use your toilet, honest mate." the fisherman replies his voice shaky with fear.

Simon looks up at Stef and then looks around the room; "Looks like your normal mess to me Dude." he says with a smile.

Stef follows his gaze around the room noticing that everything is as he and Nicola had left it. Walking into the bedroom he sees that here also nothing had been disturbed. The mess of old books and paperwork was still sprawled across the bed; exactly as he had left it and he wondered if the fisherman had even been in here. Walking across the room he bends down in front of the wardrobe and peels the carpet back, his passport is lying where he had left it and he scoops it up and puts the carpet back. Putting the passport into his pocket he walks back into the lounge; "All good in there." he says giving the fisherman a strange look.

"I ain't even been in *there*, I only looked." exclaims the fisherman nervously.

"Yeah I can see that," replies Stef softly as he looks around the room; "you can't stay here mate."

"Do you want me to go now, or in the morning?"

Stef smiles weakly and looks towards Simon for support, Simon smiles back but says nothing.

"No mate, you can stay here 'till the morning it's only a few hours away anyway."

"You wanna drink Dude? I'll put the kettle on." asks Simon as he walks into the kitchen.

Stef feels helpless and trapped, he cannot get violent

with this person in front of him; "What's your name mate?"

"Ian."

"I'm Stef and that's Simon in the kitchen, you wanna coffee?"

"Pleased to meet you, sorry about breaking in I was desperate to get warm, yeah I'd love one thanks."

"How long you been here?"

"Only a day, I wasn't very well and your place looked empty with the window broken and the curtain hanging out blowing in the breeze."

"Who broke my window then?" asks Stef his face frowning in annoyance.

"Your back door was still locked as I had to climb through the window to get in and there was a pile of post in your letterbox, I pulled the letters in and let them drop to the floor."

"Thanks for doing that." replies Stef absent mindedly as he pictures the Polish couple sorting through the mail and pushing it in his letterbox. Ian had probably done him a favour by doing that and he looks around the room.

Stef's eyes stare into Ian's dark brown eyes; "Where do you normally live?"

"Down at the lake, usually." Ian replies in a matter of fact voice.

"Down at the lake; what in that?" asks Stef looking at the tent. Ian still lay on his bed chair and apart from sitting up had not moved since they found him.

"Yeah, it's really cosy when the sides are down and it's zipped up, even got two windows I can look out of." Ian answers proudly.

"What do you do in the winter?"

"Get cold."

"You are mad, ain't you got a proper house or flat to

live in?"

"Not anymore." replies Ian bitterly.

Stef is glad that Simon walks in at that time carrying three steaming mugs; "I put two sugars in each." he says as he puts the mugs down on the floor in front of Stef and Ian. Keeping hold of one of the steaming mugs Simon stands up and walks across the room and sits down on the couch. Taking an exaggerated sip he breathes out a sigh of relief and smiles broadly.

"Thanks Dude." says Stef as he picks up one of the mugs and takes a small sip. Taking his telephone out of his pocket he dials Nicola and tells her they will be back in the morning.

"Thanks man." says Ian as he bends forward and picks up the remaining mug of steaming coffee.

The grey light of dawn finds Stef outside measuring the broken window, noting down the sizes on his mobile phone he looks around the garden for something a bit more substantial than a carrier bag to block up the window. A dirty cracked oversized square of glass leans against the side of the shed between the shed and the high fence. The ancient shed and brand new panel fences are only separated by a narrow one hundred and fifty millimetre strip of dirt and gravel. The glass is far too large to fit the window and Stef peers the other side of the piece of glass hoping to see more, he is disappointed as there are only a few weeds searching for sunlight in the gloom cast by the shed and the new fencing. Looking around the garden he can see nothing to help, the only solution is to go to a glass shop, but not in this town!

Going back indoors he puts water on to boil and searches the cupboards for something to eat. All he can find is a tin of creamed rice pudding and a tin of

mandarin segments in light syrup.

Opening the tin of rice pudding quickly he pours it into a bowl and puts it in the microwave to heat up. When it is piping hot he takes the bowl out of the microwave and pours half the tin of mandarins into the bowl with the rice. Pushing the segments deep into the hot pudding he leaves it on the worktop as he makes tea.

With tea made Stef picks up the bowl and grabbing hold of the mug of tea he walks into the lounge, Simon is now sitting upright staring at Ian who still snores happily in his sleeping bag.

“What we gonna do with him Dude?” asks Simon.

“Chuck him out when he wakes up.” answers Stef coldly as he puts a spoonful of rice pudding in his mouth.

“Do you think he knows any of that gang? He could cause us problems if he does as he knows this place.”

“No, I think he's good and we can give him a lift to this lake he stays at, if he wants one.”

“That might be a good idea Dude, we'd know where he is then.”

As Stef finishes his breakfast Ian starts to stir and finally opens his eyes, panic covers his face for a few seconds until he realises where he is. Looking Simon in the eyes he cheerfully greets; “Good morning mate, feels like it's going to be a good day.”

“You could be right there Dude, wish I woke up that cheerful in the mornings.” he says looking at Stef.

“Must be this fellas lifestyle, morning Ian.” greets Stef.

