

# SKIN

PART ONE OF THE TATOO SERIES



**A. J. MALONE**

# SKIN

*PART ONE OF THE TATTOO SERIES*  
*An Urban Fantasy Crime Novel*

By A. J. Malone

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published in the United States of America.

Copyright © 2014 by A.J. Malone  
First Printing, 2014

## **Contents**

[About SKIN](#)

[Start Reading SKIN](#)

[BODIES, Part Two of the Tattoo Series: Sample Chapter](#)

[GUN LAWS, Part One of the Murder Watch Series: Sample Chapter](#)

[Ebooks by A.J. Malone](#)

[About A.J. Malone](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

## ABOUT SKIN

The relationship of tattoos to antisocial personality disorder would seem obvious. However, as we live in politically correct times, nothing can be taken for granted any more. Knee-jerk responses like this one need to be hypothesized and then studied under conditions of clinical accuracy.

Preliminary results seem to confirm what we all thought anyway; forensic psychiatric inpatients are more likely to have tattoos.

No kidding.

They are likely to have a higher percentage of overall body area tattooed. They are also more likely to have histories of sexual and substance abuse and suicide attempts than non-tattooed offenders.

So why do they get more tattoos? What are they trying to do? Externalize? Internalize? Keep themselves safe from demons the rest of us can't see?

Are they just crazy or do they know something the rest of us don't?

The oldest known tattoos date back 5000 years to a male found frozen in the Alps in 1991.

He was very, very dead.

The latest tattoo in human history is the one that is about to be drilled into the stretched out skin on my back.

And me? I'm as good as dead anyway...

The needle pierces my skin at 3000 jabs a minute. What's that per second? 50 times?

My math's not bad.

How likely am I now to take drugs, sexually abuse and engage in suicidal anti-social behavior?

Answer; very, very much indeed.'

What would you do to save your family?

You probably don't even want to know.

Neither did Dennis Small, but he sure as hell was going to find out.

## CHAPTER ONE

Rocco stared at the moon and couldn't quite believe his luck. It was a warm night and the last thing he thought he would be doing was lying on his back in the open air at midnight with a hot girl writhing on top of him. He wasn't a virgin, not by any means. Although shy with girls by nature, and still in his teens, he was not inexperienced. He was quite successful even, especially with his growing reputation as a rising star in European MMA cage fighting. But he had never encountered a girl like this one.

He had just finished training in the boutique and exclusive Contender Club; Ireland's number one fight club located in the hard inner city of Northside Dublin. The club was exclusive but the neighborhood was not. Step outside the doors and you were in gangster land where guns and knives were weapons of choice, not fists and feet. A fighter became just another ordinary Joe out on these mean streets of crime bosses, heroin dealers and street gangs.

Rocco didn't mind. Since he had taken some of the ranking titles in European MMA often when he stepped outside the club there were girls waiting for autographs with happy endings. The first time it had happened he was more frightened than he had been on any fight night. By now he was only too ready and willing to oblige, provided of course, he wasn't in training for a bout. His new found fame saved him having to chat girls up; a skill which still eluded him despite his confidence in the ring.

On this particular night he had trained until late and found no-one waiting for him in the shadows of the club door. As he walked to his bus stop he saw something he didn't want to see. The girl was trying to scream but her voice was stifled by the hand across her mouth.

He quickly gauged the man's height and weight; 6 foot 5 easily and at least 250lbs. Heavyweight for sure, maybe even a super heavyweight. Rocco had been gaining weight to go up in the classifications but he was still only at light heavyweight. There would be 60 to 70 pounds in the difference and reach would also be a problem. Rocco stood just 5 foot 11 tall.

In the micro second it took him to evaluate the odds, the girl had been dragged around the corner into an alley. He dropped his training bag and launched into a sprint.

Strike first, ask questions later.

Training was already kicking in.

Unless the guy was a heavyweight MMA champion, he could take him.

He rounded the corner and skidded to a halt.

Five, no six pairs of eyes met his.

*What the hell is going on here?*

His heart went into overdrive, beyond adrenaline and into evasive fear. He saw the flash of blades reflected in a street lamp. The girl was trembling, in shock, too terrified even to scream, the stain between her legs evidence that she had already wet herself with fear. Her eyes cried out desperately to Rocco

for help. He was good, but six against one? That was something he'd never done before, never even thought about doing.

*Too late to back out now.*

"Let her go!" He shouted.

Without turning his head he could feel another body circling behind him. Was that 5 or 6 now? Or 7? Before he went into cage fighting Rocco had been a reasonably good street fighter. On a Friday or Saturday night at the main crossroads in the centre of Darklow Town you could always find a sparring partner with a good mix of styles; local boys, travelers and foreigners. His interest in MMA started there. But like every trained fighter, he knew that one against 6 or 7 was a fantasy for computer games and graphic novel movies. If this wasn't a test for his new tattoos, nothing was.

The big man took out a knife from nowhere, a Gerber Mark II, easily recognizable with its distinctive shape and length.

"What's the plan hero?"

Rocco hated knives but he knew all about them from his Dad who liked to collect vintage weapons and the Gerber II was a well-known piece; popular in Vietnam before being retired from use for being 'too brutal'.

The savage looking blade waved in front of his face.

"I said what's the plan, hero?"

There was no plan.

In seconds Rocco had kicked the knife from the big man's hand with a blow that left him doubled in pain, probably with a broken wrist.

The second went down with an Inner City Uppercut, as Rocco's Dad called it; a straight and ruthless kick in the balls. He wasn't going to take chances with anything too fancy.

Already the remaining four in front were hesitating. Rocco's instincts kicked in and with a swinging roundhouse kick to the rear he went for the lone figure behind him, but they were already gone or he had misjudged where they had been. His foot sailed through empty air.

The four in front began to advance but they were slow now, cautious and fearful.

"What about it lads? Come on then. Rapists." He spat the last word. "What's the fuckin' plan?"

He stamped on the big man's knee, the abductor who had held the Gerber II, and a howl tore through the night.

The bodies began to melt away.

"That's right, fuck off the lot of you," he shrieked in rage, indignation, ready for blood if they fancied themselves able, "fuck right off, right now!"

He considered chasing them but then remembered the girl who still sat in shock on the ground.

"Are you OK love?"

*Stupid question.*

She couldn't answer. Rocco went to help her up and she backed away from him. The two injured would-be rapists were still on the ground next to her.

"Don't worry about them." He took her hand and helped her up, scooped up the Gerber Mark II as well with a scowl to its owner. It would be a good present for his Dad.

"Did they hurt you?"

She was still shaking with shock, Rocco still rippled with adrenaline. He gave her a quick scan.

"I think you're OK. Let's get to the police, we need to report this."

"No, no, no please no. Just help me get home, please."

He would have protested but the girl was too frightened, he didn't want to make it worse.

She didn't live far away so he escorted her home although she seemed nearly as frightened of him as she had been of her attackers. As she closed the door to her apartment she gave him one scared look, hesitated as though she had something to say, then closed the door in a choked silence.

*Not even thanks.*

He blew some air, ground his teeth and frowned.

*Oh well. Poor girl is in shock. No need to get pissy Rocco.*

He turned to go back to his bus stop, still alert. After all, there had been a lot of guys and they were armed. They might decide to come back for him once they had gotten their balls together again. He would need to be ready just in case.

As he walked he could feel eyes on him already. He stopped to look around but saw no-one.

*Stay ready.*

But then, with his new tattoos he was always ready. His friends and the other guys at the Contender Club hadn't believed him, but since he had gotten the bizarre new tattoos on his upper back, occupying the entire diamond shaped area of his bulging, rock hard trapezius muscle, he hadn't put a foot wrong. He had begun to feel and act as if he were bullet proof and with his success rate since then, he was beginning to believe he was.

Suddenly all the fighters wanted to know where his crazy tat had come from, but that was a secret. What would be the point if they all had one? That would just set things back to zero again, his fighting advantage diluted to nothing.

Those damn eyes were still on him but when he looked around again there was still no-one there. Must be the adrenaline and shadows making him paranoid.

When he got to the bus stop he sat down and tried to calm himself. He wasn't afraid to get into the ring with any human being, had mastered hundreds of obscure martial arts skills but still he hadn't taken out his bloody driver's license. With the way the buses operated in Dublin this was a serious inconvenience. Next year. Once he had the European title in hand, then he could focus on taking the test.

He was checking text messages when a pair of legs to his left made him jump on the cold metal of the bus shelter seat. Alert as he was he hadn't seen them come near him.

They were female. 100% girl. Long. Slender. Pale and provocative. With his head still down he couldn't see where they ended.

*Not a junkie prostitute, please. Not after the night I've just had.*

Although he still didn't lift his head, his eyes couldn't help but follow the tapering lines of her legs upwards. She wore new and expensive ankle high leather boots. Not typical prostitute attire. The ankles were thin. He followed the lines of her shin bones to the knees. Steel-studded roller-girl, roller derby knee pads?

*You're joking me.*

His eyes went higher. It wasn't like he could really stop them anyway. Somewhere near the top of her upper thighs he found the line of a tiny black mini-skirt.

She looked clean, and the clothes were new, but she could still have been just a non-junkie prostitute. Better than a whacked out smack or meth head anyway. At least she might be reasoned with to go away and leave him alone.

He permitted his eyes to go further, past the curve of her hip bone to the tight leather belt, slim waist, short black leather jacket.

In gentlemanly fashion he skipped her perfect round breasts and raised his eyes to her face. He let out a gasp and his eyes dropped for a second before he could force them up again.

She was jaw-dropping. Sensational. Like nothing he had ever seen before. Not in real life anyway. Maybe in some hip-hop music video or a virtual girl in a video game, but not in the scandalously beautiful, fully accentuated, statuesque and angelic reality of the here and now.

"What's your name?" She asked. Her accent was foreign, east European.

"My... my name?"

"Yes. Name. Your name." She repeated. Her features were long, sharp, exotic. Her long blonde hair was tied back into a tight pony-tail, her eyes were large, oval, and glistened in the street light.

"Uh...," he almost struggled to remember, "Rocco. Rocco's my name."

"Are you sure?" She smiled, teasing him.

He flustered silently.

The bus stop was empty but she sat down close enough to press her thigh against his.

"You are hero, yes?"

"Excuse me?"

"You save girl. Fight bad guys. You are hero, yes?"

Rocco was always shy with girls but this was no girl. This was a beautiful woman. She must have been in her twenties at least. Old by his standards.

He could face down seven guys with knives in a dark alleyway but one beautiful woman, like this and his words began to stick in his throat like chunks of raw meat.

"I was just, you know, trying to help."

"Yes. You are hero. I like heroes."

He gave a nervous laugh as his eyes involuntarily looked her over, scanning face, breasts, arms and legs all in one obvious and blatant instant. He was only 19 after all.

"You like what you see hero?"

"No. God no. I mean yes."

She sniggered mischievously.

"Don't you know little boy? Or can't you make up your mind?"

Rocco didn't know what to make of her, but he was beginning not to care.

"Ah Jesus," he smiled, forcing himself to relax, "of course I do. Sure wouldn't there be something wrong me with if I didn't?"

"This is better. Now you begin to speak like man, not frightened little boy."

He smiled again, the half shy, half cocky smile that made young Irish girls weak at the knees.

"Are you Russian?" He asked her.

"You are smart, hero. I like that. You are like Irish Sherlock Holmes, yes?"



"I may have some sleuthing powers alright."

"Sleuthing. I don't know this word. Maybe we go back to your place and you 'sleuth' me, OK?" Her emphasis of the word sleuth made it sound lewd, wet, irresistible. Rocco's eyes bulged, his tongue tied itself into a knot.

"You live near here Irish hero?"

"Uh, yes, kind of."

Rocco was still afraid, but the fear was making him more excited. It wouldn't be the first wild thing that had happened to him since he started to look like a full-grown man. With his new tattoo and the series of ring victories that followed, his sexual conquests had become easier, more frequent and at times, definitely more wild. The memory of his confidence with lesser females than this gave him his voice back.

"Do you feel like coming back to my place for, um... coffee?"

"Only coffee?" She pouted with little girl disappointment, but then quickly smiled and stood up, the curves of her breasts about level with Rocco's bulging eyeballs.

She was tall, maybe even a little taller than him. Or was it her boots? What difference did it make anyway; this was going to be a night to remember.

"Let's go this way, hero, my house closer. Very nearby." She pulled him roughly from the bus stop and led him towards a nearby city park.

Within minutes they were inside and on the ground. It was an unusually warm night and Rocco couldn't remember ever having been so excited about anything in his life, not even fight nights. The girl, or woman rather, had pushed him firmly, but not unwillingly to the ground and was then instantly on top of him.

He didn't want that though. He wanted her alright, just not on top of him. That was against the rules.

"Wait."

Her lips began to cover his face and neck.

"Stop, please."

It was weird for him, like some kind of perverse role reversal, but exciting at the same time.

Her sure fingers unzipped his training clothes and explored his chest and abdomen.

"No really stop." He said more insistently, but she wouldn't take no for an answer and in seconds he was naked to the waist. He didn't want her to stop really, but he knew he didn't want her on top of him. He never allowed any female to get on top, it was a rule he had to keep, ever since he got the tattoo.

But it had been a long time since then, nearly a year and as his sexual conquests had multiplied the rule which had been easy to keep in the beginning, had become an increasingly hard one.

Now that his shirt was off she lifted herself from him and moved down to his hips. He was relieved; he wouldn't have to use force to get her off him. Her long fingers reached inside the top of his training pants and jerked them to the ankles. He felt the Gerber knife in his long side pocket bump down the side of his leg. She gave a lascivious guffaw as his erection sprang up and bobbed nervously in the shadows.

She felt through the rumpled fabric in his trousers, then pulled out the knife and held it awkwardly above him.

"What is this?" she said.

"Huh?" Rocco lay exposed, dazed, gazing up at the blade.

In a second she spun it in her hand and stabbed it expertly into the ground between his ankles. He flinched as it thudded into the leaves and dirt.

Next he watched, transfixed as she removed her underwear, advanced over him and then dropped herself down onto his stomach, pinning his erection between her vulva and his abdomen.

He was definitely under her now.

"Please. Don't."

But it felt so good. Maybe he could break his rule just this one time?

"I hope you know how to slow it down little boy." She said this, but the look on her face indicated that she didn't really care. A couple of soft pelvic thrusts and he felt himself disappear inside her. It was too late now, the rule was broken, for better or worse.

*Hold on. Jesus Christ. Hold on Rocco. Fuck's sake.*

He struggled. After all, he didn't want the most thrilling experience of his life to end in one short, ugly grunt.

"You look like scared rabbit in headlights again little boy."

She was moving on top of him now, holding him inside of her.

"Aren't you... agh... uhh... going to take off the rest of your...uhh... clothes?"

"Of course not. Why would I? Then I would only have to put back on."

He wished she would though, because keeping her clothes on was making it even harder for him to contain himself.

"What about me though I'm... agghh... pretty... ahhh... naked."

"Yes, but you don't need to put clothes again."

Whatever the hell that meant, it didn't matter anymore as he felt her clamp down onto him, and then lean her hands heavily against his shoulders, pushing him into the dirt and leaves below.

It was like nothing he had ever felt before and after religiously avoiding any girl sitting astride him for so long, it felt good like nothing on earth could have even come close to feeling at that particular moment.

He had to say something to slow things down or this would not only be the most exciting moment of his life but also the shortest.

"Do you... aaghh... like my... my... uhh... tattoos?" He finally managed.

She leaned in close to him, looked intensely into his eyes, stroked her long fingers over the tattoos on his chest, abdomen and then most greedily of all, on his shoulders and down his upper back.

"I... fucking... love them." She hissed into his ear and then clamped down even harder, causing him to wince in pain this time.

She opened her jacket a little and Rocco saw an electronic glow coming from underneath her blouse.

"Do you like mine?" She purred.

The design was beautiful, intricate, like living circuitry on her skin. Rocco knew a lot about tattoos for a guy his age but he had never seen tats like these before, never in all the years hanging around in his dad's tattoo parlor.

The lights glowed around her rib-cage and then tapered down to her groin, disappearing into a glow between her legs, pressing to his pubic bone.

"Wow, that's... aggh... beautiful. Aaaagghhh!"

He couldn't hold the painful cry in. He didn't want to admit that she was hurting him but it was getting kind of uncomfortable. If it got any worse he might actually have to ask her to go easy. For a moment he had been just at the point of

finishing off but the pain had drawn him back again. Maybe all that pain wasn't such a bad thing after all.

He shut his mouth and decided to hang on.

But she kept on moving, kept squeezing, clamping herself around him.

"Aaaaagghh!" His mouth was shut but he still couldn't hold it in. The mix of pain and pleasure was too new and too much.

And he was breaking his rule.

"Eh..." he tried to think of her name but realized that he hadn't had time for that before she had dragged him into the bushes.

Her grip on him was getting really painful now. He was still excited but the balance of pain and pleasure was beginning to shift towards the unpleasant side.

"Stop." He managed to gasp.

The woman continued to move, slow, rhythmic, powerful, tight.

"Please, you're... aggh... really hurting me."

He still didn't want to manhandle her off him. He was a gentleman at heart. A shy guy.

He tried to put his hands to her hips to control her movements, reduce them, but she pushed her hands down onto his. He tried to slide them under her buttocks, lift her a little away from him, but she was much stronger than she looked. He was just going to have to flip her, no other option.

Then suddenly, before he began to put his full resistance to the task she eased the pressure, released him a little so that he relaxed.

"Whew, thank God for that. You were really beginning to hurt me there.... uh... what is your name again?"

She gave him a disobedient smile and then began playing with his hands, loosening and relaxing his arms before snapping them into a pronating wrist lock on both sides. He instantly recognized the hold and the surprise showed on his face.

"What the...? Are you a fighter or something?"

From any other angle he might have easily escaped, after all, it's not like wrist-locks weren't standard fare in martial arts, but as she tightened the lock she squeezed hard down on him again and the searing pain in his loins combined with the bone breaking lock on his wrists served to weaken him into submission.

"Aaaaagghh."

His disbelief at the situation wasn't helping him either. He couldn't seem to get his hands free and with a growing sense of alarm he realized that there was no easy way out of this lock short of kicking her in the head, which he still didn't want to do. It was wrestling alright, but not as he knew it.

She eased up on the pressure again, allowing him to take a breath and he got some words out.

"Don't make me hurt you baby."

She gave a loud laugh. "What's wrong little boy, aren't you having fun? Is too wild for you hero?"

"Too wild?" He snorted. "No way, not at all. You don't know me babe."

"Very good, because we are not near to finish yet."

She clamped him again and put another turn onto his wrists. The pain was excruciating.

"Aaahhh, no, come on...."

That's it, he would have to kick her in the back of the head or get her in a neck lock with his ankles. He had both the strength and flexibility to reach her neck

with his ankles, even if she was leaning low down on top of him. He flicked his right leg but nothing happened except a little jerk that lifted her a fraction and seared his groin.

She grinned.

"Is that all?" She asked.

Oh yeah, he remembered that his trousers and underpants were around his ankles so he would have to kick her with both feet at the same time.

He gave another powerful jerk, hurting himself and lifting her a little more. Something was pinning his feet to the ground, he couldn't lift them more than an inch from the dirt.

"That's right hero, I have you right where I want you." She grinned into his face.

It was the Gerber. She had staked his trousers to the ground between his ankles using the army knife he had taken as a gift for his Dad.

*Fuck me. How my goin' to get out of this one?*

He thrust his groin up again, like a helpless amateur, and the pain was awful. He watched her throw her head back in pleasure at the move.

Now he tried to head-butt her, it was the only option left, but she kept her head just out of his reach and laughed wildly as he struggled and floundered, causing himself more pain each time.

"Ready to give up little boy?"

She squeezed hard again.

"Aaaaggggh! Please.... no... OK. Tap out for fuck's sake, tap out. You win."

"That's better baby, a little politeness not going to hurt, eh?"

But she still didn't let him go.

He wondered if he was actually going to have to cry out for help. 'Please help me, this woman is having sex with me and I want her to stop.'

*For fuck's sake, don't be ridiculous, Rocco, this is a fuckin' fantasy come true! Just relax and go with the flow.*

He fully relaxed now. Or as much as he could with the constant contraction on his groin.

She sensed it immediately and used his relaxation to push his wrists in under her knees. The studded knee pads pressed into his soft wrists, pinning his arms to the ground and causing more sharp, debilitating pain to shoot up into his forearms.

Suddenly the roller-girl look didn't seem so cute any more

She clamped down harder than ever now and he shrieked out in pain. He could feel a warm liquid running down onto his testicles and inner thighs. Was it her? Was she that wet? Maybe he had already come? He wasn't even sure any more. Was it blood?

*Oh Christ, no fucking rubbers, Rocco you fucking idiot...*

Then he realized that although he was shrieking, everything was still silent in the woods. All he could hear was the rustling in the leaves and the dirt as the woman on top of him moved, relentlessly, riding up and down on his shaft. He was shrieking and choking at the same time.

That's right, her hands were free now that her knees were pinning his aching weakened arms to the ground.

He tried to lift his head but she slammed it back down into the dirt with her right hand. He felt her left hand on his Adam's apple, squeezing.

His head was spinning from the blow against the ground and the panic set in for real now. The woman's fingers searched his throat for the carotid arteries. The knee pads seemed to almost break his wrists. Was the bitch really trying to kill him? As a trained fighter he was well aware that 7 to 14 seconds was all it would take for him to lose consciousness once the throttle hold was fastened on his throat. He tried to scream but her right elbow pushed up against his chin forcing his mouth closed. He could only grunt and snort through his nose.

His young, healthy, super-fit heart and struggling body sent a powerful pulse through his neck. She easily found her goal and then expertly pinched the blood vessels to a halt. He could feel himself begin to black out. Only seconds to go.

His body thrashed, involuntarily now, and he could feel himself, still so annoyingly fucking excited finally release himself inside her and then he relaxed, looked up to see her huge, soft, oval eyes watch him go into unconsciousness.

The Gerber Mark II was in her right hand, poised over his throat.

## CHAPTER TWO

The relationship of tattoos to antisocial personality disorder would seem obvious. However, as we live in politically correct times, nothing can be taken for granted any more. Knee-jerk responses like this one need to be hypothesized and then studied under conditions of clinical accuracy.

Preliminary results seem to confirm what we all thought anyway; forensic psychiatric inpatients are more likely to have tattoos.

No kidding.

They are likely to have a higher percentage of overall body area tattooed. They are also more likely to have histories of sexual and substance abuse and suicide attempts than non-tattooed offenders.

So why do they get more tattoos? What are they trying to do? Externalize? Internalize? Keep themselves safe from demons the rest of us can't see?

Are they just crazy or do they know something the rest of us don't?

The oldest known tattoos date back 5000 years to a male found frozen in the Alps in 1991.

He was very, very dead.

The latest tattoo in human history is the one that is about to be drilled into the stretched out skin on my back.

And me? I'm as good as dead anyway...

The needle pierces my skin at 3000 jabs a minute. What's that per second? 50 times?

My math's not bad.

How likely am I now to take drugs, sexually abuse and engage in suicidal anti-social behavior?

Answer; very, very much indeed.

So why is a 'normal' guy like me getting a tattoo etched onto his back? Well, although I'd rather not talk about it, you're in my head already, so you might as well hear it.

It all started with a murder, like a lot of dumb, sordid human stories do. Some time ago a body was found in the woods to the rear of the quiet Sunnyvale estate in Darklow, Co. Wickford. Known for its taciturn people and industrial history, Darklow is a small, beautiful town, with a population of approximately 12703 at the last census. Sleepy, lost, depressed, and of course, like everywhere else in Ireland these days, increasingly poor and violent.