“Good morning Stef.” Ian grins broadly as he stands up; “I need the toilet.” he informs as he walks towards the kitchen. This was the first time they had seen him standing and Stef is surprised to see that Ian is small, maybe only one and a half metres tall and as he walks Stef notices that he limps. The left leg is stiff and it

seems to cause him pain to walk.

“Where are you going once you've left here?” Stef asks Ian as he limps back into the lounge.

“The river is closest, I still need to rest for a couple more days before I do anything too energetic.”

Stef looks across at Simon, the mention of the river sounds alarm bells in Stef's head and by the expression on Simon's face he is having the same thoughts. Stef laughs; “We went down there the other day, that day when it rained really hard and we got soaked.”

“Was there many people fishing?” asks Ian earnestly showing his main concern.

“No we didn't see anyone apart from a few walkers.” Stef lies.

“We can give you a lift to the lake if you want Dude?” Simon volunteers.

“You are not serious are you?” Ian asks with real hope in his voice.

“Looks like you will struggle without some help, what's wrong with your leg?” asks Stef.

“Some of the muscles are dead and its a bit stiff in the mornings, I'll be all right later in the day.”

“Where's this lake then?” asks Stef.

“About twenty miles away; in the Stour Valley.”

“Yeah, I know where you mean, there are six lakes along there and that's on our way, let's do it.” says Stef as he stands and takes his bowl and mug back into the kitchen.

Ian starts to pack his gear away and Simon helps by rolling the sleeping bag up and folding the bed chair. Stef helps take down the tent as Ian puts his fishing rods into a huge rod bag.

Ten minutes later they leave the flat quietly; “What are you going to do about the window Dude?” asks Simon as he steps out into the back garden.

“I've measured it and I'll go down the glass shop and come back later, we don't want anyone else breaking in.” he answers staring at Ian.

Ian looks embarrassed; “I was desperate and I didn't break in really as the window was open.”

“I still want to know who did that.” answers Stef as he locks the back door, picking up the big tent and a rucksack he helps carry Ian's stuff to the car.

Chapter Twelve

“Who is that?” shouts Steve from the bathroom as hears a vehicle pull into his drive.

Curly Pete who was sitting at the table is already looking out of the window; “It's Barney and Dippa.” he shouts up to Steve.

Steve dresses quickly and runs down the stairs as Barney, Dippa, Cheesey and Graham approach the front door. Steve opens the door wide and looks at Dippa; “What do you want?”

“I came to see how you are, quite an exciting day yesterday.” replies Dippa seeming unconcerned that he had shown cowardice by running away.

“What happened to you then?” Steve demands his face starting to flush with anger.

Dippa turns pale; he had been scared of being arrested and admits it to himself. He had hoped that Steve was going to be all right about it.

“Here he is, the one that ran away.” says Curly Pete in a loud voice as he approaches the front door.

Dippa looks ashen and tries to pull himself together; “I thought everyone got out of there fast when we found it empty.” he lies.

“No you didn't, you ran coz you are yellor.” says Steve scornfully. Standing to one side to allow them in, Dippa takes the lead glad to be away from Steve's accusing eyes and walks towards the kitchen.

“You all right Steve?” Cheesey asks looking concerned.

“Yeah I'm fine thanks, come in will you?”

Cheesey stands in the doorway for a few seconds before he realises he is standing in the way, taking a step forward he stands beside Steve as Barney and Graham walk in. Nodding a greeting to Steve and Curly Pete they follow Dippa into the kitchen.

Steve shuts the door and turns and looks at Cheesey; “Something on your mind mate?” he asks softly.

Cheesey goes to speak but looks at Curly Pete nervously, whatever he was going to say it appears he does not want to say it in front of him.

“Can you make sure they are behaving in there please Pete?” Steve politely asks.

Curly Pete looks annoyed, saying nothing he nods his head towards Steve in agreement and with a final long stare at Cheesey he follows the others into the kitchen.

“What's on your mind then Cheesey?” asks Steve as Curly Pete goes into the kitchen.

Cheesey looks at Steve seeming to pluck up the courage to talk; “We heard that Curly Pete weren't on your side anymore and Barry was gonna take over?”

“As you can see Pete's here with me, who told you that?”

“Well we weren't sure, Barney overheard Dave talking to Curly Pete saying that Barry would be in charge from today. We thought we would come and see if you wanted any help.” Cheesey tells him nervously looking around him.

Steve's thoughts are that it is nice of them to think

about him though they had left it a bit late if they had wanted to help. He appreciates that Cheesey's concern is real and Dippa, Graham and Barney are more than likely to have come to see who is in charge now; and they wouldn't mind who that is, as long as they got paid.

Steve puts his hand on Cheesey's arm; "Thanks for your concern mate, you still have a job here."

Cheesey visibly relaxes showing his relief; "I'm here now if you want me to do anything?" he asks hopefully.

Steve assumes that Cheesey has no money, hence the offer; "You only got paid three days ago, you can't have spent that already?" Steve laughs covering his annoyance.

Cheesey looks sheepish and stares down at the floor; "Yeah we made a bit of a weekend of it."

"I'm amazed you are still alive the state your liver must be in." Steve exclaims laughing loudly.

"Yeah, well" Cheesey replies nervously and stares Steve in the eyes waiting for him to give him some work. Cheesey is an alcoholic and Steve could see that a lot of the nervousness is probably due to a lack of alcohol.

"You wanna beer? I got some in the fridge." Steve asks as he pushes past him and walks towards the kitchen.

Cheesey's face lights up at the thought of a drink; "Yeah, I ain't had one yet, Barney said to wait 'till we got here and see what was happening first."

"Anyone wanna beer?" Steve asks as he enters the kitchen.

"Yes please." Graham almost shouts.

"Yeah I'll have one." smiles Dippa.

Barney and Curly Pete appear to be in deep conversation and they look up at Steve, shake their heads and carry on talking.

Steve tries to listen as he opens the fridge and gets out three cans of beer. Handing them to Cheesey he shuts

the door and sits down beside Barney as Cheeseey hands the beer out.

The sound of the cans opening with a hiss, almost all at the same time shows their eagerness and the contented sighs confirm the alcohol addiction. Barney is telling Curly Pete about a new customer he wants to take on. It appears he has known him for several years and he was assuring Pete that he was good for several ounces each week. Curly Pete interrogates Barney asking what happened to his last dealer, who is friends and family were and even what kind of car the fella drove.

Curly Pete looks Steve in the eyes; "What do you think Steve?"

"Sounds good, as long as he only goes through Barney."

"When will you be getting some more? That is I assume you are still in business?" asks Barney.

"Yes am still in business, can do you three this afternoon if you want and the rest will be in tomorrow."

"What time this afternoon?" asks Barney as he looks at his gold watch.

"Be about half two if you can wait that long?"

Barney smiles in relief; "That's good, will give me time to get a decent dinner before I head back."

"As you are all here I might as well tell you that we are going to do things a bit differently for a while. Me and Pete will be meeting Ingrid for a while, if you want anything your contact will be Natalie or Sheila."

"Natalie?" sneers Dippa.

"Yeah I know you and her don't get on, maybe you should understand what 'no' means." replies Steve reminding Dippa as to why Natalie does not like him. Dippa had tried several times to have sex with her and the last time he had tried he had been very drunk and

ended up with a slap!

“I don't like her nor Sheila come to that.” admits Dippa.

“Only because they won't have sex with you, I can't see why you want to, them being lesbians.”

“Dippa has to have every female he meets, no matter whether they are lesbians, ugly, old or young.” laughs Barney as Cheesey and Graham nod their heads in agreement.

Dippa's face flushes a deep red; “No I ain't.” he lies looking down at the floor.

“Seriously Dippa you will have to get over it, if you still want to hang around they have come into partnership with me and you will be working for them.” Steve tells him sternly.

“I never thought I would hear you say that, you must be desperate.” sneers Dippa.

Steve's face hardens; “I ain't got a lot of choice mate, with everything going wrong on the last deal and as you can see Barry and his friends are no longer with us, I had to get the money from somewhere.”

“It surprises me that they have that kind of money, I know Barry was pissed off with you but where's he gonna get his from now?” asks Dippa.

“That's his problem all I know is that I gotta meet Ingrid tomorrow and I've got the money now, without him.”

“Yeah but Sheila and Nat? They'll take over and in a few months time and you'll be working for them.” Dippa warns.

“If that happens then that will be *my* problem.” says Steve firmly.

“Already it's become my problem as I gotta deal with them now, why can't I come to you?”

“Because you have to go and see Natalie or Sheila, it will be the same price as from me as I need to take a back seat for a while.”

“Already they are taking over by the looks of it.” grumbles Dippa “How come Barney gets to deal with you and I don't?”

“Because Sheila and Natalie will be here at two thirty.” replies Steve, getting angry.

“Have you got anything for us to do today?” interrupts Cheesey.

“Not work wise, but I do need someone to check on that fellas flat and to have a look around the town for him and his mate, you know what he looks like don't you?” asks Steve.

“And his mate.” agrees Cheesey.

“Just let us know if you see them, he's mine.” warns Curly Pete.

Cheesey looks unsure what to do next as he waits for Steve to give him and Graham some money.

Steve looks at Barney; “You wanna give them a lift down town? And you can take Dippa as well.”

“Yeah sure and I'll come back at two thirty.” agrees Barney.

“You want me to have a look around as well?” asks Dippa.

“If you got nothing better to do.” replies Steve sarcastically.

“No I haven't, trying to help you is what I'm doing.” lies Dippa.

“Sorry mate things are a bit tense round here at the moment.” apologises Steve “You come back with Barney as I guess you want some today?”

“Yeah I do, only one, though but I might need some more tonight.”

“You can talk to Natalie or Sheila about that when you come back, have a walk around the town with Graham and Cheesey see if you can find that geezer, or his mate.”

Barney stands up from the table; “We might as well go now.” he says.

“You got enough money Cheesey?” Steve asks.

Cheesey looks embarrassed and looks to Graham for help, Graham searches through his pockets and pulls out some loose change; “That’s all I got.” he says in a matter of fact way knowing that money was coming soon.

“I’ll go get some, meet you at the van.” says Steve as he walks out of the kitchen.