I live there. Or at least I did until quite recently. The Sunnyvale estate is a gated community in a lush rural setting, just outside Darklow centre and with a beautiful view of the Wickford Mountains.

The body was inside the perimeter of the 'compound', as some residents like to call the estate. Had it been outside, no big deal. But it wasn't. It was inside, in a wooded area just opposite a row of houses. Directly opposite number 17 Sunnyvale Avenue.

An 8 year old boy found the body.

The deceased was naked and covered in tattoos except, it was rumored, for one large section missing from the middle of his upper back and across the shoulder blades. To the relief of everyone, he wasn't a local resident, not one that we could think of anyway. Those kinds of tattoos would have stood out on our little estate even today when so many ordinary Joes feel compelled to decorate themselves like prison inmates.

A meeting of the residents association was convened by founder member Dennis Small. That's me. I invited the local police to attend. Fortunately, our local police sergeant is also a resident of the estate so the meeting was well attended by the Gardai. My fellow citizens were angry and afraid. I was angry too. It was Thursday and normally at this time I would be in my basement restoring antiques.

I was not happy.

"Who was this young man?" Mrs. O'Grady asked.

"We haven't identified him yet." Sergeant Mike Biggs replied.

Mike Biggs had been with the Darklow police station since as long as I could remember and that was a good ten years. I'd never seen him look so nervous. Small town cop with a big crime on his hands. I didn't blame him. I was unsettled too. He lived in Sunnyvale, number 17 Sunnyvale Avenue. The body had been found directly opposite his house. It was his son who had found the body. I felt for him and for his family. Policeman or not he was also a human being and no child should have to ever see something as gruesome as that. He was here in uniform tonight.

"Is it true he was missing a piece of skin?" asked a traumatized Mrs. Dunne.

"I can't confirm or deny that Mrs. Dunne, not until the autopsy report has come in."

"So there was no tattoo missing?" Derek Reilly, hard local resident asked. Mrs. Dunne gasped. "A tattoo? There was a man with tattoos on our estate?" She looked terrified, horrified. I knew how she felt, but of course. If she hadn't been so short-sighted and befuddled she would have observed that half the people in the room around her sported skin art and she would have passed out on the spot. It can't be easy for more traditional older people like Mrs. Dunne to watch this continual decline in taste and values that goes on year after year.

"As I said Mr. Reilly, I can't confirm or deny. All I can say at this point is that all avenues of investigation are open including that of foul play."

"Including foul play? Did he cut off his own head?" Derek said, he seemed to be more incensed than anyone else in the room and not prepared to let Sgt. Biggs off the hook. If anyone could put Mike under pressure it would be him. There were gasps at this suggestion. Not everyone had heard the rumor. Mrs. Dunne looked very shaky on her feet so I helped her to find a seat and sit down. She was a widow, living alone on the estate. Of course she would be terrified.

"Who told you that? Nothing has been established." Mike Biggs said. "It is by no means confirmed that foul play was involved. I would urge you to keep unsubstantiated rumors like this to yourself."

"I heard about the head too." Peadar Croney said. "And if you want to know where I heard it then just ask me." He had heard it from his own son, a school friend of Mike Biggs shortly before the Sergeant had clamped down on his son's communications. Maybe it was just children exaggerating or maybe not. There were a lot of resources here; the whole of Darklow Garda station, both of the town ambulances and the forensics team from Dublin hadn't even arrived yet. I sat next to Mrs. Dunne with my arm around her.

Sgt. Biggs didn't ask Peadar the question.

"Why would anyone do such a thing?" Mrs. Dunne said in a frail voice.

"Now look what you've done Peadar." Sgt. Biggs hissed. "That has not been confirmed Mrs. Dunne. There is no need to concern yourself for the moment. Just take your usual security precautions, nothing more and stay away from this area. It's a crime scene. Any contamination of evidence and you may be subject to prosecution yourself."

Mike Biggs was a good man. Only in his late 30s but with all the rectitude of a senior pillar of the local community. Today he was being unusually strict and formal, no doubt in view of the serious nature of the event.

"Has there been any unusual criminal activity in the area of late?" I asked.

He gave me an angry look.

"I assure you Dennis, the Gardai know how to do their job. We don't require suggestions from amateur detectives."

It was a bit sharp. I was only trying to stay informed and offer any help if I could. Obviously Mike was under a lot of stress so I decided to leave him alone. After all, he was on our side, a resident of the estate and just as concerned as us. For God's sake, the poor guy would see the crime scene sitting down to eat his breakfast tomorrow morning.

On the other hand, if he wasn't doing his job properly as a result of stress, the Mike Biggs I knew would be happy to be called out on it. I decided the estate as a whole was more important than keeping Mike happy.

"I propose we set up a neighborhood watch patrol immediately." I said.

"Hear, hear." There was a lot of support, particularly from Derek Reilly, Peadar Crony and another tough looking local Dad by the name of Michael Nulty.

Mike Biggs didn't look happy at all.

"Now come here to me Dennis, we already have a residents' association," he was a member himself, "and the squad car comes through here all the time. Sure what else would a neighborhood patrol do? This poor fella probably wasn't even killed here."

"So he was killed then." Derek said.

"I didn't say killed."

"Yes you did."

"I did not. Not officially."

"Come off it Mike, this isn't the evening news or your boss in Dublin you're talking too. I'm your neighbor and I live in this estate. Tell us what's going on."

Mike paused and took a deep breath.

"OK. I'm still not saying there was foul play here, but in the case that there was, it would still not indicate that there would be a repeat of the crime or that it represented the beginning of a trend. This would just be a convenient spot for a gang to drop off someone they've hit. Now in this case a neighborhood patrol isn't going to make any difference, is it? The horse is already out of the field, what's the use in closing the gate now?"

So, already we could assume that it was, in fact, a crime. A murder, probably gangland, right here in our safe little estate in the countryside. A patrol, I thought, would at least make everyone feel more secure. Particularly people like Mrs. Dunne.

"Well what harm can a patrol do Mike? Is there a law against it?" I said.



"There is no law against it and you know that, so we can do whatever we want." Derek Reilly said. His attitude wasn't helping. I was glad I had someone fired up, but I wanted Mike on my side as well.

"Obviously we would prefer the Gardai to be involved Mike, but this is short notice. I think we would all like to have something done tonight so we may have to involve you later and just keep you posted for now."

"OK Dennis, you can do what you want, all I'm saying is that this is still a safe neighborhood and you don't want to overreact to an event like this. Even if this was a gang related crime, and I'm not saying it is, there would be no direct threat to the estate itself. It is just unfortunate that this man's body landed here on our doorstep."

"Mike, all I want to do is help out the Gardai. We'll just do a patrol to keep an eye on things and be sure to call you if anything is out of order. There's no question of us trying to intervene or take things into their own hands."

He didn't say anything.

"Show of hands. Everyone in favor of a neighborhood patrol?"

Derek Reilly was first up and gave a menacing stare around the meeting hall, daring any man to keep his hand down.

Nearly all hands went up.

Mike looked even less happy.

I did feel for him, but I also believed that we could be of assistance to him. For God's sake, he had a wife and two young children, it would make them feel more secure to know that we were walking past the house regularly throughout the night, keeping an eye on things. The Gardai can't be everywhere at once.

"Volunteers for tonight's patrol?" I asked.

About five hard looking local dads put their hands up, and a couple of the more spirited local ladies.

"Now let's be very careful here." Mike's disapproval was making him distinctly nervous. "We don't want any vigilantism in this town. We had a problem with that kind of thing back in the 80s and 90s and we don't want those days to come back again."

I hadn't been aware of the problem back then, at least not in Darklow. Surely in this little town it couldn't have been that bad. Nothing like where I grew up in Dublin. These small town Gardai have no conception of just how extreme things are in big cities.

"It's a neighborhood watch patrol Mike. If there's any problems you'll be the first to know." I meant it, but Mike didn't look convinced.

"Look, Sergeant Biggs," I used his official title to show some respect, "I'm just trying to be civic minded. You know how I feel about these things. If you let something small go, whatever it is, a bit of graffiti, minor vandalism, it's seen as a license...." He cut me off.

"I know all about the broken window theory Dennis. I was in New York to do training on the method for God's sake, so please don't lecture me on criminology and crime prevention. I'm not going to tell you how to do insurance, now am I?"

"This isn't a broken window Mike," I reverted back to his first name, "this is a bloody murder." There were murmurs of assent from the group. I had always been good at motivating groups likes this, even in a country as notoriously difficult to rile people in as Ireland.

"I'm aware of the potential crime Dennis, and I'm telling you now, as the head of the Darklow Garda station, that I would prefer if you didn't go ahead with this. I can't stop you obviously but I won't back you up on this if anything goes wrong."

"What do you think will go wrong?" Peadar asked. Mike ignored the question.

"If you want to wait then we can work something out together, get some training done, set up some good communications, but I am against anyone going out on this estate tonight and potentially damaging evidence. If I see anyone near the crime scene or anywhere near those woods I'll be issuing a warning to them."

"Is there more to this than you're telling us?" Michael asked.

"Ah Jesus of course not. As I said I can't stop you, but I can ask you and I can appeal to your good sense. Please don't do anything until we've talked it all over and until the crime scene and surrounding area has been well tested for evidence, OK?"

He finally left, unhappy, but he had done all he could possibly do. I didn't think anything at all was going to really happen myself but I knew that we needed to be seen to do something. If we didn't, then before you knew it our estate would be seen as a dumping ground for gangland criminals. If there were regular patrols on the estate then they would look elsewhere.

I turned to the small, nervous assembly of my neighbors. I could see the resolve already fading away. I love my country and I love Irish people, but I know them very well. After a little bit of talk and letting off steam they would all just go back home and grumble about things in front of the telly or with their mates down in the pub. The usual. Complain, complain, complain and then do nothing. I needed to act fast.

"We all know Sgt. Biggs is a good honest Garda and a great member of the Sunnyvale community, right?" There were nods of agreement. "Now I grew up in inner city Dublin, in the 1990s and when I was a kid the neighborhood I lived in was just as peaceful, tidy and clean as this estate is today. One day a group of kids vandalized the signs on the entrance to our estate and we did nothing. By the time I was a teenager my parents were afraid to leave their house after 6pm. It was a like a prison for working people. Once the local kids knew they could get away with vandalism then they were always looking to up the ante. Before long the drug dealers moved in. Still no-one did anything and it was already a lot harder to change things by then. After that there were crime bosses living in the area and it was too late to do anything. Men were being shot on their doorsteps in front of their own children. People were openly beaten as punishment on the streets. Forget about being afraid to go out after 6pm, people were afraid to be out on the streets at all."

Poor Mrs. Dunne looked as though she would pass out again.

"So what are we supposed to do now? Go out and fight some bloody psycho murderer in the woods at night?" Peadar said.

I respectfully ignored him and continued on.

"There was another estate right next to ours and when the first bit of graffiti went up they immediately went out and cleaned it up. Local parents came together and set up a neighborhood watch patrol. The next time kids went to vandalize something they were immediately intercepted and a few words was all it took. When the drug dealers began to move in they could see that this neighborhood would be harder than the one next door, so they steered clear of it. People were happy to live there so no houses were up for sale or vacant on the local county council books. Drug lords couldn't move in if they wanted to. And

sure how could they anyway? Their soldiers would have been confronted on the streets and asked to take their business elsewhere. Let me tell you there was never any violence or burglary on that estate. On mine? A daily occurrence. By the time the locals got together to fight back they had a war on their hands that they just couldn't win. I haven't been back there in years. Everybody I knew either moved out or got locked up and now the police don't even bother going in there anymore"

I paused to let my words sink in.

"So who's ready to go out on patrol tonight?" A tiny sea of hands went up.

When I got back home I began to regret already the success of convincing my fellow neighbors. Now I would have to explain myself to Marianne, my partner of nearly 20 years and the very centre of my world. Together with my two children of course. I knew she wouldn't be thrilled. We lived in small semi-detached with a nice view of the Wickford hills. Our house isn't huge, but it's enough for us. What's more important is that we have good neighbors, a clean estate and our children's' friends are not tiny, menacing, tattoo covered tracksuit warriors with an early start on a career in drug dealing.

The tattoo thing was another slippery slope issue with me. My kids could choose to be anything they wanted to be, as long as it was legal. I understand that in Ireland there will be a bit of excessive drinking in the teen years and Irish parents are fools if they think they can eliminate this, but tattoos? I drew the line there. Thankfully none of the children on the estate had any yet even if some of the dads and mums were not setting a good example.

Marianne was upstairs when I announced as casually as I could; "I'm just heading out to do a walk-around of the estate with James Keogh sweetheart. Won't be long." The moment of silence before her response spoke volumes. She chose to wait, then walk all the way downstairs looking at me with her beautiful, wise and disapproving eyes.

No eyes in the world could look at me like those. I squirmed.

"Dennis. Please." She came all the way over and looked up at me. She took both my hands in hers. I tried not to look directly into her eyes. She would only win, she always did. I knew she was the strong one, but damn it, she always had to go and prove that she was the wise one as well.

"It's just a walk around sweetheart ... just to make the older people feel safe."

"Do you know your son wanted to speak to you tonight?"

Damn it. She always had something.

"He can speak to me any time He knows that."

"Does he?"

She was right. Something had changed between me and him of late. We used to be like best friends. Now he treated me like a loathsome old tyrant.

"I'll speak to him first thing tomorrow."

"How about first thing right now. Before you go out."

"Jesus Marianne, we've all agreed already and I'm the bloody organizer. If I'm late how will that look?"

She said nothing but I knew she was furious.

It won't take long. I'll talk to him as soon as I get back."

"You better. He's still very far from being over it."

One of his friends, a kid he looked up to had gone missing a couple of weeks back. There was no indication of what had happened to him. Just left to catch the

bus one night and never showed up at home. You couldn't even know if you were to grieve or not.

"Who was this kid anyway? How come we never heard about him before?"

"Maybe that's what he wants to talk to you about?"

"OK, look, as soon as I get back. It won't take more than 30 minutes, 40 at the outside."

"OK, whatever. Just be careful."

I nodded.

"And don't forget your son."

She could make me feel like a schoolboy again in seconds, even after all these years. She took me face in her hands, pulled my head down towards her and then kissed my forehead. "I mean it." She said. "You don't need to be everybody's hero."

"I know." I still couldn't risk looking at her.

"You just need to be our hero, OK? Not the whole world's."

James and I did the first patrol, circling the estate with another pair who circled in the opposite direction; Mrs. MacDonald and Ken O'Donnell. Both pairs skirted past the woods where the body had been found and where Gardai from the technical division were still gathering evidence. We were very careful not to get too close. Other than a sudden downpour of rain lasting ten minutes or so where we all had to duck for cover, there was nothing to report.

The late shift was taken by Peadar Crony and Michael Nulty with Wilbur O'Shea and Derek Riley going the other way. All tough looking local dads, permanently in trainers and football jerseys, each, unfortunately with the odd tattoo here and there, but not as yet, passed onto their children. Couch potatoes in reality but hard enough looking and up for the task. Derek Reilly was the exception. He looked like a typical Sunnyvale Dad but he had no kids and was usually a bit better dressed. In reality he was by far the hardest, or better put, he was the only hard one at all. He used to be a bouncer in Dublin before he opened his own nightclub. As an owner he was even harder. It was rumored that he had gotten into trouble with the wrong people; organized crime and terrorism if you were to believe everything you heard. He sold up for millions at the height of the boom when things got too hot for him. Now he was retired and leading the quiet life of a country gent. His background didn't matter to me. I absolutely believe that everyone deserves at least one second chance.

As we changed shifts he leaned in close to me and growled out these words; "I didn't move out here to have this kind of shite happen on my doorstep. I'll fucking ruin anyone I see trespassing in here." It was reassuring, even if not exactly the kind of language I would use myself. I hate bad language. That and tattoos. But Derek had been a kind of unofficial police man in the estate for years. More so even than Sergeant Biggs. Kids and adults alike instinctively listened to him. He was a good man to have around for this kind of thing, a bit of muscle on our patrol. One thing I hated passionately about him though. The nasty looking spider web tattoo on his neck. It was a web with an eye in the middle of it, like an Egyptian hieroglyph. If he was so eager to distance himself from his criminal past and live a quiet middle-class life couldn't he just spend the few Euros to get that horrible eyesore removed?

Apparently not.

Old habits die hard I suppose. But still, he definitely would add a bit of backbone to our otherwise spineless community watch. As long as he didn't beat up some innocent drunken teenager by mistake.

When I got home the house was quiet except for the sound of Suzy, my fifteen year old daughter practicing her piano lessons in the living-room. We don't watch much TV or use that room together much so after about 8pm it was all hers. She would practice there all night if we let her. That's why I took out a loan to get her a decent piano to practice on. She was entering competitions already, even beginning to get some prizes. The local credit union gave me €9000 to buy a beautiful second hand Bechstein Model 8 upright piano. The loan was spread over eight years with still seven and a half to go. It would mean holidaying in Ireland again, or maybe even holidaying at home in Sunnyvale if my commissions turned out to be low again. But still worth every penny, even if she only had an outside chance. I would put myself in debt forever if it meant my kids could get ahead and have a chance of living their dreams.

"Hey sweetheart, don't practice too late, OK?" She was so focused she didn't hear me open the door, never looked around. I thought about kissing her goodnight but she was so into her practice, so dedicated. I softly closed the door and went to bed.

I went to bed.

Idiot.

When my mobile rang at 4.30am I didn't know where I was. I shook my head, tired to focus.

"Hello?"

I could still hear Suzy practicing downstairs. She was playing Beethoven's Piano Sonata number 9 from opus 14, one of her favorites. She had chosen it herself when she first started learning to play. She didn't know it was her grandmother's favorite sonata as well even though the two had never met. My mother loved classical music and passed it on to me. Some people complain about the broadcasting charge but I don't know what I'd do without state radio. The dial is always on Lyric FM in our house.

"...found Peadar and Michael tied to a tree, battered, and you're fucking next mate."

My stomach twisted into a hard knot.

"Who is this? What's going on?"

"You fucking heard me you twat and you fucking know who this is. Your stupid fucking harebrained patrol is over." He shouted the words into my ear.

"Derek? What's going on?"

Local hard man Derek Reilly ended the call without an answer. I was still just trying to get my eyes used to the dark, Suzy was still softly playing piano downstairs. I knew Derek Reilly was a tough guy but he had never threatened another resident and I considered myself to be on good terms with him.

"What's wrong baby?" Marianne was awake now, bleary eyed and confused.

"Derek Reilly has just threatened to batter me."

She sat bolt upright in bed.

"What? Really? I don't understand baby, what's going on?"

I didn't really want to tell her, but things always turned out better if I did.

"Something about more assaults on the estate and he seems to be blaming me."

She didn't say a word. She didn't have to. 'I told you so' was written all over her silhouette in the silver half light of the moon.

## CHAPTER THREE

The bump she heard made Betsy think she had hit a sheep on the dark country road she had been negotiating for over an hour already. A torrential downpour had come out of nowhere in the last ten minutes and visibility was low. She stopped the car and a familiar feeling came over her. The pit of her stomach went tight, she felt light-headed. It always happened to her that way. To her right, directly outside the driver seat window, just inches away from her cheek, she saw something in the corner of her eye. She didn't want to look. Didn't want to see it. She never did. But the same thing always happened and she knew she had to.

Ignore at your peril.

She turned her head and the haunted, distraught, shocked eyes peered at her through the window of her tiny 1990 Fiat Uno. Although separated by glass, the face was still so close; she jumped in her seat. The young man was naked in the lashing rain, at least from the waist up. She was pretty sure he would be naked from the waist down as well, if she had the courage to take a better look.

The boy looked directly at her. He was exactly 19 years of age, his birthday was yesterday. It was hard to tell if he was crying with so much wind and rain but his expression said it all. Betsy didn't say a word. She couldn't. One part of her wished he would go away, but another part, the maternal part, the grandmother part wanted to take him inside the car and away from the rain and cold.

There was blood running down the window panes of her vehicle although she couldn't see where it was coming from. There was blood running down the boy's neck, spilling over the swirling tattoos and open wounds on his shoulders and splashing in the hard rain.

Betsy's stomach ached and her knuckles locked to the steering wheel. She had had experiences like this before but never so close to home, never so personal.

The boy broke his gaze, turned away and the old lady let out a gasp. There was a large diamond shaped swathe of flesh missing from his back. The open expanse of skin where his trapezius muscle was had been neatly, surgically removed. The boy's shoulders hung heavily down in its absence.

He began to melt away into the rain, but not before he reached up with one weakened limp arm and pointed to something on the back of his neck. Betsy squinted her eyes and in the dark and rain, through the oblique glow of her headlights made out a crude picture of an eye on the back of his neck

She found her tongue at last.

"Come back."

She reached down, struggled with the window handle, clumsily tried to roll it down. It was unresponsive at the best of times and failed her now. Fumbling with her seatbelt she eventually freed herself and stepped outside the car into the rain.

"Rocco! Rocco! Come back, it's me, it's alright. Please come back honey, it's alright."

The rain had washed away any trace of blood from the car and from the ground. The rain had stopped as suddenly as it had appeared. She peered into

the humid inky blackness but already in her mid seventies she couldn't attempt to follow him. Anyway, the boy was gone now and she knew she wouldn't see him again, at least not in this world.

She noticed the headlights behind her now. A man came through the shadows and the final drops of rain.

"What's going on? Is something wrong?"

"Did you see that?" Betsy asked.

"What? The animal? The deer? What about it? Did you hit it?"

Betsy ignored him and got back into her car. She took a few minutes to compose herself, wiped the rain and tears away from her face. She put her old car in gear and ground away at a snail's pace into the blackness of the night.



## CHAPTER FOUR

"Derek Reilly has just threatened to batter me."

Marianne sat bolt upright in bed.

I didn't really want to tell her, but things always turned out better if I did.

"Something about more assaults on the estate and he seems to be blaming me."

She didn't say a word. She didn't have to. 'I told you so' was written all over her silhouette in the silver half light of the moon.

"I have to go and see what's going on."

"No you don't. This has nothing to do with you. Not yet."

How can two conflicting feelings be so right at the same time. I still wasn't awake. I couldn't think. Marianne was always right. But I still had to go. I had organized the neighborhood watch, even if Derek Reilly had been its most enthusiastic supporter, the ultimate responsibility lay with me and I hated to shirk responsibility.

"I won't be long." I felt guilty saying the words. "Don't wait up though. No need for both of us to lose sleep."

Marianne rolled over away from me.

"Do whatever you want, but don't say I didn't warn you."

So I left my house and family behind at 4.30am to go and investigate a potential serial killer on our estate. Ireland, even small town Ireland has its problems, but this was surreal for a place like Darklow.

The police lights made the spot easy to find. Sgt. Mike Biggs was still on duty.

"Happy now Dennis?" he said.

Peadar and Michael, as Derek Reilly had pointed out, were well and truly battered. Mangled would have been a better word. I wanted to speak to them but the ambulance crew were working hard to stabilize them and they looked in no condition to speak anyway.

Derek Reilly was still at the scene, still angry, but also looking a bit frightened which was highly unusual for him. I gave him a nod. I figured if he was really going to batter me he wouldn't do it with a Garda Sergeant standing next to me.

"What are we going to do?" I asked Sergeant Biggs.

"We are going to do nothing Dennis. *You* are going to go home and put your alarm on. All of you are going home and we will be out to question the lot of you once we have this mess cleaned up. You've done enough harm for one night. You know you could be prosecuted over this."