“Don’t push him.” warns Curly Pete.

“What do you mean?” asks Cheesey nervously.

“Not you, I’m talking to Dippa.”

“Me? I ain’t pushing him it ain’t fair that I gotta deal with Sheila and Nat.”

“That’s the way it’s going to be for a little while until Steve sorts himself out. Anyway they will be different to you as they gotta work with *you* and I know Natalie’s not looking forward to it either.”

“What’s going on then?” asks Dippa.

“Best you ask Steve that one, though I wouldn’t do it today.” smiles Curly Pete.

“See you later then?”

“Maybe, if I’m still here.” answers Curly Pete in a tone of voice that tells Dippa he may not.

Dippa does not push his luck and follows the others out of the door and makes his way to Barney’s van.

Steve comes out of the house and walks quickly to Barney’s van, sliding open the side door he gives Cheesey two twenty pound notes; “That comes out of your wages, I know this is a stupid thing to say but don’t get too drunk I’ll probably need you tomorrow afternoon to do a few things and I want you sober.”

“I will be by tomorrow.” laughs Cheesey as he takes the money from Steve’s hand.

Steve slides the side door shut and orders Dippa to wind the window down; "Make sure you come back with Barney, I ain't too happy about you running away yesterday and I'm not that sure I can rely on you anymore."

"Everyone else ran." Dippa almost shouts in defence.

"There was no sign of you when I came out on the street; you ran first sign of trouble." Steve roars back, his face turning almost purple with rage.

"No I never." whines Dippa his face turning pale with fear.

Steve raises his eyes and looks at Barney; "Get out of here, make sure you bring this one back." he says firmly indicating Dippa.

Barney wastes no time and starts the engine, putting it in gear he drives quickly away from Steve and pulls out onto the road; "What did you do, I thought everyone ran?" he asks Dippa in a friendly voice.

Dippa stares Barney in the eyes, the fear he feels slowly fades from him and he feels a friendship growing between him and Barney; "Yeah everyone ran, it was possible the Old Bill were on their way."

"Dunno what Steve is so upset about then, I'll be with you when we go back so no worries." Barney assures Dippa in that same friendly tone though this is not how he feels. He had heard how Dippa ran away and he felt the same way that Steve now feels about him. He no longer trusted Dippa and had always viewed him as a liability.

Dippa smiles weakly in reply; "Thanks mate."

"I'll drop Cheesey and Graham at the Pub and then we'll go get something to eat." smiles Barney.

"Yeah I missed breakfast." admits Dippa.

"I got us a room" announces Stef as Nicola opens the

door for him.

"I hope it's more than one, I love you Stef but not enough to be cooped up with you in the same room twenty four hours a day."

"It's got a kitchen and a bathroom." smiles Stef.

"What about a bedroom?"

"No, it ain't got one of them." admits Stef.

"You hear that Heather? Stef's got us a room." she shouts to her sister who is sitting in the lounge.

"Only one?" Heather shouts back.

Nicola pulls a face at Stef; "See what I mean."

Stef looks crestfallen and looks down at Nicola's feet, the white trainers she wears look clean and new; "I was only trying to help, it is a big room."

"Won't be big enough, where is it?"

"Well that's the good bit; you know the old tin church round the corner?"

"We're not going to live in a church?" asks Nicola with disapproval.

"Let me finish will you? Next to the church is a lovely bungalow." smiles Stef broadly.

"I've seen that; it looks more like a shed than a *bungalow*." Nicola shouts in horror.

"You don't mean that little place that's all covered in roofing felt do you?" asks Heather as she comes out of the lounge.

"Yeah, that's the place it's really great inside in it Si?" asks Stef as he turns to Simon for support.

Simon gives Stef a strange look; "If you say so Dude." he says smiling evilly.

"You said you liked it!" Stef exclaims indignantly.

"I do, can't resist a wind up when I get the chance."

"You bastard Simon what's it really like?" asks Nicola.

"It's really good inside, nice and clean, really big garden and one really good room."

“You are joking about their only being one room?”

“It's a big room.” laughs Simon.

“I want to see it.” Nicola says firmly.

“And so do I.” says Heather as she joins Nicola in standing in the doorway.

“You'll have to wait until tomorrow, I'm hungry and I want to get back and mend the window when it's still light.”

“Was it expensive?” asks Nicola with a worried expression.

“You are having a laugh aren't you, as if you care?” asks Stef.

“I am worried.” answers Nicola looking at Stef he sees her face change as she remembers the amount of money they had; “I'd forgotten about that.” she laughs looking embarrassed.

“Go make me a nice dinner.” orders Stef.

“Yes Dear.” says Nicola as she obediently walks back into the house and into the kitchen.

“That was Natalie, appears her and Sheila have got their new guns and they are going to bring them here to show them off to us.”

Curly Pete nods his head that he understands unable to speak due to the mouthful of sausage he is eating. He and Steve had had a quiet morning after Dippa and Barney had left, Steve had volunteered to cook them a big fry up for dinner and Curly Pete could not refuse.

“I've been thinking about Dippa, I am not sure about him anymore.” says Steve after he had eaten and sips at his coffee.

“Yeah he ran away first sign of trouble, but it's more than that, you can see by his face that he now resents you telling him what to do.”