"Me? What for?"

"Ah Jesus." He shook his head and walked away from me to attend to his crime scene. I craned my neck to see into the ambulance and my stomach turned as I realized what I was looking at. Michael's right forearm, the one I could see, looked like a piece of raw meat or an anatomical specimen with the skin removed. I gagged and then landed my eyes on something worse as I turned to Peadar. If I hadn't been told it was him I wouldn't have recognized him. He looked

like someone had wanted to flay him and had gotten most of the way through before being interrupted. A chill went through me. Whoever did this couldn't be that far away. Something must have interrupted them. Was this the condition that the first body had been in? Or worse? No wonder Mike Biggs hadn't wanted to discuss the details.

Suddenly Derek was in my face, almost nose to nose. A throwback from his bouncer days I suppose. Everybody else was quietly afraid of him, maybe even Mike Biggs as well but he didn't intimidate me. If he laid a finger on me I would make sure the law dealt with him and he knew me well. Well enough to know that I would stand on principal and never back down.

"Why don't you fuck off home Dennis?"

I held his gaze for exactly two long seconds while he blew air out through his nostrils like a bull.

"Derek, we have to do something. What are you threatening to batter me for? I've known you for years. This is Sunnyvale, we're on the residents association together for God's sake."

He listened hard and underneath his anger I could see fear. Maybe he wasn't so different from the rest of us after all.

He leaned in even closer and looked me in the eye.

"I've seen some fuckin' nasty stuff in my time man. And I know when to back off. Leave this one to the cops Dennis. Fuck sake."

"Dennis," Mike shouted at me, "out of here. Now!" Mike was an even less intimidating man than ex-thug Derek Reilly, but I decided it was time to go home anyway. This whole mess could wait until the morning.

At the house the whole family was awake.

"What's going on sweetheart? " Marianne wanted to know. " What's all the noise? The whole street is up and talking about it."

"You and you, bed. Now." I told the kids. My son Will scowled at me. He was getting harder to manage. At 15 years old he was beginning to behave a bit like me at that age. I didn't want that. He was born when I was only 20 for God's sake. The biggest mistake I'll never regret in my whole life and the most beautiful, painful experience I will do anything for my own kids to never have. Don't look for the logic in there please. Unless you've done it, it can't make sense to you. Thank God Suzy wasn't showing signs of anything other than maturity at the same age. That's right. Twins. We were blessed with twins. Although sometimes it felt like the Gods were laughing at us.

"Dennis, what's going on?" Marianne called me back to myself.

"There's been another incident. Down in the woods again. Peadar and Michael both beaten to a pulp and it looked to me as if pieces of skin had been cut off them." I shuddered as I told her the details. The shock of it all was slowly sinking in. This was happening on our doorstep.

Marianne was speechless.

I reset the house alarm.

"Pieces of skin? What do you mean? What's this got to do with us? Why did *you* have to be down there?"

"It was my idea. The neighborhood patrol. That's why Derek Reilly was so angry."

And now Marianne was angry too.

"Why do you always have to be the one to take responsibility? You always have to be the one to stand up for things and then we, this family, end up taking the consequences."

"Somebody has to stand up sweetheart. That's how things happen. Otherwise ...."

"Not this time."

She gave me the 'divorce' look, so I backed down. As always. Marianne was a beautiful woman, inside and out. I never really deserved her. Smart, sexy, strong, intelligent; an all around beautiful person. The kids adored and respected her and she was devoted to them and to me.

Me.

Who was I? Who am I?

Just a plain old ordinary sales guy, mid-thirties and heading for the big 40. Struggling to keep a roof over my family's head, wondering where it all went right, wondering where it all went wrong. I knew she was right. She always was. I always had to be the one. Problem neighbors? I complained and then took the heat. Other people benefited. Poor service? I had to see the manager. Queue jumper? Not with me around. I'm a pacifist, non-violent and non-aggressive, which is a real problem when you are trying to put good manners on the whole stupid ill-mannered world we live in. I won't hurt a fly. I'll chase the damn thing around the house for an hour to get it out of the window first. Even the kids laughed at me. But I didn't care. In my head I was the good manners hero. I still am. But to the rest of the ill mannered tracksuit wearing bad-tattoo sporting, ever trashier world we live in, I guess I was just a short, skinny, ordinary uptight guy and most of the time people would just tell me to go to hell. One kid recently told me my vagina was too tight. A girl. The little...

But it never did stop me. Not even when they got aggressive. I was Joe ordinary and it's guys like us Jane and Joe ordinaries who make this world go round. We pay the taxes, respect the law and other people, keep a bit of damn civility and manners alive in an otherwise rude and obnoxious world.

The only thing more important to me than cleaning up this trashy planet one sloppy tracksuit at a time, is looking after my wife and family. They always came first.

The always will.

"Did you speak to him?"

"Damn!" I had forgotten about him. Will. The walk around had taken an hour in all with the ten minutes of delay from the rain and the bit of exchange as we changed shifts and I just damn well forgot. I was tired.

But that was no excuse.

Marianne glared. "Go to bed Dennis. You have work tomorrow and I have to get up early too."

"I'll speak to him first thing tomorrow. I swear. I won't forget."

She stopped on the stairs.

"Don't tell me. Just do it. And in case you forgot, Suzy and I are having our girls' break tomorrow. Mother and daughter together. Get it? We won't be back until Thursday."

"Of course sweetheart. It's just this stupid rubbish happening on the estate and all ...." I sounded so lame.

"Speak to your son and then get your mind off this crazy stuff. Let the police handle it. You've done all any concerned citizen should do already."

"I'll be up soon."

She dismissed me with a withering, disbelieving sigh before disappearing up the stairs.

As soon as she was out of sight I clicked the computer on. God help me. I wouldn't be long, but I knew if I didn't follow this train of thought I wouldn't get to sleep anyway.

'Tattoo's cut off' was my first Google search.

Results:

'Joyous Life – how to remove a tattoo!' No.

'I need help to cut out my tattoo. One drunken night ...'  
' No.

'How to delete a tattoo – 6 easy steps!' No.

'The Five Punishments of ancient China' Interesting. I read that one before continuing.

'Woman tries to cut off boyfriend's tattoo.' Hmm, a little more relevant.

'Man cuts out tattoo after split with girlfriend' Maybe.

'Gang Member with Tattoo of crime scene' Just stupid.

It's a sick world and all the more reason for hard working people like me to organize ourselves and stand up for our families and for what we believe in. Even if we end up being a small minority on a generally screwed up planet, we will be the hard working ones, the focused ones, the clever ones. No wonder we had chosen to live in a gated compound. Keep the damn tracksuits outside. Just a pity they had started renting inside the gates is all. Nothing I could do about that. When the recession hit and landlords started to drop their prices in desperation suddenly exclusive wasn't so exclusive any more. Now we were locked inside with them.

But I digress.

It was time to go a little deeper with the searches.

'Magical Power of Tattoos' I entered on a whim.

Results:

Sak Yant: Magic Tattoos of Thailand

Cambodian Yantra Tattoo

Magical Tattoos of Thailand's Mahouts

Mahouts? Interesting.

Now I didn't have any tattoos, I'd never been interested. In fact, as I have mentioned... Did I mention that? I downright hated the damn things and had forbidden my two children from ever having them. I'm only 36 years old but that's enough to remember when they were universally considered to be anti-social, trashy, criminal looking stains on the skin. I preferred it that way. Now every bank manager and school mistress has to show off their flash sheet designer tattoo at the beach or the company picnic. My dad was a sailor back in the 1940s and he made his own tattoo. He dug it into his forearm with a sewing needle and some printers' ink. He did it on board ship which probably explains why it was so lopsided. He earned that tattoo and it represented his profession and his experience and his time. It was still horrible though and he wasn't proud of it. I grew up in an era when you would cover them up so people wouldn't think you had been in jail. But today everybody has them. It no longer means anything. It's just fashion. Boys, girls, old ladies, intellectuals, rich and poor.

Meaningless. Vain. Pathetic.

If I see one more set of Robbie William's shoulder flames, or swirls or whatever they are, so help me .... Does anyone really think this makes look rebellious or cool anymore? I was an insurance salesman before all this happened. It's a good solid, honest profession. If I was going to get a tattoo it would say that and nothing else. 'Insurance' printed across my upper back. Possibly with the company website and logo underneath. If a bank manager gets a tattoo then that is exactly what it should say and it should be somewhere conspicuous so it can't be hidden away when he's at work. Once a thieving banker, always a thieving banker and recognized as such.

I digress yet again. Please don't get me started.

My Internet search needed to become a bit more graphic.

Thus:

'the serial killer cut off his tattoos'

Call it a hunch.

This time, the results weren't nice at all. Two cases, separated by a lot of time. The infamous Black Dahlia case of the 1940s and a much more contemporary case from the 90s. Two killers removing tattoos from their victims. Both, coincidentally, from the inner thigh.

Not an exact match. These victims were women. The victims here are men.

"What are you doing?"

My wife's voice came down the stairs.

"Nothing. Just shutting off and going to bed."

As the computer powered down I heard the muffled tone of a text message coming through on my phone. It sounded like it was under something so I got up to look for it and sure enough there it was underneath a sofa cushion. I picked it up and swiped the screen to take a look. It was my wife's phone, not mine, and the text was on screen. Our phones were brand new, an offer from the provider, the latest smart technology. We had been meaning to get protective cases to distinguish them from each other but hadn't quite got around to it yet.

The text was short and but not sweet.

"Where's my fucking money?"

Huh?

## CHAPTER FIVE

Betsy ignored him and got back into her car. She took a few minutes to compose herself, wiped the rain and tears away from her face. She put her old car in gear and ground away at a snail's pace into the blackness of the night.

The boy she had just seen was her grandson, Rocco McGinty. She drove on through the downpour in the direction of her son's house, Travis McGinty. It took another hour before her battered old car finally struggled up the winding roads and steep hills that lead to his remote home in South-West County Wickford.

Travis could tell by her expression that something was terribly wrong.

"Jesus ma, come in, sit down. What is it?"

"Get me a cuppa tea Travis, for Christ's sake." Betsy had an American accent. Her son Travis was pure Dublin.

"Is it news? Did you hear something?"

She remained silent, shivering, glaring at her son. He made the tea and set it before her.

"I saw him about an hour ago. On the way here."

"You're joking me. Is he alright? Why didn't you bring him here?"

"He's not alright Travis. Not at all."

Her look said it all.

"Jesus Ma. Where is he?"

"I don't know son. All I know is he's gone. They took a huge chunk of skin off his back, there's no way he could have survived it."

Travis' breath shortened; the beginning of hyperventilation. His children were the most important thing in the world to him.

"You must be wrong ma. There's no way anyone could take that from him. I made it myself for fuck's sake. Do you know how many times that thing has saved him? Or me for that matter? You must have seen something else."

"He's gone Travis. If I wasn't sure I wouldn't say so."

She paused. Travis was in a daze. The daze you get when the news you've heard is just too unreal, too painful and too final to be true. The mind wants to reject it and turn back time, believe in anything else except the reality it has been presented with.

"And there's something else."

Travis looked up but didn't say a word.

"He had another mark. It was an eye. Real simple. Right down here on the back of his neck."

She indicated with one bony finger.

Travis's eyes were already streaming silent tears now. No words or sounds came, just terrible unbelieving emotions.

Betsy gave him plenty of time. She knew her son well. Eventually he found his voice.

"I'll fucking kill that cunt. I swear I'll fucking kill him."

He jumped up and started tearing out drawers in search of a murder weapon.

"Travis."

He ignored her. Or didn't hear her.

"Travis!" She shouted. "It won't do any fucking good and you know it."

"He was a good boy ma. You know how good he was. He wouldn't hurt a fly that didn't hurt him. He spent half his life down the animal rescue looking after cats and rats and any aul yoke on four legs that came in. He was the softest, most kind hearted, sweetest kid in the world."

Travis collapsed onto the ground in tears and his mother leaned down to comfort him.

"I know what I saw son. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. He was my kin too, remember? I love him too." They rocked back and forth together on the kitchen floor, the big lanky man all bent up and sobbing into the little frail woman's arms.

She whispered into his ear. "I don't want to lose you too baby."

Travis began to extricate himself from his mother.

"How could they get it off him? It was the best there is. I made it myself."

"Look. They got it somehow and Rocco needs us to know that, OK? Why else would he come to me. We can't let them have it Travis. We have to get it back or he isn't ever going to be happy. He won't ever let this go. he can't. You gave it to him, remember?"

Travis abruptly stood up, finding his strength and composure again. He went straight to the kitchen cupboards and took out a shoe box. Betsy looked on; resigned, afraid, saddened. He reached in and took out an 8mm Baikal Russian service pistol.

"What are you going to do with that Travis? Shoot your way in, kill them all, then go on the run the rest of your life? Is that what Rocco would have wanted?" Her son loaded the weapon and pushed it under his belt. "They got Rocco already. What makes you think they won't be able to get you as well?"

Travis gave his mother a grim look and walked out into the night.

## CHAPTER SIX

"Who is it? No hold on, hold on," Sammy paused to correct himself, "Forgive me. What I mean to say is who the fuck is it?" His was a thick, rich, cockney accent.

The voice at the other end of the line was loud, deep, masculine, and very timorous.

"Eh... it's me boss."

"Oh for fuck's sake."

"Me... it's me boss, me."

"Fucking Paddies. Let me repeat myself. Who the fuck..."

"It's Thicke Sammy, Garda Thicke."

"Do not fucking interrupt me Thicke. Do not ever fucking interrupt me."

"OK, right so."

Sammy paused to compose himself.

"Go on then Thicke, what is it?"

"Well, it's Biggs Sammy. He's in trouble."

Sammy sat upright.

"Oh is he really?"

"He's gettin' desperate."

"What is it then? Gambling? Prossies? The Bookies? No, no, no, don't tell me... he's lifted evidence from the station, init? Taken home some confiscated drug money."

"Not yet he hasn't. But it's worse than that Sammy."

"No way Thicke. Stop, really, because you're hurting me. Not kiddy porn. On his laptop?"

"Worse again."

"Well, well, well. Lovely. Do fucking tell."

"It's the mortgage. He can't pay it. He's well behind on his interest only. Him and the missus bought a big house back when the overtime was piling in. Now he's down to the bare salary and the wife is out of work. He's in arrears, well, well, well into arrears. Up to his ears in arrears and you know what the banks are like these days."

"Do you know what Thicke, I do sometimes miss old London, I really do. Mortgage payments. Don't you Paddy filth ever do anything bleeding exciting?"

Thicke didn't know if he was expected to answer that or not. He chose not to.

"Go on then, how do you know he's in trouble then?"

"Well, they've started calling him at the station, you know? Not the bank but the fuckin' debt collectors. They have debt collectors onto him now. Can you believe it? Onto a Sergeant of an Garda Siochana?"

"Oh it's bloomin' disgrace, init."

"It is Sammy, it is."

"So tell me Thicke, why should I give a fuck about your Sergeant Biggs? He can't pay them, he can't pay me. He's nobody."



"He can't pay them what they want, but he could pay you. Every penny in confiscated drug money that comes into this station would go to you."

"How much is that then?"

"Well, sometimes it's nothing at all but sometimes we're talking tens of thousands at a time. You could squeeze him to hand the lot over and I can keep an eye on him."

"OK, I'm listening."

"Also the big idiot actually thinks he's a real bloody policeman. He still thinks he can take you down."

"If I go down Paddy, you go down an all, don't you forget that."

"I know that Sammy, of course I do, so here's the thing, not only do you get your hooks into him for money, you'll fucking own him."

"You know what Thicke? Sometimes you think like a real evil piece of scum. Maybe you ain't so bad after all. Wot's his mobile number then?"

"Ah Jesus Sammy, I can't give you that."

"Don't fuck around Thicke, I can't go through the same bleeding bollocks every time you pretend you can't do something for me."

"This is different Sammy."

"Let's just pretend we've had the conversation already, eh? I've threatened to reveal your kiddy fiddler porn addiction, you've begged me not to, blah, blah, fuckin' blah, init?"

"Ah Jesus Sammy."

"I have a pen in my hand Thicke. Please do not make me wait."

Thicke dutifully read off the number and the line went dead.

"Fucking cunt." he muttered as an old lady from the village entered the station to report her missing cat.

"Excuse me Garda Thicke, did you say something?"

The caller ID was blocked but Sergeant Biggs was not one to screen calls.

"Biggs." He grunted.

"Is that Sergeant Biggs of the Darklow Garda Station?"

"It is. How did you get this number?"

"A friend gave it to me. A very caring and thoughtful friend of yours."

"Who is this?"

"Look, Sergeant Biggs, I just recently heard that you is having difficulty with the mortgage, init?"

"Are you a collection agency? Is that it? Look, I've already told you that I'm making arrangements to have the debts consolidated and an offer of monthly payments will be made to you via my intermediary. I will no longer accept these calls."

"Monthly payments?"

"That's right, and we're talking in the order of hundreds here, not thousands."

"That sounds quite acceptable to me. How much are we talking about exactly?"

"It's not decided yet, but don't expect more than €350 a month at the very most."

A derisory laugh came from the telephone. Three hundred and fifty bills a month was the limit of a Garda Sergeant's financial nightmare. This was barely enough for a quiet night in at Sammy's house and this was breaking point for Darklow's main crime fighter.

"I'm not a collection agency Sergeant Biggs. On the contrary, it's your lucky day. I am here to help you."

Biggs was momentarily confused. Then the penny dropped. The cockney accent, the offer of help at a low moment.

"Sammy the Shark."

"Well, I do prefer my actual name of Samuel Sharkey if you don't mind."

"I'm not interested."

"You can pay it off tomorrow. The whole lot, in one go. Save yourself thousands in interest payments...." Sammy didn't intend on paying anything off in one go. He would deal directly with the debt collectors himself and re-negotiate the deal as he had done on many occasions. Most of them knew him by now so he barely had to say a word. Half of the debt collection agents owed him money themselves.

"And then have you banging on my door? I don't think so."

"No banging on doors Sergeant, you are, after all, an officer of the law. You would be a tier one client on my books and a very generous grace period would be arranged for your first payments in view of your high position in local society."

The silence told Sammy all he needed to know.

"Let's say a year, shall we? Payment free."

Biggs looked around him. He was sitting in his 2002 Ford Escort on the overcast and windswept seafront of Billstown Harbor where he had attended many a suicide scene, towing cars in from the ocean as water poured out of the engine blocks, exhausts and body work.

"Not enough? How about two years? No, no, hold on. Let's be really generous here, we'll make it three full years before there's any talk of payments and after that it'll be three hundred and fifty quid a month, no questions asked and of course, no interest. Not for my special friends, the officers of the Gardai. Never say that Samuel Sharkey don't look after members of the public service. I am very civic minded Sergeant Biggs, despite what you may have heard. My old man was a public servant and a good man he was too."

Three years debt free, mortgage free, small monthly payments thereafter, and no accumulating interest. Just the freedom to go about his duty, clearing drunks off the streets, maintaining public order, investigating break-ins and robberies. He could be the guardian of the peace again that his father and mother had been before him, as he had always dreamed of being. He looked out at the brilliant blue summer sky. It was a rare day of perfect sunshine in Ireland. Sergeant Biggs licked his lips, took a deep breath and got ready to frame his words into the phone.

"Now should you have any windfall in the meantime you could of course pay a lump sum with no fear of punitive charges Sergeant Biggs. Let's say a little money came into the station and somehow got lost."

"What are you talking about?" Biggs asked.

"No need to answer now Sergeant. You think it over and I'll call you back in a day or two."

"Wait..."

"Before I go though, one question to you. Seeing as you is the Gardai."

Mike hesitated. His stomach turning a little.

"What is it?"

"You is in charge of that investigation in Sunnyvale, init?"

"Which one do you mean?"

"Only one I've heard of. Only one that stands out anyway."

Mike chose his words carefully.

"If you mean the suspected homicide, then that has been passed on up to the Phoenix Park. I'm just a local Garda Sergeant so I wouldn't be involved in that kind of investigation. Unless someone had some information about it, then of course I would pass it on."

"Well, it was right in front of your house, init?"

Mike froze.

"Hello? Sergeant Biggs? You still there mate?"

"What is this Sharkey? If you have information it would be in your best interests to pass it on to the Gardai at your earliest convenience."

"Who me? I ain't got no information. I was just wondering though. It must have been very traumatic for your family. It being in front of your house and all. Especially as you is having young kids and then your financial difficulties too, you know?"

"Sharkey. If you have information...."

"Sergeant Biggs, I have information alright. Now you listen to me. I can pay off your whole mortgage in one day. Do you understand me? One single day and that's it, gone. I can do it today. Right now. Do you understand me? I can make that call. You can tell the banks, the fucking banksters, the debt collectors, the whole filthy lot, tell them to go and fuck off. Do you understand?"

Mike was sweating. His standard issue policeman's blue shirt sticking to his skin.

"As I say, I'll let you think it over for a day or two."

"Sharkey...."

The line went dead. Biggs stabbed at the phone to make a call back but the blocked number wouldn't allow it.

"Fuck it." Biggs threw the phone to the seat beside him where it bounced to the floor. He scrambled to pick it up again, making sure it wasn't damaged. There was a crack in the display.

"Fuck. It."

It would have to stay that way. The cost of a new phone wasn't something he could permit himself these days.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Theo Petrakis looked out into a small sea of faces. He had a lot of experience with the press and knew many of the correspondents personally, but he had rarely given press conferences. This was the most high profile case he had handled to date. Not the most important, but the most public. Usually the work of Interpol agents was conducted in anonymity and most of his colleagues preferred this. He adjusted his Boucheron cuff links and shrugged his shoulders comfortably into his tailor made suit. He had had the opportunity to have several made recently on assignment in Hong Kong. The quality was absolutely worth the time and effort to have it done.

"I have time for just one more question. John, from the BBC, go ahead." He spoke perfect English with just a hint of a Greek accent.

The senior correspondent came respectfully to his feet.

"Thank you lieutenant. Firstly, could you tell us if the operation came about as a result of a tip off, and if so, could you reveal to us the source. Secondly, can you tell us the scale of the operation and how many human organs were involved. That is to say, how many people would have had to die as a result of this shipment alone?"

"No, certainly not, no and not yet. And that was four questions, not one." He gave a friendly nod to the correspondent and then raised both hands over the pack of reporters like a Roman emperor. There was a buzz of confusion as they backtracked to link his short answers to the questions the BBC had put.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is all we have time for. I thank you very much for your time today and will let you know when we are ready to brief you again."

Mirielle Demonique watched Theo Petrakis closely from behind. She was dressed in an impeccable hand tailored business suit. She was petite, blonde, with fine features and a smooth lilting voice that swayed with southern French tones. No-one that knew her mistook this for either weakness or friendliness. The head of Interpol was a woman of ambition from the very best schools of France. Her degrees in law and economics from the Grande Ecoles and Harvard Business School meant that she could have chosen any career she wanted. International Law Enforcement had been her choice. She leaned over to the tall pink-faced plain looking Englishman next to her, Nigel Grimsby and whispered into his ear.

"He is a natural with the press, don't you think?"

Nigel looked mildly irritated.

"Loves the sound of his own voice a little too much I would say." Nigel was head of Europol and like Mirielle Demonique, despite his appearance of mediocrity and infectivity, no one who worked with him mistook this for anything other than the most superficial of impressions. Unlike Mirielle however, Nigel had not come from the Etonian halls of British education. He was a man of the people who had worked his way to the top of his profession from the streets of Islington.

A career policeman who liked to get into the details of cases even now from his remote position in The Hague.

Theo turned from the crowd and smiled at his two superiors.

"One more question Lieutenant, was it really necessary to cause a bloodbath in order to break this trafficking ring?"

Theo stopped and turned to see who had asked the question. All heads in the conference pack had turned to look at one young American woman, casually dressed, neat blonde hair and fine, intelligent features.

"I mean, how many dead? Seventeen people? Was this a planned sting operation or a mass execution?"

The media pack was in silence. No-one seemed to know the young reporter.

"What media source do you represent?" Theo was still relaxed, but the young woman had intrigued him. Before she could answer Mirielle stepped in front of her star employee and gave a frosty glare to the reporter.

"There are no more questions thank you."

The pack broke out into noise again as Mirielle hustled Theo away.

"Mais Mirielle, c'est quoi le problem?"

"Silly little Americaine. She should look to her own country first where the death penalty is so popular."

"How do you know she was American?"

"What does it matter? She is one of these who worries about the human rights of the criminal and not the victim She has no idea what you have been through to make these arrests and to free these people. This operation is the biggest of its kind in the world. This is a serious interruption to the trade routes of this vile modern slave trade. Who cares how many of them have died fighting to bring people to slavery and death. This is seventeen less evil people in our world today."

They stepped into the custom built bullet proof Mercedes that would take them back to the colonnaded glass and steel Headquarters of Interpol on the quai Charles de Gaulle. Mirielle nodded to the driver and he raised the blacked out partition between the front and back seats. As soon as they had privacy she reached over to Lieutenant Petrakis and placed one slender hand between his legs. He reached out to her but she pushed his hands back.

"How many poor slave traders did you have to kill Lieutenant Petrakis, to save those dirty child sex slaves?" She imitated the young reporter with an exaggerated whine. Theo smiled.

"You know she's right of course you bad boy. Seventeen is a record, even for you." Mirielle grinned as she sank lower into Theo's lap. It would take at least thirty minutes to reach the quai Charles de Gaule. Theo sat back into the plush seats and relaxed.

"Wait stop!" He banged urgently on the partition, Mirielle hurriedly raised her head as the partition slid down. "Henri, please stop the car, pull over here."

"Theo, what is it?"

"I just saw someone I used to know."

The car pulled over and Theo jumped out. A man about his own age was sitting by the side of the road with sign that read 'will work for food'. He looked up at the well dressed agent without recognition.

"Herve, don't you recognize me?" The man seemed too dazed to register the question. "Come with me, you don't look well, what has happened to you?"

Still Herve did not register. Theo tried to pick him up but the man resisted.

"Who are you? Take your hands off me."

Theo let him go. "Herve..."

The man sat back down onto the cold pavement. Theo took out his wallet and emptied it of bills. The homeless man stared at the money as Theo held out his hand.

"Take it. Go on." There were about 200 Euro. The man snatched at the bills but Theo drew back. "The money is yours but you have to take this too. It's my number. Call me." He pushed the bills and the phone number into the man's hands. "I have to go Herve, but I will be back. I know you. A bientot." He walked back to the car.

"Who was that?" Mirielle was not happy about her interrupted advance.

"Someone I went to school with. I cannot believe my eyes. He was brilliant, a good person, talented. I can't imagine what has happened to him."

"Leave it for later." Mirielle said softly. The partition had been raised again. Her hands sought him out as the car pulled away. Her head went low again as Theo turned to take one last look at his old friend.

Just a few hours later the lovers were on Santorini looking out over the caldera from the balcony of Theo's luxury apartment on the island. Their liaisons had to be clandestine, not because of spouses or partners but because of their professional relationship. They had promised themselves this break for months and now that it had come they were determined to take it. Even if it was only for a few hours. Theo looked out over the glittering sea as the beautiful Mirielle sipped coffee next to him. Both wore thick white bath robes.

"Have you ever been to Ireland?" Theo said.

Mirielle nodded her beautiful head. "Not yet." She said.

"Such a pity it is a crime that will take me back to that beautiful country. And so soon after our success here in Europe."

"It never stops, Theo. You know that. Besides, it's your specialty." Her large eyes peered over the wide brim of her coffee cup. "Skin."

"I know, what a shame. They have been lucky until now."

"Well, maybe you haven't been in the loop quite as much lately, with your time off and being in the far east." Her voice had a captivating musicality that Theo loved.

"Oh really? Why? What has been happening?"

"Or maybe Europol has just been too slow, as usual." Theo worked for both agencies with direct responsibility to Europol and the Interpol hierarchy above that.

A mocking smile crossed Mirielle's lips. "You really should forget this Europol thing and come back to work directly for us again."

"Come on, don't be such a tease. Tell me what you know. You are supposed to be briefing me Mirielle. Or do you want me to make you tell me?"

She smiled again.

"Sure. Go ahead and make me." She put down the coffee cup and sat back into the chair allowing her bath robe to fall open. "If you can." Theo checked his watch.

"You know I have to be on a plane in under an hour."

She allowed the robe to fall open a little more. "You had better be busy then. And you had better be good."

He reached out to take her by the wrist but she pulled her hand quickly away.

"I don't know Theo, you know that information is never free. It will need to be very good this time or you can rely on Nigel for what you need to know."

"Mirielle..." he pleaded.

She smiled seductively at him. "Go on. Leave me. Enjoy your time with the English pork sausage." She briskly turned her head away, snapping a copy of Le Monde open in front of her face.

Theo sat for a moment. He had no time for this. But on the other hand, he couldn't afford to be without Mirielle's information. What she chose to reveal was invariably better than the inter-intelligence communiqués where one agency often hid detail from another in order to maintain tactical advantage. Their casual, consensual, informal and strictly forbidden exchanges of secret intelligence had been the secret of their remarkable successes for years, even when Mirielle had been a junior intelligence officer.

It also helped that she was like a super model in looks and build. Even for international playboy Theo Petrakis Mirielle was something special.

What the hell, if satisfying her one more time meant arriving an hour or two later in Ireland than planned, well, it was the price he would have to pay.

His phone, buzzed on the glass surface of the breakfast table. He eyed it with irritation. He had been ignoring calls from his bank for weeks. There was always something more important to do than talk with an officious little bureaucrat. Most of them were criminals anyway that he would perhaps one day enjoy putting behind bars.

Looking at the pouting and seductive Mirielle, he could think of no reason to answer the call today either.

He pulled the newspaper down into her lap and smiled, raised a single eyebrow, Roger Moore style.

"You don't even know what you have gotten yourself into little cat!" He growled. Mirielle screeched like a schoolgirl and let the chase begin.

Several hours later, but miraculously on time, thanks to a personal friend with a pilot license, Theo was in the Phoenix Park Headquarters of the Irish Police Force, An Garda Síochána. One of the few unarmed forces in the world, they had the utmost regard of the European superstar policeman; fighting a tidal wave of international organized crime with only their bare hands, hopelessly outnumbered, out-gunned and underfunded, technology from the stone age, forensics from the middle ages.

"Who are you?" The liaison officer asked.

"I am Theo Petrakis. Europol." He showed the officer his badge.

"What can we do for you Theo?"

"Show me the crime scene."

"Nothing to see, all cleaned up already, samples taken and sent to forensics."

The rush to the airport had been a waste of time. The crime occurred less than 10 hours ago so it was unusual that things should have been wrapped up so quickly.

"The samples are here in Phoenix Park?"

"Where else?"

"Anything back yet?"

"Nothing yet."

"OK. This is a pity, I would have liked to see the scene myself. Call the morgue and let them know I will be there shortly."

"The morgue will be closed by now. Will tomorrow do?"

"Can you take me there yourself?"

The big policeman looked at his watch. Theo followed the glance down to the Garda's left hand.

"He'll still be there tomorrow. The state he's in I wouldn't worry about it.

*Local office employees, pen-pushers, desk-monkeys. Rarely helpful.* Theo thought dismissively. It was an old story.

"That's a nice tattoo. Where did you get it?" He asked.

The Garda was surprised. There was a small inscription just visible between his thumb and forefinger.

"Holiday in Macau."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Nah. Just a souvenir of a good time. I think it means lucky or something."

"You could say that. The first character is a negative particle meaning 'not'."

"Not?"

"The second character means lucky."

The Garda was confused for a moment before he put the two words together. A look of anger crossed his face.

"Don't blame the messenger." Theo smiled. He left without telling him that the last character meant 'easy to anger'.

*Vlakas. Idiot. Another clueless vlaka with too much ink.* He thought.

Theo decided to go to the crime scene first and alone rather than bargaining for an escort to be arranged or worse, being refused until the following morning. The co-ordinates of the location on his smart phone took him to the back of the Sunnyvale estate outside of Darklow Town, Co. Wickford. He knew the details of the crime and supposed that the body had been dumped over the wall from the forested area behind. There were footprints in the soft muddy grass but that was all. No broken branches, no evidence of a struggle, even of the effort to lift a body over the wall. Only lots of boot prints of the Garda variety. He circled around the back of the estate, staying close to the perimeter wall. Eventually the ground rose a little higher to a spot where it was easy to climb over and here he entered the supposedly secure estate.

The crime scene was directly on the other side of the wall and as the Garda Liaison officer had pointed out, there was very little to see. On the other side there was indeed little left by way of evidence. Once again there was no sign of a fight. Either the mystery man had been well secured before being murdered, or he was long dead before he arrived in Sunnyvale. Or maybe there was another reason. Theo always kept an open mind. But why leave him inside the wall? Were the gangsters just stupid? Or was there a reason? If they had left the body outside in the woods it could have been weeks or even months or years before anyone found it. Why specifically inside?

He made himself ready to leave the estate.

"Hey you!" An angry voice challenged him.

Two burly and very agitated men ran up to him, boxing him in on either side.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?"



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Samuel Sharkey was on the balcony of his top floor office at home in the Wickford hills. It was a nice day.

"About fucking time we saw the bleeding sun, init?"

He spoke into the air as much as into the back of the girl's head that was sprawled over the patio table in front of him. Her hands gripped opposite edges of the round table top.

"You talking to me?" Her Eastern European accent was strong. She didn't bother turning her head around as she spoke and Sammy seemed only to notice her for the first time.

"You wot? Nah, just noticed the bleeding sun is all. First time in ages. This fucking country. Sometimes I wish I was back home, init."

"Has been sunny all day. You only notice now."

He continued thrusting into her.

"Don't squeeze so fucking tight Vagina. For fuck's sake, I'm not some bleeding merchandise, init. Don't bite the fucking thing off me."

"Sorry, just habit, you know?"

"Whatever, just ease off."

"It's just you are so big, you know? Inside me. It feel so good I want to squeeze harder."

He grinned. He knew she didn't mean it. VD had experienced virtually no sensations in her sexual organs at all for at least five years. She did however, know how to say all the right things.

Sammy's phone buzzed in the dark silk robe he wore that flapped gently in the Irish summer breeze.

"Shut up a minute please sweetheart. Got some business here."

He put the phone to his ear and continued thrusting. Vagina turned her head back to look over the rolling hills of the Wickford Way.

"Yeah?"

"Have some info for you boss."

"Get to the bleeding point Reilly, I'm busy here."

"He's got a daughter. Name is Megan."

"Lovely, good work. I love it when they have kids. How old is she then?"

"Eighteen."

"Pity. Where is she anyway?"

"Lives with her mother in Avoca."

"Is that so? Mummy and daughter together. Very sweet. What's the address then?"

"Working on that."

"For fuck's sake."

"Sorry boss."

"Don't apologize Paddy, just get the bleedin' address."

"Of course, yeah."

"Oh yeah and Reilly? How old is your daughter then?"

The line went dead.

"Ha, ha. Paddies." He slipped his phone back into his pocket. "Jesus, Vagina, how many times I told you, don't bite the thing off, init!"

"Sorry boss, force of habit, you know? And you so big."

"Whatever."

## CHAPTER NINE

Travis McGinty is lying face down in a basement in North inner city Dublin with four pairs of hands holding him down. Two to restrain his arms, one each side, and two to stretch out the skin between his shoulder blades. He's grimacing in pain, biting on a filthy looking rag that might have been white once a very long time ago. The little Asian man behind him is very, very focused and holding up what looks like a wooden stake, ready to push it into Travis's back. Smoking seems to be obligatory for everybody in the room, except for Travis himself.

"OK Travis, fucking pussy." The little man says. "You fucking ask for this you gonna get it. You know what gonna happen right now? Don't you? Fucking piece of shit, Irish white trash. What they call you? Tracksuit knacker? Is that it?" Knacker was a hard word for him to pronounce.

Travis struggled to turn his head and grunted as best he could through the rag. The little man raised the stake a shade higher and gave a throaty, smoke congested cackle.

"Pussy."

Travis closed his eyes and waited for the pain to begin.

"Fucking pussy."

Despite the contempt of the little man, Travis was more than able for this kind of torture and had undergone it many times in the past. He knew it was the pain that counted. The little Asian man's name was Ajarn and he was Cambodian by birth, Thai by ethnicity. Travis may have been the best tattoo artist in Ireland, if not all of Western Europe, but he didn't come close to the skill of this man, at least not when it came to ritual Sak Yant; sacred skin art, Thai style. Ajarn was one of the best there was and while he handled his mai sak and khem sak, the bamboo and metal ritual tattoo sticks, as though he were about to commit murder with them, the designs were as perfect and fine as medieval calligraphy. He could cause less pain but he knew that Travis would need more for this Yant to be effective. It would take hours of work and would be exhausting for everyone, but the power unleashed would surpass anything that raw vengeance alone could accomplish. This wasn't work that Ajarn undertook lightly. Only that Travis was his close friend and colleague, because his need was so great and out of respect for Travis' skill as an artist would he perform this ritual. No amount of money could have induced him to carry this out for idle curiosity or vanity. He had often been asked for his services by the wealthy, powerful and famous. Rock stars and movie stars had come looking for him. Business people, politicians, Mafia. Some had even gotten what they wanted in the end, if they were determined enough. But they had never gotten it from him or from anyone nearly as good as he was. Empty scrawls and letters punctured into their soft, vain flesh by lazy, fat monks willing to sell their souls for a few dollars. Ajarn's art was too powerful and precious to be wasted like this. Moving to Ireland had been an effective strategy for a long time. No-one thought to look for him there and if they did it was usually not a place on the top of anyone's list for tattoo holidays. Most people wanted photographs of beaded sweat on brown skin and slow turning ceiling fans in

Bangkok, Phnom Penh or Vientiane. A dingy back room in Dublin was a bucket of cold water for most people and a cloak of invisibility for the rest.

When the work was finally done the assistants released Travis' arms and let them fall to the ground. The skin on his back was raised, swollen and raw. They left him to recover.

Betsy was sitting outside, dozing uncomfortably on a plastic patio chair in the hallway. One of the assistants poked his head outside.

"Mae Betsy?" She raised her head. Mae is a term of respect for the mother of friends and relatives in Thai.

"Yes?"

"You take him now. He done."

"OK. Thank you. How was it?"

"Very good. Strong ritual. He very powerful now, but need to use quickly or lose the power."

Ajarn stepped into the hall.

"He strong guy but pretty wasted. Might have put other guy in hospital. Not him though. Travis like old Thai warrior. This guy legend."

Betsy wasn't smiling.

"So what's the catch Ajarn?" Tattoos weren't really her thing but she understood enough to know that although they usually worked, there was always a sting in the tail. The saying 'be careful what you wish for' was never more apt than for 'tattoo witchcraft' as she liked to call it.

"You very wise woman Betsy, but no catch this time. Just one condition. Here you take look, you see yourself."

Betsy entered the tattoo room and squinted in the dim light. Her son's back was still stinging red with the edges of his new art screaming out pain. Surrounded by Khmer lettering was a small but intricate picture of an event. The desired event. An event so important that it was worth a permanent mark on the skin, first to assure success, second to commemorate once it had taken place.

"I don't understand Ajarn. What's going on here?"

"This guy here? He Sammy the Shark."

"Yeah I get that and this is Rocco and this is the Yant, but who's that? That isn't Travis."

"You very smart lady Mae Betsy. You dead right. Only one way for Travis to make this happen. He go himself he dead man. Might as well forget about skin, forget about justice, forget about revenge. Say hello to stinking real world where bad guy rule. You know? Maybe better that way, to tell you the truth."

"Who's this other person?"

"You got to find him Mae Betsy, that all I know. He will get the skin back, he will get revenge on that motherfucker Sammy."

"I don't get it. How do we find him?"

"No idea Mae Betsy, no idea. But you very wise lady, you can figure out. All I tell you is don't let Travis go there alone or a lot worse thing gonna happen to him than happened to Rocco. You got that?"

"Did you tell him this?"

"You kidding me? Travis? That boy the best white tattoo artist I ever seen, but he also pretty stupid when it come to this stuff. No wisdom. All heart, passion, violence. It never work out that stuff. I can't tell him nothing, you got to do it. You his mammy, you his Mae Mama. You can't convince him then no-one can."

"And people really pay you for this kind of advice?"

"Ha, ha. damn right Mae Betsy. Good money too. Listen, I got one more thing for you. Take good look at Yant. Take good long look. You got to recognize this guy."

"OK. If I see a god damn blue outline of a human being walking around then I'll go and tell him to kill Sammy the psychopath Shark."

"Got to love your style Mae Betsy. You bit younger I like to do you, but you too old now."

"Oh, unlucky me. If I could only turn back time."

"Take a look at the face."

Betsy peered at her exhausted son's raw, inflamed skin.

"He's got a mark on his forehead."

"Jesus Christ, you good Mae Betsy." Ajarn cackled.

"Like a crescent moon, right between the eyes."

"You got it."

Travis began to come out of his daze on floor.

"One more thing Mae Betsy."

"Yeah?"

"You can't make this guy do it. He got to want to do it himself. You got that? He got to burn like fire to go up there and do this thing."

"This just gets easier all the time."

Travis shook his head, rubbed his eyes.

"Ma? What are you doing here?"

"I call her you stupid fuck-up. Show some respect to your Mae Mama, she good lady. She got news for you so listen up good. I leave you two together now."

He left the room.

"Don't try and stop me ma. He was your grandson too, we owe him this."

"It won't work Travis."

"You wait and see. I just spent the last six hours preparing for this. Do you think Ajarn would waste his time if he didn't think I was going to go and blow that scumbag's head off?"

"You're not listening...."

"The earth will be a better place without that parasite and Ajarn knows it. He agrees with me and he's a Buddhist for Christ's sake."

"Well, that last bit is debatable Travis, but it's not the point. Have you seen your Yant yet?"

"I haven't seen it but I sure as fuck felt it."

"I've seen it."

"So you know what I mean."

"It's not what you think."

"What are you talking about? Did that little shit fuck me over again?"

"He didn't fuck you over Travis, he might just have saved your life is all."

Travis starts frantically trying to look over his shoulder to his back to see the new tattoo.

"What is it? What the fuck is it? Why doesn't that cunt have a fucking mirror in the tattoo room?"

"The Yant is beautiful Travis and we'll get Sammy the Shark alright and we'll get back the part of Rocco that piece of crap still has his filthy hands on."

"So what's the problem then?"

"Jesus Travis!" She shouts. "Stop trying to look at your own spine for Christ's sake, you can't see it. It's a Yant and it's got Sammy surrounded and Rocco revenged and protected, whole and in one piece."

"OK. I'm going then."

She physically obstructed him.

"It's not you that gets it back Travis."

"Get out of the way ma."

"Jesus. Why won't you listen? Ajarn told me that if you go yourself you'll be killed or worse and it won't benefit anything to Rocco."

"Then why did he make the Yant for me?"

"Because someone else will do the work and he's put him into the picture, for crying out loud."

Travis stopped, took a deep breath.

"Finally."

"So who is it? Who's the guy?"

"Who said it was a guy?"

"Who's the bird then?"

Betsy sighed. A long suffering sigh.

"We don't know."

"That little yellow fucker."

Betsy cut a stinging blow across her son's face.

"Enough. That man is saving your life and Rocco's soul. We do what he says. We find the person in the picture. Simple as that."

"He told you how to do that I suppose."

"Of course not. It never works that way, stop being stupid Travis."

"For fuck's sake...."

"Still wanna go up there now?"

Travis stood where he was. Fear would never have stopped him, but this? He couldn't move.

"What's the point now. The little bastard tricked me. You tricked me."

"Only because he knows what a hothead you are and no I didn't trick you, I tried to stop you coming here, remember? But you wouldn't listen to me. Just like always."

"Will he help us find the guy?"

"He already has. He made the god damn Yant didn't he?"

Travis's phone lit up with a call. He pulled it out of his pocket and the caller ID made him freeze.

"What is it?" Betsy asked.

He held the phone up and her breath froze in her teeth.

It read: Sammy the Cunt.

## CHAPTER TEN

Theo Petrakis was at the Sunnyvale crime scene when two burly figures ran up and boxed him in on either side.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" The smaller of the two said.

"Excuse me?"

"You fucking heard mate. What are you doing in this estate? How did you get in here?"

The two men were middle-aged, aggressive, bald, a little overweight. They looked like brothers.

Theo calmly took out his Europol identification.

"My name is Theo Petrakis. I'm an investigator with Europol. Who are you?"

"How did you get in here?" The taller one said.

"The same way the killers did. The same way any house thief would enter. The same way a 12 year old child looking for a lost football would enter."

He pointed to the wall behind him.

"You shouldn't be here Petrakis."

"Gentlemen, I will give you one more opportunity to identify yourselves. If you do not do so then I will consider this conversation over. Do you understand?"

The taller one took out his wallet, opened it and handed it to Theo.

"Pleased to meet you Sergeant Biggs. May I ask why you are not in uniform?"

"I live here Petrakis. This isn't my beat, it's my estate."

"Oh really? Nobody told me about this. Which house is yours exactly?"

Biggs was reluctant to answer.

"Why are you here Petrakis? Who said you could come down here without contacting the local Gardai?"

"Sergeant Biggs, I think we both know I'm allowed to go where I like in this country. This is a closed crime scene correct?"

Biggs grudgingly assented.

"The technical examination is complete so there is no evidence to contaminate. I just wanted to see the location for myself. So please do tell me, which house is yours."

Biggs gave a deep angry sigh then indicated the nearest house across the road from the small wooded area in which they stood.

"This one? Really? And you didn't hear or see anything take place on the night in question?"

"Is this an official interview Petrakis?"

"Please call me Theo Sergeant Biggs. May I call you Michael?"

"Sergeant Biggs will do. Now you answer me, is this official?"

"I'm here to help Sergeant. There is no need to be hostile. We are on the same side, remember? This can all be off record if you prefer."

"Come on Mike, tell this guy to fuck off before I lose me temper."

Theo showed no reaction.

"Look Mr. Petrakis, I don't want any trouble. All I'm asking for is a little professional courtesy. It would have been nice to know you were coming and then I could have met you in the station, escorted you here, briefed you on all the details before we got to the crime scene. Now you'll have to excuse my brother, he's not a member of the force. If you would like to make an appointment then I'd be happy to meet you sometime this week when you are free."

"Very good Sergeant I'll do that. Can I have your mobile number?"

"Just call the station and they'll take care of it."

Theo nodded and then left by the same way he had entered the estate. He found his rented car and drove back towards Dublin.

He would certainly need to speak to the local Gardai but information was best gathered fresh and raw, not pre-processed. He decided to go straight to the local station. Biggs had an attitude that spoke volumes. Theo assumed he was in trouble of some kind. It was more and more common these days, especially in countries where the financial crisis was biting the most. Perhaps some of the other Gardai would be easier to deal with. Even if they were no longer in charge of the investigation the local police were still the first on the scene and would know more about the area, the people and the estate than the more expert and professional Special Detective Unit would.