“I agree there, I have noticed he is getting the right

hump lately.”

“What you gonna do, put him same place as Barry and his crowd?” asks Curly Pete hopefully. He hadn't liked Dippa from the beginning and over the years the dislike had grown.

“Might be an idea, I'll slap him around a bit when he gets here and see how loyal he really is.” smiles Steve grimly.

“You should rest and let me do it.”

“You will end up killing him, whatever happens.”

“Yeah you are right there.” laughs Curly Pete.

“I don't think that Dippa is the the main problem.” admits Steve.

“Who else then?” asks a mystified Curly Pete.

“Natalie and Sheila, they've been trying hard for years to become major players in our business and now to a certain extent they've succeeded. Only be a matter of time before they decide they don't want us around, they already make the mistake of using it and stuffing it up their nose and as you know then the thinking goes.”

Even though Steve had been the main cocaine dealer in this area for the last ten years he did not use it. When he first started dealing he had, but after a few short months life became complicated and it was Curly Pete who had helped him out of the hole he was digging for himself. Pete was not a user either; Steve had built up a good business over the years with his help when extra muscle was needed, which had been quite often. They had no conscience in the harmful substance they were selling, most of it was mixed with a lot of unknowns and the percentage of cocaine was very low, hence the aggressive behaviour that follows a 'session'. With Natalie and Sheila as partners Curly Pete thought he would have less to do, if they were using it; the aggression and madness is sure to follow and he and

Steve would be some of the first to get involved!

They talk quietly of the cold bloodied way Sheila and Natalie had shot the three in his kitchen, of the money they had offered Steve towards the next shipment and the involvement that would bring. Steve was beginning to regret his decision to accept the money, though he did admit it all sounded like paranoia. He had known Sheila and Natalie for years and had always known they wanted to be a part of it, he couldn't see them doing anything wrong to mess that up.

The sound of a vehicle pulling in the drive about a half hour later stops any more talk between and Steve stands up and looks out the window; "Yeah it's Natalie and Sheila." he says as he answers their waves by waving back.

Their excited chatter as they walk in breaks the silence; "Hiya." they chorus as they enter the kitchen, huge smiles cover their faces and they look very happy.

"Hello there." greets Steve.

"Look what we got." says Natalie as she takes a leather bag from her shoulder. Undoing the bag she reaches in and pulls out a clear plastic bag of cocaine and a small automatic pistol.

"Let's have a look?" asks Curly Pete.

Natalie puts the bag of cocaine on the table and hands him the gun; "Be careful it's loaded but the safety is on."

Curly Pete feels the weight of the gun and guesses it must weigh over a kilogramme. A small round barrel about twenty five millimetres long sticks out of the dark grey square shape of the automatic. Curly Pete pulls down the folding front grip and getting hold of the gun with two hands he points it in the direction of the window and looks along the barrel. The gun about two hundred and fifty millimetres long looks tiny in his giant hands but he looks impressed.

“I got one too.” says Sheila as she puts her gun onto the table.

The gun is exactly the same as Natalie's and Curly Pete asks; “What are these then, you going to war or something?”

“No.” laughs Natalie “But you took our other ones away and we had to get something.”

“You didn't answer my questions.” Curly Pete snaps harshly.

Natalie's face flushes a pale shade of pink; “It's a Beretta 93R automatic pistol that holds twenty rounds and you can shoot them in bursts of three. That's what I set it on with that little lever on the side.” says Natalie as she points at a little lever on the gun; “And no, we are not going to war.”

“What do you want this for?” Curly Pete says angrily, holding the gun out towards her.

“It's all right for you, being big and tough, but we have to protect ourselves and this is the best way.” Natalie tells him her voice tense.

Curly Pete stares her in the eyes his anger rising, the fear that he feels unnerves him, Steve interrupts by leaning on the table and taking the gun from Curly Pete's hand; “Let's have a look.” he says not giving Curly Pete the opportunity to refuse.

“Nice gun I expect that you will need this in the future now you are a big cocaine dealer.” Steve says carefully trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

“We're not going to let anyone take it from us.” says Sheila firmly and Natalie smiles with excitement, anticipating the moment when she can shoot someone.

Steve looks Curly Pete in the eyes, their answer confirming his and Curly Pete's suspicions. Curly Pete seems to understand what Steve is thinking and Steve sees his face change from the angry red to a pale white

that looks very worried.

Natalie watches Curly Pete; “You are not scared of me are you Pete?”

Steve hands the gun back to Natalie as Curly Pete locks eyes with her; “I am when you have that thing in your hand. I don't like guns they tend to make you do more than you really intend.”

“Yeah well, I told you, we need to protect ourselves.” Natalie snaps as she puts the gun on the table.

Curly Pete's face starts to turn red and Natalie breaks the gaze and looks up at Steve; “You understand don't you Steve?”

“In a way, but you leave them at home if you ever come out with me.” Steve replies harshly. The guns frighten him also, especially with a mad lesbian holding the trigger!

“You may need my help on a big deal, that way we won't get ripped off.”