He found the station easily enough. It was a typical small town Garda station; a low squat building with a couple of aged squad cars parked badly outside. The blue lantern of An Garda Siochana bolted over the entrance was cracked and peeled.

Theo parked his shining 2013 Audi TT convertible next to a dented and scratched Garda Fiat Ulysse with a 2003 license plate.

The glass in the main entrance window was webbed with fractures and the hinges creaked and groaned as he pushed the front door in. There was no-one at the small desk behind the hole in the wall.

"Hello, hello? Anybody there?"

A voice came from a back room.

"Hold your horses there. What's the emergency? I'll be with you in a minute."

Theo sat down in the one rickety chair provided in the reception area and checked his phone. There were two messages.

One from his bank. It was short.

'Call us today.' It read.

*Malaka.*

The other from Mirielle. Even shorter.

'Call me.'

He replaced the phone to his waistcoat pocket and looked up to see a man in his late 50s, heavy-set, bald with back and sides graying hair and a friendly if canny look on his face.

"What can I do for you young man?" He asked.

"Is sergeant Biggs on duty?"

The officer opened his eyes wide in exaggerated surprise and gave a broad friendly smile.

"Oh be the hokey! That depends now on who wants to know. To whom do I have the pleasure of addressing myself?"

"Theo Petrakis. Europol." Theo handed him his official identification. The Garda took the small laminated card and held it far away from his eyes, peering, as though at a mystery.



"You'll have to forgive me Mr. Souvlaki.."

"Pe. Tra. Kis."

"..oh, excuse me. Mr. Ke. Pra. Tis..."

"Just call me Theo."

"All right then, Theo. You'll forgive me but I can't read a feckin' word of this so I'm afraid I won't be able to give you any official assistance here until I can have it confirmed via the Garda HQ."

He returned the ID to Theo.

"That's quite alright. I fully understand. I was simply calling by in courtesy to let you know that I will be investigating the recent incident in the Sunnyvale estate."

"After I have confirmed it with Garda HQ obviously."

"Obviously. Would you like to call them now?"

"Well, I would love to do that Theo but just at the moment, would you believe it, our phones are down."

He smiled an incredulous smile.

"Are your mobile phones down too?"

"Well, that would hardly be very official now would it? To use a mobile phone to call the boss up in HQ, like."

Theo looked a little harder at the ageing Garda and then smiled.

"You must be as far up to your neck in this as Sergeant Biggs."

The man froze.

"Now you get the hell out of this station right now Petrakis, before I make an arrest. Do you think I'm some kind of idiot? Sergeant Biggs has already informed us of your activities in the Sunnyvale estate this evening, nosing around that crime scene without any official sanction. Such a serious breach of procedure could easily render evidence gathered there invalid. You might find yourself taken off this case if you aren't careful."

"You must be very, very afraid of someone to risk this kind of talk Garda ... what is the name?"

"Garda Thicke you cheeky little shit. T. H. I. C. K. E. I'm not afraid to give you my name. Now you get out of here Petrakis. I don't care who you are. I may be up to my neck in shite, I'm a fuckin' Garda after all, but you are very much in over your head boy, even though you might not realize it yet."

The big man began to shuffle around the counter and squeeze through the small entrance into the reception area. He was slow on his feet. Theo stood up sharply and adjusted his suit and tie.

"There's no need officer, I'm on my way. But of course you know I'll be back. I've dealt with small time police tangled up with crime in dozens of countries all over the world. The threats always come first, then the defiance and finally the begging to be saved."

Thicke stopped in the tiny entrance as though wedged into place. The station had been built for the smaller generations of the past. He stared at the neat and diminutive man in front of him.

"Just remember that we were once on the same side and that I can help you when the time comes."

"Just go. Go on. Go on now. Get your fuckin' documents in order from Phoenix Park and I'll be happy to show you 'round but you'll have nothing today, so go on, get out of my station."

"As you wish."

Theo returned to his car, pulled out swiftly and with some sharp revs disappeared around the corner under the glare of Garda Thicke.

Once the shiny Audi was out of sight he made his heavy way back into the station and fished an old battered phone from his pocket and selected a speed dial number that picked up quickly.

"Give me the boss."

He drummed his thick fingers nervously on the desk as he waited.

"Howya. Yeah it's Thicke. Garda Thicke. I think we have some fuckin' trouble comin' our way."

"Oh Yeah?" The voice growled at the other end.

"Fuckin' Europol, if you can believe it. Is this whole shithouse going to come down around our fuckin' heads now?"

"His name Theo by any chance?"

"That's right. Theo Petrakis. How did you know that boss?"

"Don't you worry Paddy. You just make sure I can keep on doing what I do best and don't you worry your pretty little head mate. Nothing, and I mean nothing at all is gonna change. Where's the little shit now?"

"Well sure he's gone anyway. Driving a silver Audi TT convertible, license plate 13D76830. Rented. Had the Europcar sticker in the back window. I can trace him if you want."

"Don't bother Mick. I'll find him. Good work. Now fuck off."

The line went dead. Thicke gave the old phone an evil look then put it back in his pocket.

"Cunt." He muttered under his breath.

Theo deleted the first message in his phone as he drove north on the M12 towards Dublin and then called Mirielle. She picked up instantly.

"Theo?"

There was always a seductive laugh in her voice, even if she spoke only a single word. Mirielle had retained all the charm of her youth despite her current success and status. She was in her early thirties and a meteoric rise to success had angered and frustrated many of her male colleagues. She didn't care though. And neither did Theo. It was one of the reasons she liked him.

"Mirielle, it's me. What is it?"

Her voice became instantly serious. Business, not pleasure.

"Theo, thank you for calling me back."

"What is it Mirielle?"

"Theo .... you know I hate to even talk about this."

He went silent, his whole body tensing in anticipation. He knew what was coming. Over the years it had always been like this; the news he longed for most of all and which carried with it the most fear. Mirielle was one of the few who knew the whole story, gradually over time she had won his trust where few others had. A little at a time he had revealed to her the painful memories. She rarely spoke of it and he appreciated this. It was always he who did the talking, always him who initiated the conversation and then only very rarely.

The exception was when there was news, a clue, a connection, a hint of warmth on the trail. Only Mirielle was in a position to have and to share this information with him. He knew it pained her to bring these things up at all and loved her even more because of it.

"Tell me."

"It's about her."

"Where?"

"Well, of course we don't know exact locations."

He took a deep breath. Of course not. That would be impossible. After all this time. But anything will do. Any hint or clue.

"But there is a possibility. A connection."

"I'm listening."

"It's in Ireland."

The speedometer was already at 180kmph and increasing. Theo didn't even see the mobile speed camera as he powered by.

"Where?"

"It is a little town to the south of Dublin."

"Where?" His voice was almost a whisper.

"It's Darklow."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The needles are still buzzing. The baby is nearly complete. That's right, I'm having a baby tattooed onto my back and it's nearly done. Some of it has crossed the shoulder blade so there was a little pain at that point but that's exactly what I need to let me know it's on there.

Getting back to my story though...

The text on my wife's phone was short enough that I couldn't not but read it all in one go.

"Where's my fucking money?" It said.

Short as it was, the meaning didn't quite register with me for a moment. It sounded more like a joke. Must have been one of her girlfriends having a laugh I figured. Hilarious. Usually they weren't such a foul mouth crew though. In fact, her friends were a pretty cool bunch and I got along with most of them well even if we had been too busy of late to see any of our friends. I checked the sender but it was just a number, no name attached.

Maybe she hadn't transferred her address book from the old handset yet. I decided to forget about it and put the phone back down on the sofa. It was late and I had a lot to do the following day.

After just a few hours of sleep, the kids were up, fed, dropped to school and I was back in the office looking to meet my daily insurance sales quota.

Sales is never easy, no matter what people say. I had been doing it for years and still I couldn't quite get used to it. The worst part wasn't the cold calling, it wasn't the abuse from disgruntled clients or even the poor pay packet and low commissions at the end of it all. No, no, no, the worst part for me, by far, was my stupid boss and his attempts to scare, motivate and most annoyingly of all, 'fix' me.

"Dennis ... you have me in despair." He told me that morning.

Peter Dooley was a portly man. Younger than me in years, but in gravity and girth, certainly my elder. As I said, I'm on the far side of 30, he's only 28 but going on 48 in looks and attitude which I think he actually wants.

"Look, I've got 12 people to manage here, including yourself." He told me this at least once a week. "You don't know what it's like to be only 28 years of age and have people nearly twice that working for you." Boohoo. "I started under you, remember? Jesus you showed me the ropes for God's sake." I inadvertently caught his eye when he said this. He had to keep on reminding me, year after year. "I was only 21 when they promoted me to regional manager, do you know what that's like?" I shook my head. How could I? Me, just a simple insurance broker on the phones for the last 10 years.

"I know my uncle owns this place but really, who else could they put in charge? Draper? Hah!" Benji Draper was the oldest employee in the office. He was doing his time there before Peter was born. He hadn't changed his suit in 8 years and had hairs like toilet brush bristles growing out of his nostrils.

"I'm trying to help you Dennis. I need you to focus more on your work. I've been asking you now for months. You know your numbers are down."

I nodded my head. What else could I do? The numbers were down. He was right. But it wasn't my fault. It was this bloody recession.

"Don't talk to me about recession." He said. "There's no such thing in sales. Either you go out and get the goods or you don't, right?"

Again he was right.

"People like you and me, we have to think like hunters."

He meant well.

"We are the modern day hunters. We have to go out there and forage every day."

Forage or hunt, which was it?

"And every day is different. Every day is a journey."

Oh for God's sake. He had been speaking to me for over an hour already.

"Now all this is one thing Dennis, and don't get me wrong Dennis, because I believe in you Dennis Small, I really do."

My name had been seriously worn thin ever since Peter had invested in and read 'How to Win Friends and Influence People.'

"There are times in the past when you've done... OK, let's not say spectacularly well, but you've done alright."

Direct praise was anathema to Peter.

"You've been with the company a very long time now and if we didn't like you, well, you simply wouldn't be here."

Veiled threat of termination. Commonplace stuff.

"Are you having any problems at home?"

Oh Jesus.

"No Peter. Everything's fine."

Silence.

"Then what is it?"

I couldn't blame personal problems, I wasn't allowed to mention the recession. Where did that leave me?

"I have an idea Peter."

"What?"

"I have an idea. To maybe bring in more revenue."

He sat up. He looked skeptical, but he still sat up.

"You know how people are really into tattoos these days?"

His look became quizzical, slightly derisory, as though he expected pure nonsense next.

"I... suppose so."

"Well, I was thinking... em... you know how people then change their minds, get a boyfriend's name as a tattoo and then they split up? For example?"

"Eh, yes. I've heard of it."

"How about we offer insurance on tattoos?"

It was a desperate attempt to deflect the direction of the conversation. I would have felt like a total idiot if everything hadn't been so surreal already with his self-help mumbo-jumbo. He sat and made stupid faces for a moment or two, as though manually grinding the gears in his head.

"And we could offer insurance to tattoo artists for claims against tattoos gone wrong!" I added.

Peter leaned across his desk and looked me very closely in the eye.

"Dennis... look, if there's something going on at home just tell me. OK?"

This was my daily torture.

He had been asking me this for years, wishing it, willing it. He wanted to fix Dennis Small. He wanted to fix everyone in the office, but for some reason, I was his favorite. God help me. Some of the others played along, but I had some self-respect. In spite of everything I was proud of my job and everything it had allowed me to do for my family. And my family? It was the only thing that worked in my life. If it wasn't for them, how could I have done that stupid mindless job day in and day out, year in and year out, squeezing whatever bit of pride out of it that could be found?

This month numbers had been bad though. Nearly an all time low.

I lowered my eyes to the floor and swallowed hard.

"I've got problems Peter. Family problems."

"Oh Jesus, Dennis. I just knew it son. Why didn't you tell me sooner? We can help. You know we aren't like other employers here. We just want you to be a success. We want you to be happy. A happy employee is a successful employee. Without happiness, what's the point of it all?"

I nodded again. Prayed for it to end.

"Look, Dennis. I feel awkward even talking about this but I have to tell you. I got a phone call from the Gardai last night."

I lifted my head, fully alert again.

"What about?"

"I think you know what it was about Dennis."

I had to think. Honestly. What trouble could Peter have been in? But he was half smiling, his head turned a little to one side, looking at me sideways, as though willing me gently to come clean, to myself as well as to him.

Oh for Jesus sake.

"Not about the ... " he nodded his big, moist, bald head, "... the neighborhood watch thing?" He tightened his lips in supportive resignation and nodded again, like a disappointed undertaker.

"Look, Dennis. I know it's kind of shocking. And I admire you for being the one to actually set up the neighborhood watch in the first place. Frankly, knowing you, that surprised me. But you can't use these things as an escape from your problems."

It was my turn to nod. The nod of guilty admission and shame.

"The Gardai have warned me to warn you that they don't need this kind of interference in their affairs."

"Is this normal Peter? Since when do the Gardai call up someone's employer?"

"Don't you worry about that Dennis." He said firmly. "This is a small town and most of us grew up and went to school together here. The ones we don't work with or didn't go to school with are all related to us anyway."

He didn't need to remind me of the fine tradition of inter-breeding in Darklow Town. I had lived there continuously for thirteen years but of course, I couldn't go back in time and go to school in the local Christian Brothers in order to be fully accepted by the natives of Darklow.

I just didn't have the DNA.

"Mike Biggs and I go back a long way Dennis. He just called to let me know what was going on because he's a friend and he wants what's best for the town and that includes both you and me."

"OK. I understand."

"Are you sure Dennis? Because if you don't it could get worse. Mike might be forced to bring charges against you for vigilantism or some other such thing and make no mistake about it, he will if he has to. If he feels that you or anyone else is trying to do his job for him he will have to take action."

"I do Peter. I really understand."

"And you know I couldn't have anyone on the payroll here who has problems with the law. Do you understand that? That's only fair enough, isn't it?"

He was right. I waited for the finale.

"OK Dennis. We'll leave it there. Now whenever you want to talk about your other problems, you know you have a willing ear right here, don't you?"

He pointed to his big, fat, soft ear and I nodded yet again.

"Is there anything you would like to talk about now?" His voice was soft.

"What did Mike say about the two patrol members who were assaulted?"

He glared at me in disapproval.

"That's official police business Dennis. Don't make this worse than it already is."

"OK."

"Now. Is there anything else you would like to talk about?"

"No thanks Peter."

"About your family problems."

He waited.

"Not yet Peter. Thanks. But it's too soon, too painful."

"OK Dennis. As I said, I'm here when you need me. Don't wait too long though. Don't bottle things up. It's not good for you."

"Can I go now?"

"Of course, of course, I'm not the headmaster here, go on. Get out there and knock 'em dead!"

He smiled a big awkward smile.

Good grief... my life....

"Because we can't have another week like last week... seriously." The smile dropped from his face like it had never existed.

By lunch time I was in the offices of local independent politician Daithi McGuigan.

"Do we know who's doin' this?" he asked me.

Now I didn't particularly like Daithi and I certainly didn't agree with his radical politics, but he was the first and only person to offer to hear me out. I had already asked all the local politicians, the great and good powers of our little town and region, but they seemed to know I was coming. Even that shower from Fianna Gael, Ireland's ruling party, didn't want to know anything about it. And I had canvassed for them. Three years in a row.

Sometimes it takes an event like this to really know where you are living, even if you thought you knew the place inside and out already.

Daithi McGuigan was an older man. In his fifties, but he had been a powerful Rugby player in his time and still had that aura of invulnerable solid strength that the Rugby boys have, even if his hair was a little grey and his belly bursting out over the edge of his trousers. More importantly he was the only independently elected figure we had in town and I knew he had a strong reputation for local grass roots community work. I also reasoned that if I could get local politics on

board that this would give the Gardai and my worm of a boss Peter Dooley pause for thought before they tried to shut me down. Didn't I have a right to protect my own little patch of the world if the Gardai hadn't been able to do so? Maybe I wasn't the hardest guy in the world, even if I hadn't been a committed pacifist. Maybe I wasn't the bravest in the world, hell, not even the bravest in Darklow, but one thing I can honestly say about myself, then as well as today, is that I'm determined and when it comes to family I will do, give and take whatever is needed.

"The Gardai say they haven't a clue." I said.

"Are they patrolling the estate?"

"They say they are, but a quick five minutes around the estate once or twice a night doesn't add up to much. I just don't think we should have to lie down and take this."

Daithi had a strong face. Craggy, rugged, once handsome but now lined by late nights of concern for his community, his country and for the world. He was silent for a moment before giving me a square look in the eye.

"You're the right kind of stuff Dennis. This country needs more like you. I know we've been on opposite sides of the political divide over the years but I respect anyone who goes out night after night knocking on unfriendly doors to convince people of something they believe in."

I was so distraught, so wound up that these few honest kind words nearly brought tears to my eyes. Even Marianne was against me for God's sake. I needed support from someone. Daithi put out his big hand and gripped my shoulder firmly.

"I have a few lads who I know will be up for this Dennis. Give me a few hours and then we'll meet up at the estate. Don't worry, we'll get some citizens action going. Could be the start of something big. Maybe get the press involved as well. Crime in general is getting out of hand in this town and nobody is prepared to do anything about it. Everybody waits for somebody else to do something."

"Don't I just know it Daithi." A man truly after my own heart, I was beginning to think that maybe things were going to be alright after all. This was the way things usually worked in this small town. First lethargy and apathy. Then resistance. Then lots of talk but no action. If it wasn't for people like me and Daithi we would still all be living with 17th century penal laws.

"And don't you worry about Mike Biggs either Dennis," he added, "he's a good man and of course I know his Dad well. My niece is married to his 2nd cousin."

Darklow. Sometimes the interbreeding could work in your favor as well.

When I got home that evening I felt better than I had in the last 24 hours. Knowing I had Daithi and his 'couple of lads' behind me made all the difference. It was right then that my son picked his moment to come to me with latest problem. The one I had ignored and then forgotten. But my mind was still distracted.

It's one of the great regrets of my life to this day; not listening to my son precisely right then at that particular moment. Always listen to your kids.

After some faltering, he managed to get the following words out:

"I'm in love Dad."

All I heard was; 'blah, blah, blah, I'm a stupid kid Dad.'

"That's great son. Who's the lucky girl?"

"Fiona Finnegan."



This was not good news. I became more alert, but not more receptive. I thought he wanted to speak about the disappearance of his mysterious older friend but this was new, unexpected. Despite that, or if anything because of it, I totally stopped listening at all at that point. His missing friend was a real issue. Fiona Finnegan? This was just idiocy. As it happened Will was a very good looking young man and even though he didn't realize it yet, half the girls in his school were in love with him. Of all them, why Fiona bloody Finnegan? Kids will break your heart, I swear to you. And parents, well, what we do to our children, the people we love the most, sometimes you wouldn't do to your worst enemy.

"You're young son."

"It's real Da."

He looked at me with burning teenage intensity, the bane of every parent. Probably the same intensity that fascinated all those teenage girls on our estate. He's tall for his age, taller than me already. Except for the school uniform you would think you were speaking to an adult. I decided to give him a chance. "Go on then. I suppose you aren't just sharing your feelings with me. What is it you need?" When I think of it now I could slap myself. Poor Will just sucked it up and continued on. It can't have been easy for him.

"I need cash Da. To buy her a present. Something to really impress her."

Money wasn't something we ever had much of and since my slow spell at work we were kind of on the ropes financially.

"How much do you have?"

He swiped his hand through his long hair and looked at the floor. "Not much."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Well... I want to buy her something now because if I leave it too long..."

"If she loves you, then she'll wait."

"Fuck's sake Da..."

"Son, you know I don't like that language. Now do you want to talk about this or not?"

"I don't want to talk about it Da, I just want to borrow the money. That's all."

This wasn't like him. He wasn't usually so forceful and determined. I hated to cut him down so quick, but on the other hand, this Fiona was one of the few girls my son associated with that I would have had no hesitation in referring to as pure trash. Politically incorrect I know, but God, of all the girls in his school and in Sunnyvale and in Darklow, why this one? She was loud, trashy, caked in cheap make-up and runny fake tan.

"Isn't there anyone else you like? What about Natalie Gilchrist? She's a lovely girl."

"I don't want someone you fancy Da."

"Don't start son, that's not fair and you know it."

"Just because Fiona wears a tracksuit," She was never out of them and true enough I hated them, "and has a couple of tattoos," she had tramp stamp on her lower back which never seemed to be fully covered and then a bar code, for God's sake, on the back of her neck, "and a few piercings," navel, also never covered, nose, tongue, lip and eyebrow, "doesn't mean she's trash, you know? You don't have to be so narrow minded. Mum gets along with her just fine."

I didn't know what to say. He was right about all my prejudices but none of these things were what really bothered me about Fiona Finnegan. The real difficulty was her selfish, shallow, violent personality and if that wasn't bad enough she was known to have been with every unwashed, tattoo covered boy

racing, tracksuit clad layabout from the wrong end of town. She was probably involved in drugs; her parents were known users and dealers.

Additionally, and with the best will in the world, no-one could say that she was a beauty queen. The local lads, so I understood, shagged her because they could. She was a good place to start off if you hadn't lost your virginity yet and an acceptable place to finish off the night if no one else was willing.

How did I know this?

Being the nosy, anal, obsessive do-gooder I was, I liked to keep abreast of all the trashy goings on in our town. In my seemingly single-handed war against our country's tracksuit and tattoo tsunami, this girl and her parents were the very antithesis of everything that I peacefully stood for. I knew her stupid, ignorant parents and their ham-fisted attempts at insurance scams. I had commiserated with other parents who had encountered this particular girlfriend in the hallway of their homes after their sons had been out for a night on the town.

My son. Will.

A great human being in every possible way. One of the good ones. Now 'in love' with Fiona Finnegan?

No way.

Despite all of this, if it hadn't been for the disconcerting fact of people being murdered and ritualistically mutilated just a few hundred meters from where we lived, I would maybe, just maybe have had the presence of mind to deal with this problem other than I did.

Ignore your children's problems at your peril. If you get nothing else from this tale, take that at least.

"Son, come on. I'm sorry. Tell me more about Fiona."

"Forget it Da. I know you think she's just a 'slag'. How could I ever explain it to *you*?"

"Son, just tell me how much you need, come on."

He was silent for a minute, hopeful. Jesus, how I wish I could've been a bit more useful to him.

"I need two grand Da."

But for Jesus sake... he wanted 2000 Euro...

"Ah come on here Will, for God's sake! For her? Are you joking' me?"

"There you go again: 'for her', like she's not worth it or something. What is your problem?"

"Son, you're only 15, this is crazy."

"How come Suzy gets the ten grand piano and I can't even get this?"

"She can play the piano and anyway it didn't cost ten grand."

"So because she's more clever than me she gets all the money? Is that it?"

"Son, listen, it's not like that at all."

It was too late though. He stormed off and I just didn't have the time or energy to give to him that day. So help me if I ever have the chance again.

Even then I knew I hadn't done well.

The phone rang and I decided to deal with Will later. It was Daithi.

"Dennis, I'm really sorry but the deal is off for now."

"I don't understand Daithi? Why?"

"Something has come up."

"I thought you said you had some guys and that I was the kind of person this country needed?"

"I do and you are, but this is something else. Something you don't want to get involved in. Not if you really don't want to get hurt. Do you know about the skin?"

"You mean the tattoos?"

"How did you know?"

"Well I didn't really know until just now."

"They had tattoos taken off them. The first guy and your two boys as well, Peadar and Michael."