“We don't get ripped off, we only deal with friends and people I've known for years and guns are not part of it. Admittedly I have to call Pete in to get paid sometimes, but if we do it the way you want to do it we won't be able to collect any money because you would have shot them.” Steve explains, his anger rising.

“We won't kill them, just shoot them in the leg or something.” laughs Natalie.

“Gunshot wounds get reported to the police, our way is better as they just have 'accidents' and that way we have no unnecessary involvement with them.” Curly Pete snarls.

Natalie looks at him shocked at his tone of voice and she sniffs hard, swallowing the cocaine that remains in her nose from the line she had snorted before they came out. Her pupils dilate even further and she cannot help a smug smile that forms on her lips as the

sensation of the cocaine courses through her body.

“You stupid bitch.” Curly Pete roars, he looks across the room at Sheila and her staring eyes and inevitable sniff now makes itself obvious to him; “You as well?” he shouts at her.

Sheila stares back for a few seconds until the familiar smug smile forms and she shrugs her shoulders in reply.

Curly Pete feels hurt, admittedly the time he and Natalie spent together has long since passed and she is no longer interested in men, making her appear different to him, but he still feels a love for her. That is no longer deeply buried at the shocking news.

“What’s the matter with you?” Natalie asks indignantly; “You do it.”

“No, I don’t and neither does Steve, you know it changes people who do it regular into cold, nasty bastards. No wonder you enjoyed killing the other day, those are the kind of emotions that take over, especially when the stuff starts to wear off and you get to thinking that is the ‘normal’ way to live, in hating people so much.”

Natalie’s face flushes a little in embarrassment and her eyes flick back and forward between Curly Pete and Sheila appearing unsure of herself.

Curly Pete sees his advantage and asks in a gentle voice; “Are you and Sheila having fights?”

Natalie nods her head as her face changes as a surge of cocaine makes her eyes flicker, buoyed by the confidence the chemical has just given her she stares back; “You can’t blame the cocaine for that, she’s just a right bitch in the morning!”

“That is until you give her a line?” Steve suggests softly.

Natalie smiles, recalling the change that comes over

Sheila in the mornings, from a nasty screaming violent bitch into a smiling funny person; “We’re not as bad as *that!*” she lies.

“Yes you are, let me have a look at your guns.” Curly Pete demands as he picks them up and stands up and puts them on the worktop next to the chromium toaster, the furthest he can get them from Natalie and Sheila. Sitting back down again he stares Natalie in the eyes; “That’s better, you make me nervous when you got them things.”

“We’re hardly gonna shoot you.” Natalie hotly denies.

“Not you babe.” says Sheila with a smile.

“I’m glad to hear it, sit down will you, I think we all need to have a talk before we continue this new business arrangement.” Curly Pete orders.

Sheila walks across the room and pulls out a chair and sits down as Steve sits beside Curly Pete.

“This looks serious,” laughs Natalie; “you are not going to tell us off are you?” she asks sarcastically.

As Curly Pete starts to speak the sound of a vehicle coming into the drive and pulling up outside makes him stop, Steve leaps up and looks out of the kitchen window; “It’s all right it’s only Barney and Dippa.”

Curly Pete visibly relaxes as Natalie smiles; “Bit nervous are you Pete?”

“Don’t take the piss, it’s you two who make me nervous.”

“Makes me nervous too.” agrees Steve; “Dippa has become a bit of an unknown; I’m going to give him a push and see what happens, if you are wondering.”

The sound of the front door and Barney’s voice stops any more talking and they all look towards the kitchen doorway as Dippa, looking scared and pale enters with Barney close behind him; “He didn’t want to come Steve, I had to persuade him a bit.” Barney says angrily

as he pushes Dippa into the kitchen.

“What is this?” Dippa blusters; “I ain't done nothing.” looking Steve in the eyes he tries to pluck up some courage but fails miserably as he has to break the stare and looks down at the floor, his face pale with fear.

“The truth is fella, we ain't sure of you these days.” says Steve harshly.

Dippa continues looking at the floor too scared to look Steve in the eye, Barney raises his hand and slaps Dippa hard around the back of his head; “Look at the man when he's talking to you.” he roars at Dippa.

Dippa is knocked to the floor by the force of the blow, frightened that Barney is going to kick him he scrambles across the room and pulls himself up by holding onto the worktop. As his eyes rise above the worktop he sees the two grey barrelled guns beside the toaster. Coughing, to keep their attention on his face he grabs one of the guns and points it at Barney's approaching form; “Stay back you bastard.” he screams as Barney continues towards him.

Sliding the safety off he pulls the trigger; three bullets smash into Barney's chest knocking him back several feet until he crashes to the floor. Dippa points the gun at the table and squeezes the trigger; Steve's face disappears into a mess of blood and gore as the three bullets smash into him killing him instantly. Dippa in his fear points the gun at Natalie and pulls the trigger quickly; a bullet hits Natalie in the forehead at the hairline snapping her back into her chair. Another bullet hits the table as still firing Dippa points the gun at Sheila hitting her in the stomach making her double over in time to get the next burst into the top of her head. Curly Pete moves quickly for his bulky size and runs out the back door into the garden, he keeps running until he reaches the garage and quickly ducks behind it.

Dippa points the gun back at Steve as he keeps pulling the trigger as he empties the gun into him. He stands there breathing heavily appearing unaware that Curly Pete has escaped. Throwing the empty gun down he reaches for the other one by the toaster and slides off the safety catch. Pointing the gun to his right temple he puts his finger onto the trigger as he looks at the death all around him. Tears start to roll down his cheeks as his face contorts as the crying turns into hysterics, lowering the gun Dippa stares blankly at the open back door. Still not realising that Curly Pete is not amongst the dead Dippa shuts and locks the back door. Taking his lighter from his pocket he approaches the window. Looking out at the drive and Barney's van and Steve's car he can see no sign of life. Lighting the lighter he puts it to one of the curtains catching it alight. As the flame races up the curtain Dippa lights the other one and backs out of the kitchen hurriedly.

Walking quickly, Dippa enters the lounge and sets light to the three sets of curtains before doing the same to the two sets of curtains in the dining room. Satisfied that this will be enough he hurries down the hall, pausing as he reaches the front door, he looks back at the smoke billowing from the kitchen. Smiling he reaches out to open the door, as his fingers touch the door handle the door flies open breaking his finger. Curly Pete rushes at Dippa his face contorted into a fit of rage.

In his pain Dippa manages to point the gun at Curly Pete and pulls the trigger as Curly Pete crashes into him knocking him to the floor, with Pete's now dead form on top of him!

Dippa tries to get out from under the huge weight that is pushing down on him and only manages to free his left arm. The broken finger gushes with blood where bone sticks out of the flesh and Dippa screams in

agony. Desperately he tries to push Curly Pete off of him but each time he pushes, more blood gushes out of his finger followed by an excruciating pain all the way up the arm. His other hand and arm are trapped painfully between himself and Curly Pete and Dippa screams in desperation and fear.

The smell of smoke reaches his nostrils and he starts to panic, wriggling his body he tries to get out from under Curly Pete but does not have the strength. Smoke from the kitchen starts to billow towards him. The fire feeds hungrily on the fresh air coming in through the front door. Dippa starts to cough as the smoke thickens, with Curly Pete on top of him this is a painful thing to do. Struggling to breathe in with the heavy weight on him crushing the breath out of him Dippa puts his damaged hand across his face, blood from the broken finger drips into his eyes making him panic further. Trying to wipe the blood out of his eye with his wrist Dippa does not see the approaching flames as the fire spreads quickly into the hall.

The heat of the flames as they approach Dippa makes him scream in frustration and tears flood into his eyes obscuring his vision totally. Curly Pete's trousers catch fire first and the smell of his burning hair makes Dippa want to throw up. Trying to retch under the heavy weight, forces some of his stomach contents into his mouth. As he tries to breathe he sucks in fragmented meat and acid tasting bile into his lungs.

Curly Pete's shirt catches alight setting Dippa's T-shirt alight, Dippa tries to scream and cough and breathe in all at the same time as his hair catches alight, coughing painfully Dippa starts to scream as the fire engulfs him.

As Stef takes the turning for the seafront he sees a big cloud of smoke hovering over part of the town, blue

flashing lights confirm there is a house on fire in an expensive suburb on the other side of town to where they live. Stef remembered looking at a flat in the area before they got the flat they are living in and he remembers that there wasn't a house under three quarters of a million in the road where the flat was. The flat was expensive and well above their budget but as it was one of only three in the entire town that was on offer they had gone along to have a look.

A policeman steps out onto the road about a hundred metres away and puts his hand up for Stef to stop.

Stef pulls up slowly and winds the window down as he approaches him; "The seafront is blocked further down sir, where is it that you are going?"

Stef's mind races and he smiles up at the young looking policeman; "That's Ok, I'm going to take the next right as I need to get some petrol."

"The town is clear that way sir, have a nice evening." the policeman politely says and waves Stef forwards.

Putting the car in gear Stef drives slowly away and takes the next turning right, once out of sight of the policeman he puts his foot down and hurries across town to his flat. Pulling up in the next street, Stef carefully picks up the pane of glass and little tool bag and walks quietly and quickly along the path and into the back alley. Approaching the back gate he puts his tool bag down and carefully leans the pane of glass against the frame of the gate. Opening the gate wide Stef looks about the garden and up at the windows of the flats above. Only one light shines from the kitchen of the top flat. With the Polish couples fast asleep above him Stef picks up his tool bag and walks along the path to the back door. Unlocking it he opens it wide and puts his tool bag onto the worktop, walking softly he retrieves the pane of glass and returning to the flat he wastes no time

in replacing the glass.

A half hour later Stef washes his hands in the sink using the washing up liquid as the soap as his fingers have become covered in silicone. Stef had never mastered the silicone gun tending to squeeze the silicone into lumps rather than an even line, hence the mess! Stef had put the silicone onto the window frame in his usual style and when he pushed the glass in silicone oozed out covering the glass. Stef had tried to wipe it clean but all he achieved was spreading it further and inevitably some got onto his hands. Wiping his nose resulted in silicone on his nose which seems to soak into the skin and stay there as a slimy covering. Stef washes and scrubs his hands several times and the silicone still remains. Picking up the towel he rubs his hands hard into the material hoping the absorbent towel will soak up the silicone. Furiously he rubs his nose with the towel and succeeds in only removing a small amount as his nose and hands still remain slimy.