"I had kind of guessed it Daithi. It's brutal isn't it? We have to do something."

"Is there anything else you've guessed?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think we need to leave it to the professionals Dennis. There was a bit more than just tattoos gone from that first fellah."

"What do you mean? I know they took the clothes off him alright."

"It was a bit more than that. There was other stuff missing. It seems like Peadar and Michael may have been in for the same treatment but for someone heard a bit of the commotion and called the Gardai."

"Was his head gone?"

"Jesus Christ Dennis, where are you getting this stuff?"

"That was it though, wasn't it? Or is there more?"

"I don't want to talk about this anymore Dennis, but just take my advice and let the Gardai handle it. And don't call me anymore, at least not about this. Oh yeah, and Mike Biggs wants a word with you."

"Did you sort him out? You're friends with his Dad right?"

"That's right. *Good* friends. Now give Mike a call as soon as you can and no shenanigans. Do what the man says. Good night Dennis."

He hung up the phone.

My mobile lit up with a new caller.

Peter Dooley. My boss.

Oh great. Just great.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

"It's Darklow." Mirielle whispered.

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"Theo? Theo are you there?"

"Tell me everything Mirielle. I just left Darklow now but I'm going back immediately."

He screeched off the motorway into the hard shoulder and skidded into a u-turn.

"Theo wait, you have to listen to me. You need to pull over and listen."

"Mirielle, if you are right... how can this be? I don't understand...."

"There's not much I can tell you Theo. Not without risking myself."

"Mirielle please, just tell me anything you can, let me take care of the rest."

"OK, but please be careful."

"Always."

"I have a source from an ongoing investigation into human trafficking which has found its way to Darklow, your Irish skin crime village."

"OK."

"There is an individual there sought by Interpol. His real name is Gino Ngata. He is ethnic Maori."

"OK. That surname is traditionally a North Island iwi."

"A what?"

"Iwi, like a tribal or clan name."

"I'm sorry, of course you would know this." Theo's expertise was the trade in high-value human skin art and good traditional Maori artifacts were in high demand. "His current alias is Samuel Sharkey and his cover cash for gold and loan-sharking. We believe him to be involved in much more unsavory activities, including organ-trade and human trafficking."

Mirielle still hadn't revealed what Theo was waiting to hear.

"What's the connection Mirielle?" His voice was a whisper. "Have they seen her?"

"I can't reveal all the details to you. The investigation is ongoing, but a name was mentioned. A girl with the same name as that of your niece, about the same age she would be now if... well, about 18 to 20 years of age. He may have trafficked or had some contact with her in the last year."

"Is that all?"

"All I can say for now."

"Merci mille fois Mirielle. I love you."

"Don't do anything crazy Theo. Remember, Samuel Sharkey is under investigation already so nothing strong-arm or aggressive. Leave him to us."

"OK, no problem. A call is coming through I have to go." It was a local Irish number. "A bientot mon amour."

He took the other call.

"Petraakis?"

"This is me. Who is this?"

"Detective Melinda Casey, Garda Europol Liaison Officer."

The voice had a soft south Dublin accent, female. Theo pictured a round, pale friendly face at the other end.

"Thank you for calling Detective. I thought I would hear nothing until tomorrow."

"Well, I thought you would want to be thoroughly informed in advance and I saw that you had signed in but not signed off on the briefing forms so it struck me as strange. Was I wrong?"

"Not at all Detective Casey. It is just very late already. Are you still on duty?"

"My Dad always said a real detective is always on duty."

Theo smiled. "This is very true Detective Casey. My father was on the other side of the law but he would have thoroughly agreed."

"Please call me Melinda, you are in Ireland now. My father was also on the other side."

Theo laughed. "Well, I see we have something in common Melinda. And please call me Theo. Is there anything new with the case?"

"Well quite a lot actually. Or completely nothing. Depends how you look at it."

"OK."

"The body in Sunnyvale had no ID and no visible or intact markings. The victim was decapitated and we were unable to locate the head. We presumed the holes in the skin were from tattoos that had been removed because the remainder of the victim's body was well inked and also because a shred of the removed tattoo had been left behind. It seemed like a sloppy job."

"You seem to have experience with this kind of case Melinda."

Theo passed more speed cameras on the way back, he was at nearly twice the speed limit on some sections of the small Irish motorway.

"Actually, it was me who insisted on calling this in to Europol and to you in particular."

"Really? And how is this?"

"I've seen some of your cases in the news and when I saw this body it seemed to fit your profile. Otherwise it may have just gone into the records as another gangland killing."

"Very good Melinda. I thank you. I hope we will have some success with this case and stop this kind of crime from spreading in your beautiful country."

"Not everyone thinks it's so beautiful Theo, but I'm glad you do. Anyway to answer your question, no I don't have experience of these crimes but from what I could gather it seemed a little messy. I might be wrong. Didn't you see the picture of the Sunnyvale crime scenes?"

"They were not volunteered."

"Or the body itself?"

"I was informed that the morgue was closed for the night."

"That's not true. The state coroner is paid enough to stay late and show a visiting officer important evidence. And he's a very accommodating man as well. It would be no problem at all."

Theo weaved at break neck speed before hitting a stop go section of road works. He began speeding along the hard shoulder to the left of the tailed back traffic, oblivious to the angry stares of other motorists. He had been stonewalled in Dublin and then again in Darklow. It seemed the cancer of organized skin trade was not so new here as everyone thought.

"Theo? Are you there?"

"Sorry Melinda, yes I am. Is there more?"

"Yes there is. The heart and lungs, both kidneys, liver and pancreas had also been removed. This part of it seemed pretty neat. The right hand was gone. The genitals were missing. According to the state pathologist there were no mistakes here. Great care was taken to remove the organs neatly. Also there was evidence that peripheral blood had been collected."

"For stem cell extraction."

"That's right. So anyway, here's the useful part. Forensics in the UK identified the man from his DNA samples through cross-reference with the Europol database. The remaining tattoos on his body and the strip of skin left behind allowed them to confirm the identity through prison tattoo file photos. It turned out that the man had form and not just any form but some of the most disgusting known to humankind. Zamir Bajrami is the name that eventually came out. Ever hear of him?"

"Zamir Bajrami. Yes. Unfortunately I have. Formerly of Albania but with British nationality. Wanted for human trafficking, prostitution, white slavery and of course, drugs. But Zamir was never involved in skin-trade, at least not the kind that I specialize in."

"Don't they usually go together though? Human trafficking, organ trade, skin trade?"

"This is true and it is always possible. Did they find anything else?"

"Well, apparently he had quite an ornate representation of the Albanian double-headed eagle tattooed across his upper back."

"He brought nothing but shame to his nation's flag. He did not deserve even to have this tattoo."

"Well someone agreed with you Theo."

"Oh really?"

"It was stripped off his back during the attack."

"It seems that Zamir finally crossed someone more disgusting and evil than himself. I remember him from my time in the human trafficking division. He was a prominent figure in the people moving industry on the Albania to Italy routes. He was a self-made man, raised himself up from pimping on the streets of Tirana to become a snake head and drug baron on the streets of London. Tattoos were very important to him. He had some good ones, some of the very best in fact."

"The bad guys usually do, don't they?"

"They do. And now it seems the hunter becomes the hunted. Perhaps we should be grateful."

Melinda did not share this kind of sentiment, although she did understand it.

"So what was the deal with Zamir's tattoo? Why would anyone want a tattoo of the Albanian flag?"

"There was more to it. It wasn't just the flag. There was also some lettering."

"How do you know that?"

"I saw it once and I never forget a tattoo. Zamir was a Sunni Muslim so tattoos were forbidden to him. The lettering on his back was an elaborate Islamic prayer for protection. This was a very beautiful piece of artwork carried out by a Coptic calligrapher and tattoo artist who works from Cairo. Zamir paid a lot of money for this tattoo but obviously it didn't work."

"I still don't get it. Who would want it?"

"It's hard to say. It could be for aesthetics, it could be for superstition. It may be a decoy of some kind. Whatever the reason it could fetch as much as \$300,000 from a discerning buyer who would expect its value to increase over time, particularly if a little of the owner's personal history is included in the sale. The Asian markets for skin are very inflated at the moment and are home to some of the more perverted tastes in human flesh. The price might even double if you have the right broker."

"If Zamir was such a big fish in London and Europe how did he end up, quite literally, in our little neck of the woods here in Ireland?"

"Well, this I don't know yet. But of course the bigger question is who did he cross here who was able to do this to him? Zamir was a ruthless psychopath with no conscience and a taste for torture."

"So whoever did this to him must be...."

"You do not even want to think about this Melinda, believe me. When you go home tonight, may it not exist for you in any part of your world."

"Don't worry, I'm good at that." She lied. She was the worst she knew on the force of anybody for taking brooding thoughts of work home with her. It seemed to take more and more effort to get her mind off things when she wasn't on the job.

"I hope so." He sounded sincere. Melinda had watched him on the news. She wondered what it would be like to meet him. People were always so different in real life and usually disappointing "Can you get me a list of all the main tattoo artists in the country, Melinda?"

"I'll take care of it."

"Excellent. I thank you. Will you be working with me on this case?"

"Well, only as an assistant to your main Liaison Officer, Detective Tom Dunne."

"Tell your boss you have been upgraded and assigned directly to this case. I'm going to need your help and I would like you to be my main contact."

"Uhh..."

"Assuming you wish to help of course."

"Of course I do, it's just that... well, it's not really my decision."

"I know that. But don't worry, just tell whoever needs to know and if there are any questions, direct them to me. Ciao Melinda, I will be in touch soon, OK?"

"OK."

"One more thing Theo."

"Tell me."

"The other assaults on the Sunnyvale Estate. Were you given details?"

"No, but I can follow up tomorrow."

"You might want to hear them now. They make the suspected homicide seem merciful by comparison."

Theo had heard every possible perverted twist and take on skin trade and organ harvesting imaginable. At least he thought he had.

"You had better tell me Melinda. Go ahead, I'm listening."

There was a silence.

"Melinda?"

"Sorry Theo, just got a text from Tom Dunne, my boss."

"Is it important?"

"No. It's to another officer called Belinda. Just a mistake, nothing important. I just forwarded it to her is all. Now get ready for this because I don't think you are

going to like it." She took a deep breath and got ready to describe some of the most vile details of human depravity that would ever cross her lips.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

He held the phone up in front of her and the name she saw froze her breath between her teeth.

It read: Sammy the Cunt. When Sammy had first made calls to Travis he had put his name into contacts with a description to make him avoid ever picking up the phone to the most feared man in Darklow and surrounding towns and country. This time, he was more afraid to ignore it than to take it. His hand shook as he swiped the screen. He put the phone to his ear and waited.

"Hello?" The voice oozed Cockney. "Is that Travis the great tattoo artist?" Cockney and sarcasm.

"What do you want you cunt?"

"Now, now Travis, that ain't no way to speak to your old mate Sammy, is it?"

"I want his skin back. I want to know where he is."

"I don't know what you're talking about Travis. I just wanted to call and re-iterate the terms of my offer. We need good men like you. Your artwork is really a cut above. I don't know why you won't just come up the house and do a bit of drawing for me."

"What did you do with Rocco?"

"OK, OK. I'll confess that when you refused that bit of work I offered you that I did take things into my own hands, just as I said I would. You wouldn't do me a copy of that fucking tat your sprog had so I had to take the original, didn't I? You left me no choice son. Now here's what's more. You're only still breathing because you are currently worth more to me alive than dead. You fuckin' got that? Your son, he was worth the price of his skin, his kidneys, his heart and whatever else my team cut out of him. He'll fetch a good price alright and I could use the money because my house needs redoing. Them bloody carpets must be six months old and filthy with all the people I have coming and going."

Travis fought back tears. His throat tightened, threatening to cut off the air to his lungs.

"You alright there Travis? You sound as though you are gagging or something. Listen mate, I didn't want to get nasty with you. Despite what you think of me I actually do respect your art and I am now respectfully asking you one more time to take up our offer. And believe me the only answer is yes. Say no again and it only gets worse. If you ain't working for us then you ain't worth nothing to us except for what you got inked on you, if it's any good, and what you got left inside you. If that's any good. We won't know 'till we get it out of you anyway. And don't you think all that hocus pocus Thai voodoo will help you mate because I've been at this game a lot longer than you have and I understand all that stuff. Your shit is good but it won't stop me getting exactly what I want. Do you understand?"

Travis was frozen.

"How's your daughter doing Travis?"

"Fuck." He hissed and cut the connection.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck." Travis beat his arms against the walls, kicked furniture. Ajarn's men came running out and tried to calm him down.

"Travis, please honey, come on, this isn't helping." Betsy pleaded with her son.

"What are we gonna do ma? He knows about Megan."

Betsy's face went a shade paler than its usual battleship grey.

"We've gotta get her out of here."

"I have to go and get this bastard Ma. It's the only way. He's a fucking psycho. He'll never stop otherwise, just keep coming and coming until he has us all fucked up or dead. It'll never, ever stop."

Ajarn stood behind his men.

"I warn you Travis, this not the way to do it. You got to find right guy. You know my shit work, right? You gotta stick to the rules. Always work like that. Don't go crazy big pussy man. Rocco not deserve that."

"Your voodoo shit didn't work for Rocco."

"This not help you Travis. You do whatever you want but don't blame me when they got your heart in a box beside your kidneys."

"Why the fuck didn't it work for Rocco? I did everything. So did he. We didn't eat for a week beforehand, we said the prayers, made the offerings, the whole shebang and now he's somewhere in pieces and his skin is gonna decorate some perverts living-room wall. What kind of fucking Buddha magic is that?"

"Did he lose any fight since he got the piece?"

"He lost the last one."

"Before that. In the ring. You be fucking honest with me Travis coz you gotta believe in this stuff or you know you gonna end up with your balls in a bag."

Travis forced himself to breath. Forced himself to think.

"OK. No. He couldn't be beat. Since the day he got that Yant no-one could take him."

"You fuckin' know it Travis. You better fuckin' believe it."

"So what the hell happened to him. Why is my boy dead? Why isn't he here?"

"That Yant you give him was super powerful No better Yant for ring fighter. Not many people know secret of this Yant."

"So?"

"But it just ring-fight Yant. You know how it works. Every Yant is a lock. Energy lock."

"I know that Ajarn, so what happened to him? Every fight in the world is a ring-fight if you want it to be."

"Someone know more than him unlock the Yant."

"I don't get it?"

"Didn't teacher tell you about unlocking the Yant?"

"You're my fucking teacher Ajarn. Why didn't you tell me?"

"That right knuckle-head," he pushed Travis's craggy forehead back with the heel of his hand, "I your teacher and I fucking tell you already about unlocking the Yant but you didn't have god damn ears, only want to know about how to make Yant more quickly, more powerful, more beautiful. That all good, but when you got a enemy then you need to know how to protect the Yant."

Travis held back tears. He remembered it now. A long conversation that Ajarn had repeatedly had with him but which he had always wriggled out of, selectively ignored or paid the merest lip-service too.

He bowed his head and held it there until Ajarn placed his hand to the back of his neck. For the first time in a long time Travis went all the way down to his knees and touched his forehead to the master's feet. His stifled tears came flooding out.

"So what do I do now? Ajarn. Teacher. Fuck. Master. Please help me."

"Already told Betsy what to do. Find guy in tattoo. I don't know who he is, but you got to find him. That's what the dream said. Betsy know what he look like. Now I know you all broken up Travis, but you gotta get out of my house now, I got clients coming, you gotta leave. You need any help you call me but now you gotta scram, OK?"

Travis nodded, picked himself up and put his arm around Betsy. Together they limped down the hallway wondering what the hell they should do next.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

My back tattoo is almost done. It's taken days of work, especially as we can't be seen to be doing this kind of shit in here. It's a miracle that Travis even has the equipment inside to get it done. Now I've nearly got a full picture of a strong man holding a baby in his arms. The man is me. This wasn't the hard part. The hard part is putting the tattoo onto *his* chest. I need to get it put on to my chest first and then onto his. It has to be just right and we are talking Dutch Masters here, photo-realism.

But anyway, as I was saying, local politician Daithi O'Shea hung up the phone and my mobile lit up with a new caller.

It was Peter, my boss. Just what I didn't need. I let it go to voice-mail but the phone was no sooner silenced and back in my pocket than it was vibrating again. He could call all he wanted but I wasn't going to speak to him yet. I had a quick look at the phone and realized it wasn't Peter this time but a local number. The bloody Garda Station.

"Dennis Small here, what can I do for you?"

"It's me Dennis, Mike Biggs. What did I fuckin' tell you?"

I nearly choked. In all the years I'd known him Mike was always the guy I could trust, always the guy on my side, sorting out rowdy neighbors I was too afraid to confront or talking to dangerous looking kids on the estate, the kind who break your windows and bully your children if you have the guts to tell them to get out of it. I was scared now, but also hurt.

"You didn't tell me anything Mike. You asked us to hold off on the neighborhood patrol, but you didn't tell us to do or not do anything specifically."

"Did Peter speak to you?"

"Who? Peter Dooley? My boss?"

"No. Peter Pan.

"Huh?"

"Yes, Peter Dooley. Your boss. Sure what other fuckin' Peter would I mean?"

"Mike, can you calm down please? What's with all the language? What's the problem here?"

"You've been ringing around everyone in the fuckin' county to stick their nose into police business and what good has it done you? Nothin'. Fucking nothing. Now I've spoken to Peter again and he has a message for you, but I'll give it to you myself. Keep your fucking nose out of this or you *will* lose your job. Do you understand?"

"Mike...." I just didn't have the words.

"Do you understand?"

"OK, OK, yes I do."

"Good. Now watch yourself Small. Be on your best fucking behavior from now on."

The line went dead. I couldn't believe my ears. 'Small'? Mike had known me for years. We were never on anything but first name terms. What the hell was

going on in the world? Was this still Darklow, Co. Wickford or was I in some kind of alternative anti-Darklow somewhere?

The world was going crazy.

And it was set to get even crazier.

Whoever was banging on the front door of my house sounded as though they wanted to bash a hole in it. This wasn't a politician looking for votes or a local kid collecting for a sponsored run. This was someone who didn't, obviously, like the idea of using doorbells. Who the hell would want to break my door down? I'm just Dennis Small, insurance guy. Oh wait, in the last 24 hours the list had suddenly gotten longer. It could be Mike Biggs, but I had just spoken to him. Daithi O'Shea? I hadn't really done anything to anger him. Derek Reilly, hard man local dad who had threatened to batter me. Damn. This couldn't be real. He was a shady guy if you thought about it. The story was that he was a bouncer and nightclub owner, but who's to say that was even true.

The banging continued. It got louder. It sounded like my front door was being damaged.

Now believe me, I'm not easily intimidated. Not by most things. But violence still gets me. Ever since that one thing. I used to be OK but ever since that one time, a couple of years before Will and Suzy were born, before we moved out of Dublin, I just couldn't seem to take it anymore. It was a physical reaction and I could feel it now; my throat getting tighter, the feeling of things closing in on me.

I really didn't want to open that door.

There was a clear sound of crack in the wood. That was more than a fist. Whoever it was had an instrument. A weapon? Did they even want me to open up? Maybe they planned to break the door down.

However, for clarity's sake I will repeat that my name is Dennis Small. I sell, or used to sell insurance. What the hell could really be behind that door that I should be afraid of? The law of this country was on my side. When you obey the law you are never alone, you have 13000 men and women to back you up whenever you need them.

The wood in the hall door was splintering and I hadn't moved a muscle since the first knock.

Will was beside me now. Sort of. He was half in and half out of the living room, hiding behind the door-frame. There was terror in his eyes. Suddenly he looked like a schoolboy again. He looked guilty and he wasn't asking any questions.

"Will. What the hell is going on here?" My voice was a choked whisper. Will didn't answer. He was as choked as me.

The pounding was incessant now and I could hear voices. There were more splintering sounds but it wasn't the front door. The fear had made me forget who I was. That door was reinforced. I'm in insurance so I had made sure to deadbolt my fiberglass, outwardly hinging front door. A battering ram would be needed to get in. Whatever had broken belonged to the intruder. I'm a pacifist. We need to take extra precautions to protect ourselves because we don't believe in violence.

Violence leads to more and worse violence. Always has, always will.

Stay calm.

What did I have to worry about?

In ten years I hadn't been afraid to open my front door to anyone.

I was a hard-working, law-abiding citizen and there was no way in hell I was going to be intimidated in my own home. I'd die first if I had to.

I took a deep breath.

I took a step towards the front door.

Damn them. Whoever they are.

"Da!" Will gasped at me.

"Go back into the living-room son. I'll take care of this."

He stared at me with that same look of terror and guilt.

I could clearly make words out now. "Open this fucking door."

"Get back inside son." His head disappeared into the living-room.

I walked forward until I was just behind the door.

My heart was pounding. Anger and fear. How dare they, whoever they were, do this to me in my own home, with my family beside me.

"Don't make us come in through the windows you fucking shank."

A cockney accent?

I looked through the spy hole and then jerked back. An eyeball stared back at me.

Terror.

*Come on Dennis, come on, come on, come on. Remember who you are.*

I unbolted the door but left the chains on. There were two of them, both heavy duty.

A well-aimed sledge hammer scythed down into the gap and yanked the first chain off its brackets.

I should have known they wouldn't make any difference. Should have just taken them off to save on the repairs.

"OK, OK, hold it, I'm opening the door, take it easy."

"That's a good boy. Get this fucking door open."

Cockney accents alright. Here in Darklow? It seemed unlikely. Sure there were one or two transplanted Brits on the estate but not the sledgehammer wielding kind.

"I hate these fucking doors."

"Hah, I like 'em. Bit of a fucking challenge init?"

Great. There were two of them.

As soon as the second chain was off a huge pair of gloved hands yanked the door outwards. A second later another pair, also gloved, lifted me off the ground. The thick fists gouged under my chin and an enormous fat shaved head breathed straight up into my nose. I gagged. The smell was rank. Jellied eels maybe? Or something worse.

It's confusing when you're in a situation like that. Never underestimate the combination of adrenaline, pain, shock and anger all at the same time. It would be intoxicating if it weren't for the visceral fear of mutilation and death it induces.

I could see boots, big black overcoats, gloves, shades and of course, that tell-tale sign of personality disorder; facial tattoos.

Although nothing special really, and having seen some rather more striking ones since then, these still stick in my mind. There was a tiger, a 6 pointed star, a large Chinese character on one of the guy's temples, a spider web on the other guy that reached around his neck to the front of his throat.

Classy.

"Where's the money, you fucking maggot?"

I couldn't answer. No words would come out. My lips wouldn't part but I could feel my bowels getting ready to open. The thug who wasn't strangling me was

holding a sledgehammer in one hand. He held up a passport in the other, opened up on the photo page.

"You know this twat?"

It was Will, my son.

"You his Dad?"

I nodded.

"Know where he is?"

I shook my head. I was scared, choked, but I would die of fear before I offered up my child to scum like this.

"Very touching. Every parent wants to protect their kids, init. But they all squeal in the end."

He touched my right knee-cap with the end of his baseball bat.

"All right Dad, what's it to be? Left or right."

Left or right? Which one? Think, think. I couldn't speak. Still choked.

"No preference? All right then, allow me to choose in that case. He raised the bat and drew back behind his shoulder, aiming at my right kneecap. My best one as it happened.

This was unreal.

"No. Please." The words spluttered out. "What do you want? Tell me." Finally some words.

"Well, well, well. It speaks, init. Let's see then. We have principle of €2000 with initial interest of 12.5% comes to €2250 to be paid a week from the original date of the loan application."

"We'll find it, don't worry."

He head butted me. I know, if you are a normal person this is unbelievable, right?

"Shut up maggot. I ain't finished yet. Your offspring is late with payments, init? Interest rate of 100% applies after failure to repay a loan on the agreed date, init?"

I did the math in my had. Insurance. It's all about numbers. Even with a set of knuckles in my wind pipe and the rank smell of Cockney scumbag breath up my nose I knew this came to €4500 total. Where the hell would I get that amount of cash?

"I don't have that kind of money now, but..."

Another head-butt.

"I fucking told you already, *sir*. I ain't finished. Init?"

I nodded my head. Blood trickled down my upper lip.

"Add to this a punitive weekly interest of 100% over a time period of exactly four weeks and your debt with us comes to a total of 36 grand."

"Wait, wait..." I couldn't process it.

Head-butt number three.

"You still wanna pay for him then?"

"I ... I ... "

Head-butt number four.

"Ahhhh ... " The blood came a little more freely now. "Yes, yes. Please. How long have I got?"

"Ha-ha. He's a fucking comedian, init? Dara bloody O'Brian."

"Ha, ha. Yeah, comedian, init? A bloody Irish comedian."

"You've had your fucking time *sir*. There ain't no more time *sir*. So tell me, please, *sir*, how would you like to fucking pay then, *sir*?"

His use of sir was a bit sarcastic. Obviously. And overdone.

"Tomorrow. The banks are closed now. I need just until tomorrow."

Head-butt number five. I was getting dizzy.

"That ain't good. However, we is reasonable men, ain't we?" His thug side-kick nodded, the bulb of his nose grazing up and down against mine as he did so. "Now if you want your twat of a son to still have legs by this time tomorrow, you better have that money mate. You have 24 hrs. That's called generosity *sir*. You fucking get that?"

I nodded. "Generosity, yes."

"That's it, sir. You is an intelligent man, init? We'll be back here tomorrow and you better had be as well."

Thug side-kick pushed his face in even closer to mine. The cartilage in my nose flattened out against my cheekbones. The smell of his breath made me struggle and gag again.

"Do you fucking understand my associate? *Sir?*"

I nodded my head, just barely, and he let me slide down the wall in a heap. I watched them leave. They didn't close the door. Pig ignorant the two of them. I tried to get up but I felt like I'd just run an ultra-marathon. As I said, never underestimate the combination of fear, adrenaline, violence and shock. I had run an ultra-marathon before. It was 50 miles and took me 12 hours. This was like running one in 30 seconds.

Will's face came out from behind the living-room door again. He was shaking.

"Da. Are you OK Da? Did they hurt you?"

"Son. Is there something you need to tell me?"

Just a bit sarcastic there. Obviously.

"Do you have 36 grand?" He said. Bloody teenagers.

"Son?"

"Da?"

"Tell. Me. The. Bloody. Story."

"Jesus Da, please. I tried to but you wouldn't listen to me. You were always busy. I needed the money to buy a ring for Fiona. You wouldn't listen so I had to borrow it."

"That was about an hour ago Will. And you wanted €2000 not €36000. You need to be straight with me son. Tell me what's going on, everything."

"I didn't know it was so much Da. Honestly. I thought I just needed to give him the money back."

"Who is it Will? Who do you owe the money to?"

"His name is...."

"Out with it son. Who?."

"He's this guy in the Cash for Gold place down on Main St."

"The pawn-broker place?"

"I don't know what a pawn-broker is Da, but this guy is what they call a loan shark."

"That's worse son. Much worse. Now please tell me why? Why a bloody loan shark? You have money don't you? What about your prize bonds and your savings? Where are they gone?"

"Da, you have to listen. Please, for once." His eyes pleaded with me. It was hard, but I reigned myself in.



"It was all around the time of my mate disappearing" I wanted to shout at him. This bloody mysterious mate. Why all the secrecy? But I waited. Finally. I was learning. I'm slow, but I eventually get there.

"I miss him dad. He was like no-one I've ever met. Fearless, generous, everybody loved him, he was a fantastic guy and a great fighter."

"A fighter?"

"Yeah. MMA. He was a champion. He was going to teach me as well."

"Why didn't you tell me son? You know I'd support you in anything you wanted to do."

"Not this."

"Of course I would."

"Stop Da. Just stop it. You wouldn't have."

"How do you know I wouldn't? I've nothing against martial arts. I love them. They teach discipline, respect, self-control."

"Do you love tattoos as well?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

He opened his shirt and drew his collar down.

*Oh please Jesus no. Please no.*

We were in danger of having our legs broken and our life savings stolen by criminals. I didn't need my beautiful son to become a small-town ink-splattered tracksuit warrior as well. Not after all these years of setting good examples, reasoning, explaining.

"It's part of the culture Da. You have to get them or you can't fight."

I was horrified. "Son... it looks like a... like a birth mark gone wrong for God's sake. I'll pay to have it removed, don't worry."

He shouted; "I don't want it removed. For fuck's sake Da."

Now I was shocked. He'd never spoken to me with such passion and force before. And I abhorred that language.

"You see now why I couldn't tell you? You're so narrow minded. Rocco was covered in these things and they were making him win fights. He was unbeatable."

My son seriously believed this tracksuit voodoo. I took a deep breath.

"Go on."

"Rocco taught me so much Da. Things, look, I'm sorry to say it, but things you just never could. About courage, fearless action, love, passion, doing what you love."

"But I know about those things."

"Do you? Really? Is insurance what you love then? Is that what you burned to do when you were my age? Fearlessly selling people policies they probably won't ever need as long as they live?"

"I love you son. I love all of you. That's why I go to work every day. That's why I do what I do."

"You see? All you have to teach me is compromise. Less than. Accepting the minimum to get by. Don't deny it, your whole life is a study in pure mediocrity. I don't want that Dad. I love you for God's sake, you're my old man, but I have to do things differently."

There was a pause while we both took in the words that had been exchanged. I still needed to know the details though. Even if I was the walking essence of lower middle-class mediocrity, I still had a problem to solve.

"OK. So tell me then, why a loan-shark? Why not your savings?"

"Well first of all, Rocco didn't believe in hesitating or chickening out of things. He believed in feeling and passion. When he disappeared I figured it was time to stop thinking about life and start living it. I decided I was going to go and get Fiona Finnegan or do my best trying."

"So you had to get the ring."

"Exactly. First off, there's no savings, they're long gone. But I did cash in the prize bonds you and Ma gave me. I sold my guitar, even my iPod and phone and it all come just short of the two grand. That's where I heard about the loan shark. I went to the cash for gold and they bought all my stuff from me. Gave me cash there and then."

"So why didn't you just go and get the ring?"

"I was going to but when I came out of the shop with the money I was mugged. In broad daylight. They took the lot."

"In Darklow?"

"Main St. At the t-junction."

"Jesus son. Who gets mugged on Darklow Main St?"

Will went silent. The poor kid. I didn't need to make it any worse, did I?

"Did you manage to get a look at the thief?"

"Get a look? They just walked up to me. Two blokes in black suits and shirts. I thought they were waiters or something. From the Italian restaurant. One of them just grabbed the bag with my cash and when I went after him they stuck a screwdriver up into my neck and told me to fuck off. They just walked off, down Lower Main St. They didn't even run."

"What happened next?"

"I was panicking. I didn't know what to do. Then Rafa came out of the shop."

"Who's Rafa?"

"That big guy who had you by the throat. He was really nice."

"The one who head-butted me?"

"Yeah, he was really sound."

"Five times he head-butted me."

"He can be really decent Da. He told me to come into the shop and sit down. I told him what had happened and he said not to worry about it, they would speak to the boss and see if they could organize a loan for me. I told them the whole story, about Rocco, Fiona, everything. They seemed really interested."

Oh my God. My son. My poor son. I was only beginning to realize just how badly I had let him down. He was telling his problems to loan sharks in the cash for gold instead of his dad. What did that say about me as a parent?

"Son do you think maybe you were had?"

"What do you mean?"

"Were they together?"

"The thieves? And Rafa? No way. No way. No way."

He looked to be on the verge of tears. I put my arm around him. It had been years since he let me do that. Not since he was ten years of age.

"Get off me Da."

OK. So he was too grown up already. I needed to accept it.

"What did Rafa tell you then?"

"He made a phone call to the boss. It was all serious, then he said my name and mentioned Rocco's name and they all had a good laugh and then it was all OK."

"They said your names?"

"Yeah, Will Small and Rocco McGinty. That seemed to do the trick and then he went to get the cash. He said I could get the money back to him in a week and there would be no interest and then only 10% a week after that if I couldn't find it. Fiona was going away on holiday with her family so I needed to get the ring then, you know? Before she left. So I took the money and legged it to the jewellery shop. "

He was almost crying now. I still couldn't think. He had been set up, that I was pretty certain about, but why would his name... our name mean anything to them? Rocco McGinty, somehow they name had a familiar ring to it, but I couldn't place it. Why would they suddenly lend €2000 to a schoolboy? Were they really that evil to lend knowing that the money would never come back, that the debt would only get bigger? Why the hell would they do that?

Will was shuddering now, trying to hold in the tears. I didn't want to see him cry. He wanted so much to be a man and I wanted him to be a man too. For his sake and for mine too.

"Look son, it's OK. Don't worry. Really. We'll work this out. For sure. Whatever it is we'll sort it out together, OK?"

"Will we Da? Will we really?"

"Don't worry son. Have I ever let you down before?"

"Jesus Da. I'm so sorry."

"Come on. Is there any more to this? I'll need to know everything, OK? No hidden details. Not if we really want to sort this out together."

Will pulled himself up. I knew he would. My boy. This whole thing might eventually make a man out of him.

"I went back to Rafa, that's the guy who...."

"The head-butt guy."

"Yeah. Jesus Da... He didn't believe me and you saw what he's like. He was all angry like, as if I'd made up the story, but he was laughing as well. I didn't know what was going on. In anyway, didn't he up the interest to 100% a week. I thought if I could just get the two thousand back to him, but you heard him, now it's 36k... fuck."

"No language Will. Effing and blinding won't help us. I don't care where we are or what's going on, we stay who we are, right? We're the good guys here. Now what about the 12.5% interest on the first week? Where did that come from?"

Will's eyes glazed over.

"He's just a big bollix Da."

His eyes began to mist over again. I couldn't bear it.

"I told you. Don't worry son, come on."

"What are we gonna do Da? Can you just give him the money and then I'll work to pay it back? I swear Da, I'll pay every penny of it back."

"We'll work it out son. We *will* work it out, but unfortunately it's not that easy. I'm an insurance salesman and your mother is a housewife. Do you know what that means? We might have about €9000 in the bank between us, so there's no way we can pay it off in one go."

"But you heard him Da."

He was going into a panic again.

"Listen to me son, you have to let me think. This is something new for me, but trust me, there's a solution for everything. OK? Now calm down. Take some deep breaths."

"OK, OK."

"If we did want to pay this off we'd have the €9000. Your mother and I also have a pension fund of a few thousand that we could cash in, but it would take a week at least for that."

"What about the house Da? Can you take out a loan or something like that?"

He was a clever boy in some ways.

"The house is worth a hundred and fifty thousand Euro less than we paid for it."

His jaw dropped. He was only 15 for God's sake. Nothing but music, girlfriends and pimples on his mind. Of course we had never shared any of our family's financial difficulties with him.

"What about our car? Can we sell it?"

"For scrap maybe. We might be lucky to get few hundred for it. No, it's better we keep it, it would cost us more not to have a car. Look, you're talking about our life savings here son. Even if we did decide to pay them we'd be thousands short. We would have to try and sell the few bits and pieces in the house that might be worth something, cash in our pension fund and even then we wouldn't have the money."

"There is something we have Da."

"There is?"

"Suzy's piano."

I didn't say a word. We had never been able to give much to our kids but the piano had been an exception. It was something I was proud of. I would have done the same for Will but the problem was that he wasn't interested in anything except girls. Nonetheless, he had always resented it.

"How much is it worth Da?"

"No way son. no way. We have to think of something else. That belongs to your sister and this is your problem, not hers."

"Tell that to those guys, not me."

"Let's say we agreed to sell Suzy's piano in order to pay your debt," he looked at the ground, finally a glimmer of shame, "we paid €9000 for it. Even if we got the full amount back we would still be very, very far short. Now listen to me son, son, we'll sell it if we have to, but it still wouldn't cover your total debt and if we can't pay this off in full, in one go, I think we both know that this will just go on forever. They'll keep coming back for more."

"No way Dad? Really? They can't do that, can they?"

"What do you think? We'll sell the piano if we really have to but there must be some other way out of this."

"There's no other way Da. You have to sell it. Either you pay the money or they come back here and ruin us."

"Will, forget about the Piano. I know you don't like it but it wouldn't solve the problem. We have an advantage though."

"Do we?"

"Of course we do. These guys are just criminals. We have the law on our side."

"Oh. That." He said.

"We'll find a way to beat this stupid criminal trash. We'll beat them. I don't care about the savings and the piano, they can all go if they need to, but we have to try something else first, before we just give in to them."

We sat in silence for a minute. Will looked at me and suddenly he was my little guy again; my little boy, willing to trust in his dad.

It felt good. Even in the middle of this horrible mess, it felt good.

I know it sounds weird, but my son and I hadn't been that close in the last couple of years. These things happen. They reach a certain age and then suddenly your little one is gone forever.

Sure it could have been something less grim that brought us together, but Jesus, you have to take the positives where you can find them, don't you?

"What about your boss Da? Would he lend you that kind of money?"

"That's a full year's wages son, so no, I don't think so."

His jaw dropped again.

"A year's wages? Are you serious Da? I thought you were on like €100,000 or something like that."

"35 and a half son. And that's before taxes."

"What is it after taxes?"

"Maybe 30 or so?"

He looked like he was going to cry again. The gravity of the situation and the utter mediocrity of his old man was beginning to become even more obvious. The former to him and the latter to me.

"Jesus Da, you can't be serious."

Even though it was all his fault, still, the implication made me feel like a failure. I was never that attached to money, but looking at it now, maybe I was just being selfish, lazy. My family needed money desperately and because I had always been content to just scrape by it was coming back to bite me now. Like it or not, right or wrong, I felt ashamed. Worse than ashamed I felt every inch the mediocre nobody my son accused me of being.

"I'm sorry Will. I wish I had more. They can have everything I've got. It's only money. They can have this house if they'll take it. You guys are more important to me than anything."

He didn't look convinced. I took a deep breath and swallowed a few, small, gristly chunks of pride.

"Do you have any money son?"

Of course it was a stupid question.

"What about this €2000 ring? Do you still have it? If we can bring it back to the shop then at least we'd have the original loan back."

"I don't have it Da."

"Jesus son, I hate to have to do this, but look at the situation we're in. You'll have to ask Fiona to give it back to you. I know it's hard but...."

"It's not that it's hard Da. It's impossible. She doesn't have it."

"I don't get it. If she doesn't have it and you don't have it then....?"

"I lost it."

He was nearly in tears again. I wanted to hit him. Really. But I'd already been stupid enough. I took a good hard swallow of pride, ignorance and stupidity.

"It's OK son, that's OK. Even better, we won't have to disappoint her. Where did you lose it? We'll go and look for it."

He was reluctant to speak.

"I tried to give it to her Da."

"OK."

"I wanted something, you know, romantic."

"OK."

"So I took her out on the paddle boats. Out onto the river."

Oh for God's sake. I wanted to shut my ears.

"I had it in my hand but she jerked when she saw it. she must have been excited. Before I knew it, it was gone."

The tears came now.

"It fell in Da. I'm a useless fucking idiot, I know.

"No son, no. Don't ever say that."

"I don't know how I could be so... so fucking stupid."

He spat the words out. Where was he getting the language? He'd never heard me use words like that.

"We were all the way out, right in the middle. The Garda sub-aqua couldn't find it now."

I wanted to hit him. Comfort him yes, but hit him also. He's a kid and I love him, but how could he have been so... so damn stupid.

We sat in silence another few moments while he sobbed and I tried to make sense of it all. In spite of everything, I wasn't planning on letting my family down. No way. Never had and never would.

"I'm going to the police son."

"No Da, you can't. It's no use."

"Yes I can. You just watch me. I'm a law abiding citizen. A tax payer. And this scum is a common criminal. He can't do this to us. I'll pay him back €2000 with reasonable interest and that's all he'll get or he can deal with the law. You're a minor. There must be a law against lending money to someone your age."

"It won't work Da. Half the Garda station owes him money. They're all afraid of him. Don't you know the Gardai are all short of cash and can't get loans anywhere these days?"

How come my son was stupid enough to go to a loan-shark to borrow money, buy a ring for a local tart and then drop it into a river, but then he was shrewd enough to know that all the Gardai in our local town were in debt to a criminal because of the recession?

Life is a mystery.

Darklow is a small town. Fifteen minutes later I was presenting myself at Darklow Garda Station. It was time to bring this madness to an end.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Theo hung up and turned the car towards Dublin again. As he drove, information about pimps, brothels, gangland figures and tattoo parlors was downloading to his phone.

Less than an hour later he was at St. James Gate. The smell of the hops being brewed from the Guinness factory filled his nostrils and made him think of old times. Minutes later he was at St. James's hospital. He went straight to the intensive care and found that there was no-one guarding the ward. Zero police presence.

*Good old Ireland, he thought, at least the recession has some advantages. No Gardai to explain myself to or get in the way of my questions.*

For all his respect for the Gardai he also knew that local police were never really of any use in an international investigation. Except for logistics. Maybe. But this young detective Melinda Casey might prove an exception to the rule. Or perhaps she was not that young. He hadn't met her yet. Although his first impulse was to go to Darklow and shake the small town criminal community into information about a beautiful 19 year old girl with a foreign accent who had been forced into the local sex trade, Melinda's information somehow made him believe that he should stay on course, that all these things were related. Solve the first crime and it would lead him to the girl he was looking for. It could not be a coincidence. He needed to find Sammy the Shark/Gino Ngata first and the only living connection he had right now were the surviving victims of last night's attack which Melinda had described to him in disturbing detail. They had survived a skin attack. This was rare.

"Excuse me." He asked a pretty nurse. "I am looking for the room where the two assault victims are recovering." He showed her his Europol ID and she smiled, a beautiful smile. When Irish girls were pretty they really were pretty. He had studied for a year in Trinity College when he was a young man and still remembered the beautiful young women he had known then. And one in particular who he had fallen for but never found a way to convince to be his. In fact, although even then he already had the easy confidence with women that made them fall for him today, still this girl had made him feel so vulnerable, so stripped bare of pretence that he had never been able to speak to her. He had always met her in company and just missed engaging, somehow, for the whole 9 months of his study term. Just once he had directly approached her, but he had crashed and burned as her pale green eyes watched him and waited to be charmed.

The nurse brought him to the intensive care unit and smiled again as he went in. She was pretty, but obviously this wasn't the time or place and it was a long time, several months now that he and Mirielle had unofficially committed to each other after years of stormy open relationship.

"Who are you?" One of the men asked him.

"You must be Peadar Crony?" Theo said. The other man, Michael Nulty had been badly sliced and peeled and was in no condition to talk, even if he hadn't been unconscious.

Peadar looked frightened.

Theo showed him his Europol badge.

"Did you get that in the pound shop?" He asked. Theo returned the badge to his pocket. "I don't have anything to say to you or to anybody else."

Theo sat down and then offered a cigarette.

"Those things aren't allowed in here you clown," Peadar said, "This is the Intensive Care Unit in case you hadn't noticed."

"Do you want one or not?" Theo held up the packet of Karelia Slims.

Peadar was a heavy smoker and desperately needed a cigarette.

"Go on then." He said.

Theo put the cigarette to his mouth and lit it for him.

"I still have nothing to say." The cigarette wobbled up and down on his lips. Theo watched for a while, allowing the hungry smoker take just a few long, grateful inhalations before stubbing the cigarette out.

"Thanks for that man."

"How are you doing?"

"How does it look like I'm doing?"

"It looks to me like you are afraid to even close your eyes.."

"So would you be bud, so would you. This shit was seriously, seriously fucked up and I'm not even joking."

"Let me introduce myself properly. My name is Theo Petrakis, and like the badge says, I am a Europol investigator."

"I don't want anything more to do with this shit. I just want to go home and forget this ever happened."

"Maybe one day you can Peadar, I really hope you can, but for the moment you have to accept that this is real and that you are in it and that you will have to do something to get yourself out. Do you even know why they did this to you and Michael?"

"Do you know why?"

"Tell me about the tattoos you lost and maybe then I can help you."

The terrified man remained stubbornly silent.

"Do you have children Peadar?"

"Boy and a girl."

"May I ask how old?"

"My young lad is 18 and the girl is 16."

"You are a lucky man."

"I know it. Even more now."

"I'm sure you do and I'm sure your family does as well. Let me tell you Peadar, I specialize in what they call the international skin-trade. Do you know what that means?"

"Prostitutes? Pimps? That kind of thing?"

"Yes. Prostitutes, pimps and that kind of thing. Sexual slavery. Child pornography. The sale of human body parts, particularly human skin. Skin that has been tattooed."

Peadar glanced down to his bandaged arms.

"That's right. And did you know that the average age of a prostitute abducted into the sex trade is 16? The same age as your daughter."



"Look, I know what you're at Theo, but Jesus Christ man, I'm just scared shitless, you know? I don't want any trouble for me and my family."

"I know it Peadar. And I'm not trying to scare you any more than you already are, but I am telling you that this is not the end of the story for you. No matter how much you want it to be."

"Look, just go away now will you? I don't need this. Not now...." He struggled weakly with the tangled tubes that bound him to the bed.

"It can end here, but you will have to let me help you. Trust me, the people who injured you will not think twice to take your children. They liked your tattoos. Does your son have tattoos? Is he good looking? You know the sex trade isn't just for girls anymore Some clients they also are demanding boys. Sometimes they like the boy to already be marked, but not always. Sometimes they will put the mark themselves, just like your sheep farmer's here in Ireland."

"Stop. Just fucking stop it. OK?"

Theo looked to the ground. Waited. He hated to have to do this. It was one part of his job he did not enjoy. Intimidating crime victims into speaking up for themselves and for others. But in this case it was imperative. The man's family could easily be at risk. He himself could be at risk. He had seen worse cases where traders had very specific orders to fulfill and would come back for more, either from a surviving victim, which was rare, or from their genetically comparable family, much more common, if they still needed more parts. Something about Gino's story made him particularly uneasy. There was a smell of psychosis. And then there was his niece, Elissa. If Gino had information then Theo would find him, one way or the other, with or without Europol to back him up.

"But why did they attack us? Michael and me? Two old guys like us." Peadar said.

"What kind of tattoos did you have?"

"Me and Michael are mates going back years. We had all sorts of tats, especially Michael, that's why he's so messed up. Jesus, they carved him up like a piece of meat, but they wouldn't let him scream. Or me either. They stuffed our mouths, held us while they tore strips off us. This orange shit was going everywhere. I thought it was some kind of chemical but the doc said it was the fat from under our skin. I thought I was hard but Jesus I've never felt anything like this. Michael just went out after a while, but I couldn't. They took his Yants off him, mine too. Only those. We went on holidays to Thailand, just last year, to get the real things, proper Yants, done the hard way by Buddhist monks. They were painful, but worth it. At least I thought so until this happened. What are those sickos going to do with them?"