Putting his tools back into the tool bag he puts the bag outside and washes his hands again rubbing them dry on the towel; and the sticky substance still remains! Going outside he approaches the flowerbed and pushes his hands into the moist soil. Rubbing the soil into his hands he searches around for some dry soil, finding some under a small bush he rubs it into his hands and also his nose. Going back into the kitchen he washes his hands and nose several times before drying himself on the towel. Throwing the towel into a corner of the kitchen Stef, after a quick look around to make sure he has left nothing behind and walks out of the kitchen. Shutting the back door quietly he locks it and picking up his tool bag he makes his way back to his car and drives slowly away.

The town has quietened, blue flashing lights and a

small cloud of smoke show that the house fire is getting under control, Stef takes a left turn to avoid the town and reaches the main highway and heads for home.

“What are we going to do now?” asks Carol.

They are sitting at home and several days have passed since the fire and deaths of their friends. Eric had tried to go and see Steve this morning and was dismayed to see Steve's house half burnt down. Police guarded the entrance and forensics still searched through the burnt remains. Eric had been aware that there had been a fire in this area but didn't suspect that it was Steve's house. The house fire and six deaths had been on the local news but Eric and Carol had not paid much attention thinking it was no concern of theirs.

“What can we do? I think that we have enough money to go and stay in the mountains for a few months until things quieten down.”

“Can we stay in the Elan Valley like we did last time?”

“That sounds a good idea.” smiles Eric as he looks at his watch; “If we pack now we can leave this evening and be there in the morning.”

Carol stands up from where she had been sitting on the couch; “I'll be ready in an hour.” she says laughing with relief and excitement at the thought of escaping to the mountains.

Bang, bang, bang. Stef lifts his head from the pillow and looks at the clock; the time is six-thirty in the morning! Who could that be pounding on the door?

Bang, bang, bang.

“What's going on?” shouts a frightened Nicola.

“Dunno, stay there I'll go and have a look” Stef tells her as he jumps out of bed, hurrying to the window he pulls back the curtain and looks out, it is Simon about to

pound on the door again. Stef hurriedly opens the window; "Leave it out will yer? It's six-thirty in the morning, what's the matter with you?" he shouts.

Simon laughs; "Open the door Dude and let me in am I gonna make you smile." he says waving a newspaper in Stef's direction.

Stef shuts the window as Nicola gets out of bed; "I'll let him in, make yourself decent will you?" he says as he hurries out the room avoiding the angry retort from Nicola.

Stef opens the door; "What on earth are you doing up this time of day?" he asks.

"I run out of cigarettes last night, been awake for hours waiting for the paper shop to open and look what I've got." he laughs pushing the newspaper at Stef.

Stef takes the newspaper from Simon's outstretched hand and opens it to the front page as the headlines seem to shout at him; 'Drug gang burnt in mystery fire' say the headlines, photos of the gang below the headlines with their names beneath cover the front page.

"We're free Dude; that's the people who we took the money from." Simon laughs, a broad smile covers his face as he stops laughing and Stef feels his spirit soar.

"Is that all of them?" Stef asks trying not to get too excited.

Simon points at the picture of Curly Pete; "That's the one I knocked out." pointing to the picture of Steve he says; "That one is the leader and all those others were outside my flat; we're free Dude."

Stef looks Simon in the eyes; "But there was about ten of them, where are the rest?"

"Don't think it matters Dude, with the leader gone and the police sniffing around they will keep their heads down."

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” laughs Stef the relief flooding through his body; “Come on, let’s go make Nic smile.” he says happily as he hurries into the kitchen.

Nicola is making the coffee when he enters and she looks around at him as he enters; “What’s going on?”

Stef lays the paper on the kitchen table; “Come and look at this.” he laughs.

Nicola walks across the kitchen and picks the newspaper up, reading the headlines and some of the story she looks up at Stef; “I assume by your face that these are the people who the money really belongs to?”

“Yes dear, as Simon would say ‘we’re free’.”

“There are only six here, what about the others?”

“With their leader dead and the police involved I think they’ll try and forget about it.” Simon says in a positive voice from the doorway.

“You sure Simon?” asks Nicola a little nervously.

“No, I’m not sure, but I think we can relax, well I am it’s up to you what you do; is that my coffee?” he asks with a big beaming smile as he walks over to the mugs on the worktop.

“That’s your one; the one with the car, all you need do is pour the water in.” Nicola tells him as she goes back to reading the newspaper.

“This looks like being a good day,” enthuses Stef; “I go to change the money into Australian dollars today, you want to come with me Simon? Change some of yours.”

“Yeah I’ll come Dude but I want mine changed into American dollars.”

“Aren’t you coming with us to Australia?” Nicola asks indignantly.

“After I’ve toured the States for about a year or until I get fed up, but I will join you next year.” Simon finishes with a broad smile and a laugh.

“You mean when all the work has been done on our

new house?" asks Nicola with equally large smile.

"Something like that," agrees Simon; "Please do not decorate my room with pink paint."

"As if we would." laughs Nicola.

The End