"Sell them. Maybe. Or maybe not. Maybe this was a punishment. Could that be? Or maybe your Buddhist monk, he was a good one, with a good eye. Many buyers, they like this style. Then some guys, they just hate to see good art on people they consider to be ordinary. They might think that someone like you and Michael, just two good, honest, hard-working guys haven't earned this color the way they have. Maybe they had to kill a friend in order to earn what you are wearing like an ornament. Or perhaps they have been asked to rape someone. A person they know or are related to."

"Jesus Christ. I've heard of some things, but...." Peadar Crony shivered with disgust.

"You are both still alive so I think this was a warning to you. Probably they also make some money too if the art is good. But listen to me Peadar, there is no one going to help you here in this country except for me. Your Gardai are a brave group of men and women but they know very little about this. Skin-trade is not usual here. I am very sad to hear of this in Ireland, I love your country and I hate to see this disgusting trade spread to somewhere new. You have to tell me everything you can."

Peadar lowered his head but looked furtively at the sharply dressed Theo.

"Can I have another one of them funny cigarettes?" He said.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Garda behind the counter was a big man. Reassuringly big. The kind of big dependable country Garda that made you believe they would never, ever need to carry weapons in this country to fight crime. These guys were pacifists in action. He was a man in his late 50s, stout as an oak tree and with distinguished graying hair on the back and sides of a mature bald head. He had that friendly look that Irish police are so good at wearing. I already felt better. This was my world, not the sick universe of these small time violent thugs.

"Good evening Garda, I need to see Sergeant Mike Biggs please. It's important." I dropped in the first name because I hadn't met this Garda before and I wanted him to know that I was both local and a friend of his boss. Maybe I was wrong there though. He gave me a look that said 'I'm not impressed'. The town was getting big after all. There was a time I used to know all the local Gardai, but now there were quite a few new ones I hadn't even met. I suddenly was shocked then to see a dirty tattoo sticking up over this old man's shirt collar. I mean, the Gardai? Even the Gardai? And this old guy? He could have been almost twice my age. And on the neck? For God's sake.

"What's it about?" He said. He didn't seem so friendly any more.

But still. He was a Garda, so I put my prejudices aside and decided I would trust him. Maybe he wasn't as ignorant as he suddenly looked. I figured I would at least get his name though.

"My name is Dennis Small, who do I have the pleasure of speaking to?"

"Thicke," he said, "Garda Ian Thicke."

"I'm here to discuss an illegal loan shark operation Garda Thicke, right here in Darklow."

"Oh is that right now Mr. Small?"

"Yes it is. This is very serious matter officer. He has threatened to destroy my property and has made vicious and very, very real threats against both my person and against my son."

"Well, well now. Those are serious allegations alright. Do you have any evidence for these accusations?"

"My son and I will both swear to it."

"OK so. And how many of them were there on this occasion?"

"Two of them."

"Right then. Two of them and two of you."

He gave me a withering look.

"Did these two bold boys actually hurt either of you then?"

Bold boys?

"Yes officer. I was manhandled. One of them picked me up by the shirt collar and shoved me against the wall. I can describe distinctive tattoos that each of them had."

"Oh can you indeed?"

"Yes I can. The one who assaulted me had a Chinese character right here on his temple. The other had a tiger tattooed onto his neck. Typical lowlife criminal artwork."

"Is that the case? Were the tattoos anything like this then?"

He used a thick stubby finger to draw down his shirt collar and reveal the Chinese character tattooed onto his own neck.

"Is this the kind of 'typical lowlife criminal artwork' you mean?"

Obviously in my enthusiasm to denounce I had forgotten about his trashy and inappropriate tattoo.

Great.

"Look, officer. This isn't about the tattoos. I just need to talk to Mike about this. I've been threatened, my son has been threatened. To be honest with you I haven't been to a doctor yet but I think this guy may actually have done some damage to my neck."

The big idiot snorted to himself. A disgrace to his uniform. Mike Biggs may have been a bit obnoxious to me the last time we spoke but at least he was professional and adhered to police procedure.

"So do we have any evidence of these so-called threats?"

"Well, as I said, my son and I..."

"So your word against theirs then. Is that it?"

I stood with my mouth open.

"Allegations so, is what we call this. Tell me then, who is this master criminal at all, when he's at home?"

"He goes by the name Sammy the Shark."

"Hah!"

The big Garda snorted again. I hadn't thought about it, but I suppose it did sound a bit silly, cartoonish even.

"I... I don't know his real name obviously."

"Sammy the Shark? Is that it? Do you want me to write that down? Seriously?"

"That's the only name I have Garda."

"Come here to me now, you." His attitude became very serious, very quickly. "What's your name again?"

He stood and revealed that he was big tall guy, but like I say, people don't usually scare me. I'm hard to intimidate unless it's two goons in my house with sledgehammers and baseball bats threatening to break my children's' bones.

"My name is Dennis Small, Garda."

"OK then, Mr. *Small*." He said my name like it was an insult. "You say you've been threatened by a criminal called 'Sammy the Shark, isn't that it?"

"That's correct Garda, yes."

"Give me your fuckin' address there Small, so as I can get you processed and locked up for wasting valuable Garda time."

I looked at the copy of the Irish Sun newspaper on his desk, open at the titty page. There was a half eaten chicken burger with large fries and curry sauce beside it.

"Are you serious?" I said. "Do you know who I am? Officer, I run the residents association on the Sunnyvale estate. I'm on the Tidy Towns committee. I've worked for Dooley Insurance down on Main St. for the last decade and I know Sergeant Biggs personally. He lives in Sunnyvale. He's my neighbor."

I stopped to let it all sink in.

"I need your help as a Garda and as a Guardian of the Peace. You have a moral and legal obligation to protect life and property, both of which are at stake here. Now either you help me or I'll wait until Sergeant Biggs gets here and then we'll see what he can do."

"I know very well who you are Small. Sgt. Biggs has already warned us that a fellah like you would be comin' in here to stir up trouble and do our jobs for us. So don't go trying to act important on me."

"I'm only trying to report a crime Garda...."

"Report a crime? A Crime? What crime? Mr. Sammy the Shark was mean to you? He lifted you up, did he? Oh you poor thing now. And what about Herbert the Hyena? Has he threatened to eat your children? Or Rudolf the Rhino? He wants his money back too does he?"

I could only look. How? Here. In modern day Ireland. This.

"Listen to me Small and mark my words. You get out of here right now. Right now. Do you understand? I fucking mean it. Right fucking now or so help me I'll lock you up for pissin' on my leg while I'm eatin' my tea."

He was a Garda. He wouldn't physically attack me. I decided to stand my ground. All these years reading pacifist manifestos, how to resist aggression passively. Now was the time to put it into action.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying here until I see Sergeant Biggs." It took him a bit off guard. He wasn't used to this kind of resistance. Probably more used to boots and fists coming at him at closing time on Main St. However, it only took him a moment to recover himself.

"Sergeant Biggs won't help you Small. He has less interest in you than me and I have shag all interest in you. Now either you leave this station right now or I put you in the cells for wasting time."

"Wasting time? You're reading the Sun newspaper, gawping at page three boobs and stuffing your face with curry chips while I am attempting to report a serious crime."

"The boobs aren't on page three anymore you little twit." He said.

"Are you, as a public servant, going to take the details of this crime or not?"

"That's it." He said. The big idiot bustled out from behind the counter. I flinched a bit, I admit, but damn it he was still a Garda. He wouldn't actually hit me. I took a deep breath, swallowed into my churning gut and stood my ground.

"Come here to me." He shouted. In seconds he had me by the right arm and the scruff of the neck. "Get in there." He shoved me in behind the counter towards the cells. It was one of those experiences, like a car crash or a divorce; bizarre, unreal. He kicked me up the bum with his huge boot and it felt like my arse was breaking.

"What are you doing?" I screeched. I sounded like a girl for God's sake.

"Get into that cell." I fell into the cell on the floor and he banged the door shut.

"Now you shut up in there. I mean it. Do you hear me? If there's a fuckin' peep out of you I'll go in there and shut you up meself. Got it?"

Complete shock. I mean, I needed help. For the second time today I couldn't think straight. Logic just didn't seem to work. Did 'shut up' mean that I couldn't ask him for his Garda ID to make a complaint? I decided not to risk it. He had kicked me. I hadn't expected that. Even in my worst case scenario. I don't think even Will with his sudden knowledge of the financial circumstances of the local Gardai would have expected that.

I looked around the cell.

It was a cell. Meaning, I couldn't walk out of there. I realized that I couldn't do anything to help my family. I was literally trapped.

And I had less than 24 hours.

But I hadn't done anything wrong....

The Garda's eye came to the peep-hole in the cell door. He seemed satisfied that I was gone quiet and it slid shut again.

This was bad.

Will had been absolutely right. Going to the Gardai had not only been useless but had made things even worse.

I was sitting down but my heart was racing.

I don't know how long it took me but eventually I remembered something important and very obvious; I had Mike Biggs' personal mobile number in my phone. Being a Sunnyvale resident as well as a police officer he had given it to me for the neighborhood watch program I had set up years ago when we moved into the estate. I reached into my jacket to take out the phone and began searching for his number. The keystrokes beeped on the number pad. It was a new phone and I had forgotten to turn the sound off.

"Don't you fuckin' dare."

I looked up from the phone and saw Garda Thicke's eye in the peep-hole again.

"What?"

Before I could protest he was in the cell and had pulled the phone out of my hands.

"No fuckin' phone calls Mr. Tidy Towns. This is a jail not a fuckin' bed and breakfast."

"Don't I have rights?"

"Not for the next 12 hours you don't."

"12 hours?"

"That's right. You'll go home when I go home. Cutbacks. I'm on a double shift here so you can cool your fuckin' heels until tomorrow morning."

"I don't have that kind of time."

He glared menacingly down at me with my phone in his fat hand.

"This is your last warning Small. You shut up now or you get ready for a hidin' you won't forget in a hurry."

My breath was shaking. Our eyes were still locked together. He was fuming but my family were depending on me. The goons would be back in less than 23 hours. Take 12 from that it would leave me only 11 hours to find 36 grand. It would take me a *year* to earn that much.

"Please...sir...."

He turned around slowly and closed the cell door behind him, then turned back to face me. I looked up at him like a scared schoolboy. I didn't know what was coming next but my heart was really pounding now, so bad it was hurting my chest.

I took a deep breath. Swallowed hard and repeated; "Please...sir ...."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Peadar lowered his head but looked furtively at the sharply dressed Theo.

"Can I have another one of them funny cigarettes?"

Theo lit another Karelia Slim and passed it to Peadar who took a long, appreciative drag on the harsh Greek cigarette. The frightened and nicotine deprived man coughed his approval.

"It was very dark Theo." He said. "Me and Michael had been out for about 20 minutes and we were just passing the spot where the body was found."

"In front of Sgt. Biggs' house?"

"That's right, almost directly in front. We heard something in the bushes so we decided to go in and have a look. After that I didn't see a thing. They came out of nowhere."

"They?"

"Yeah."

"How many?"

"No idea. More than two anyway. I was boxed in the head and got knocked out for how long exactly I don't know. When I woke up I couldn't move. I was tied to a tree with my shirt and trousers off. I could see Michael. He was trying to scream but his mouth was stuffed. Jesus... they were carving him up."

"How many? What did they look like?"

"It was so dark, fuck it, there could have been two or three with him alone. They all wore black. I thought I heard some foreign, you know? Like east European or something, but then I heard a voice that sounded English so I can't really tell you."

"Male or female?"

"Sorry mate, I just don't know. Right after that I felt a blade go into me, slicing up my arm. I tried to scream but then I realized my mouth was stuffed as well. Fuck me, the pain. I'll never forget it. Look, maybe this isn't such a good idea. These people were sick, fuckin' sick. I just don't want them near me... near my family. Go on Theo. I understand you're doing your job but I have nothing more to say."

"OK. If you insist Peadar, but just one thing before I go. Something you should know."

"I don't want to know."

"Michael is a good friend of yours, true?"

"Yeah, the best. Since we were kids. And?"

"Did they tell you what they took from him?"

"Did they need to? I can see what they took off him."

"I don't think you can."

"I don't get you? What do you mean? They took skin off him, the fuckin' sick bastards."

"They took a little more than skin Peadar."

"No, no. No more. What? What did they take?"

"Your friend only has one kidney left. Didn't they tell you?"

He went pale. Ashen and then his face screwed up in revulsion.

"Why?"

"Why do you think? Somebody somewhere needs a kidney and has the money to pay. Unfortunately this wasn't all they took."

"Don't, don't..." Peadar's breath was getting short. "Go on, tell me."

Theo hated every minute, but if he could get any useful piece of information he had to do it. It was his job.

"You were very, very lucky Peadar, they just took skin from you. You must have had some nice artwork on your arms."

"What about Michael, what else?"

"Look at his bandages."

"I can see them. What is it?"

"Someone was looking for eyes Peadar. And they had the money to pay."

"No... please God... please, that's not true ...."

"Look at the bandages. They took your friends eyes Peadar. He will never see again. Never see you, his wife, his children."

Peadar was crying now. Incoherent. Filled with rage, shock, fear, hatred, remorse.

"That fuckin' idiot Small. Dennis fucking Small."

"Who is Dennis Small?"

"Dennis? He's no-one. Just some stupid little cunt on the estate who always has to be sticking his nose into things. A fuckin' skinny little do-gooder who's afraid of his own shadow and calls the Gardai if a dog pisses on his front lawn."

"What does he have to do with all this?"

"He's the idiot who got us to go out on the neighborhood watch patrol. Now Michael is blinded for life."

"Do you have contact details for Mr. Small?"

"Sure, in my phone you can find him in the address book under the 'idiots' folder."

"If he's such a fool then why did you go out to do the patrol?"

"Well, yeah, he is an idiot but he's often right about stuff and he does make sure there's never any graffiti or litter on the estate. If anyone looks suspicious he's the first on the phone to the Gardai. If you have a problem with a neighbor then he's the man to call and he'll always get something done. He's a twat, but he's a useful twat."

Theo scrolled down through the contacts list under idiot. They were ordered by last name. There were only two names under S; Small, Dennis and Shark, Sammy The.

Theo put the details into his own phone.

"Oh yeah, and Derek Reilly. He was big into it and he's a hard man. Very into keeping the estate safe. If Dennis is the organizer of stuff on the estate Derek is the enforcer, the muscle. Kids rarely make the mistake of vandalizing anything in Sunnyvale unless they are absolutely sure they can get away with it. Nobody messes with Derek and he was into this patrol idea. His number is in there too if you want it, only he's not under idiots, he's in the regular folder."

Theo took his details as well.

"Mike Biggs was the only one dead against it. He's usually into this kind of civic action, co-operation with the Gardai kind of thing, but I suppose he knew how serious this crime was."



"This is Sergeant Michael Biggs?"

"The very same."

Theo took his personal number as well.

"Are you done with that phone yet?"

"Of course." Theo replaced it in the locker drawer.

Peadar drew deep on the Karelia Slim again.

"What else do you want to know?"

"Tell me about the tattoos."

"You mean our tattoos?"

"That's right. There must have been something different. Harvesters rarely hit twice like this in two locations so close together and so soon one after the other. In fact, it is unique. I need to know why they came back and why they attacked the two of you. There has to be a reason. You have to tell me what was on your tattoos and you have to tell me why they picked you. What is it that you and Michael have in common?"

"Jesus, the tattoos were nice, but for Christ's sake, who would want them?"

Theo waited.

"They only took the tattoos you got in Thailand right, nothing else?"

"That's right. Anything that looked Cambodian or Thai."

"What do you mean 'looked'?"

"Well it was Travis who gave us the idea to go to Thailand. You should see his tats. He's covered in the real thing and he knows his tats inside out. He told us where to go in Bangkok and he gave us one or two himself as well. He's bloody good. We probably didn't even need to go that far to get them, there's nothing wrong with his."

"Travis is your tattoo artist in Darklow?"

Peadar nodded.

"That's right. Tiny little shop, just off Main. St, up the lane way after the T-junction. He's local. From Dublin originally though, like half the town."

"What kind of tattoos did Travis give you?"

"Warrior tattoos. For protection he said. We just got them because they look the bleedin' business, you know?"

"I need his number. Do you have it?"

"Be my guest."

"What else do you and Michael have in common?"

"We both live on the estate."

Theo waited. There was something else. Something was being held back.

"I need the truth Peadar. Trust me, if they wanted something more from you then they will be back and I won't be able to help you."

Peadar took a nervous puff on his cigarette. "There is one thing, alright? We both owe money."

"It's Ireland Peadar. Like Greece, everyone owes money."

"Yeah but not like we owe it. There's a guy, an English guy, he's been lending money to everyone around here for the last year or so. His office is the Cash for Gold place at the crossroads on Main Street. Sammy is his name."

"Tell me more about him."

"Well, I don't know his full name but Sammy the Shark is what he goes by. He's a fuckin' scumbag but people need the money, even people who look like they don't. This recession has everyone running from banks and moneylenders."

"So what's different about this guy?"

"He's a fuckin' psycho is the difference. Most of them are just ordinary hard men but not Sammy. He seemed OK in the beginning, like any of them, but once the debts began to go bad he started getting very heavy. He'd send around his two guys to smash up you, your house or both. No problem battering your family either. No shaggin' mercy at all.

"Anyway, Michael and I both owe him a few grand each. Not that I borrowed that much, only a few hundred originally, for the kids holy communion, but fuckin' hell he packs on the interest and if you don't have something to give him every week his guys go mental. Now Michael wouldn't be easily pushed around and he had been making payments regularly, up until he lost his job that was. He was laid off three months ago. Sammy got wind of it and sent his guy around to see about getting the debt paid off with his severance package. Michael's initial debt with Sammy was about €6000. Enough to catch up on 6 months mortgage arrears in one go, get the debt collectors off his back. Then he could manage a restructured mortgage, interest only for a year and pay off Sammy on his terms over the course of six months. In the meantime, hope and pray that things would get better."

"So what went wrong?"

"Michael was three months into his deal with Sammy. His principal amount was down to just three grand and he was on target. But apparently Sammy doesn't like that. He likes to have ongoing payments. Once you're in, you're in. Like fuckin' protection money. Now Michael worked for a local company that processes credit card transactions. The lay-offs and the severance packages were high profile. Michael got just under €10000 for all his years there. Not much, but something to tide him over. He figured he would pay off Sammy in one go and have seven thousand left over to pay the mortgage for a few months while he looked for another job, retrained, whatever. At his age not much chance really, but Jesus you can't give up, can you?"

Theo nodded in assent.

"So suddenly Sammy couldn't be reached. Michael tried going down to the Cash for Gold place but they told him to fuck off basically, that he needed to deal directly with Leo, the greasy little fucker that handles our debt. But Leo wasn't picking up the phone so that was that. Michael left a message and waited. Two weeks go by. Michael is wondering what's going on. Leo hasn't contacted me either so we are wondering what the fuck is going on. Eventually we both get calls from someone called Francois. He tells us we are two weeks over due and our debts, which had both been at around the €3000 mark are now over €13000 and weekly payments have been upped from just over €250 per week to over €1000 a week to get them paid off within term."

"I don't understand? Where does €13000 come from €3000?"

"The original interest rate was 12.5% on each weekly payment of €250. But you miss a week and they add on 100%. You can do the bit of maths yourself."

Theo nodded. He understood very well the mathematics of creditors and moneylenders. Despite his well paid position and generous expense account his taste or quality and preference for excellence meant that he was always running just behind his ability to pay.

"Michael didn't have the money to give them. Neither do I. So what do you do?"

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

Peadar took a nervous drag on his cigarette.

"Well, I tried that."

"And what happened?"

"Well, they said they couldn't help us unless a crime had been committed and so far none had."

"Had you been threatened?"

"Not explicitly, and even if I had I wouldn't have been able to prove it."

"Which Garda did you speak to?"

"I spoke to Mike Biggs. Sure I know him from the local soccer club. Our kids go to the same school."

"Did he offer to investigate Sammy's business? If he is an illegal loan shark then there is a lot the Gardai can do."

"I said it to him."

"And what did he say?"

"I've never seen anything like it. I know Mike well. I don't drink with him or have him over to the house but I've known him for years. He went ballistic. Told me to fuck off out of it and leave police business to the professionals. He said I should come back if I had some evidence to the allegations. It was fucking mad."

"Why do you think this happened?"

Peadar looked nervous again.

"I don't want to comment on that. I don't know. But let me tell you about Michael. He told me the cops would be a waste of time and he was right. He told Francois to go fuck himself and that if he wanted Leo's usual payment for the last two weeks he should come and get it. Otherwise he could go and get fucked."

"What did Francois do?"

"He just laughed and told him he better have the money in 48 hours or else."

"Or else what?"

"Nothing. He didn't say. That was the night of the first murder."

"So you had another 24 hours to get the money together."

"That's right."

"So why were you out doing a neighborhood watch patrol?"

"The murder made us nervous. Couldn't exactly say why but Michael felt we could be better sticking together with the patrol group, especially Derek Reilly. It would be unlikely Francois or Leo would come looking for money with so much action on the estate."

Theo let silence hold for a while, allowing Peadar to finish his cigarette.

"Do you think it was his guys who did this to you?"

"I don't know. I didn't think about it until now. I didn't recognize any of them. But being in hospital won't stop him sending his guys around to collect. I have to get out of here and get some money together... before they..."

He began to choke up.

"My kids..."

Theo had heard enough.

"OK Peadar. Thank you very much for your cooperation. Don't worry. You did the right thing. There's nothing you can do here, but Sammy is going to be very occupied for the next few days I can guarantee it."

"Please don't go near that guy Theo, unless you know for sure you have something. He'll fuckin' ruin us and you as well if you mess around with him."

"He's a small fish my friend." Theo gave a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. When I approach him it will be with good reason. You and your family are safe. Sammy is local, a little guy, but he has gone too far and this has already gone

well beyond Sergeant Mike Biggs and Darklow Garda Station. It is out of your hands now."

Peadar didn't look convinced.

"You rest now Peadar, just relax and try to recover. If you think of anything else, or if Michael revives and can speak please give me a call right away. Take this."

Theo held out his card but Peadar didn't move.

"All due respect there Theo, but I don't want that thing anywhere near me."

Theo nodded, replaced the card in his pocket and wrote his number down on a paper napkin instead.

"Anything at all occurs to you, just call."

An hour later he was coming into Darklow again on the north exit. The Europol database revealed a little more about Gino Ngata, aka Sammy the Shark. The pseudonym, it turned out, was a common one used by loan-sharks in the East End of London. Those using the name were many, but those using the name who also held a connection to human trafficking, prostitution and more specifically to the skin-trade, were a much more exclusive group. In all, they numbered just four. Of these, two were currently doing time, one was known to be still active in London and a fourth had gone under the radar during the course of the last 12 months. This latter was a convicted pimp, an ex or perhaps still current member of the notorious C-Block gang of Bethnal Green, a suspected pedophile, rapist and drug peddler. Direct connection to the international skin-trade and human organ trafficking was a recent addition to his portfolio of accomplishments.

This individual was possibly off radar as a result of internecine strife within the C-Block or for falling foul of any one of the various killer whales that this particular little fish may have been sharing the pond with.

Interpol, it seemed, was already on the trail of this incarnation of Sammy the Shark where he had become invisible to Europol 12 months previously.

Theo swiped his smart phone and the soft voice of detective Melinda Casey came to his ear.

"Theo?"

"Ciao Melinda, I have a question for you."

"Fire away."

"Ever heard of Gino Ngata?"

"I think so, yeah. Wasn't he an Italian pop star or something? From the 80s?"

"There is an international warrant for his arrest."

"Really? His singing wasn't that bad!"

"He's not a pop star Melinda. He's an ethnic Maori small time organized crime boss and seemingly a very big time psychopath."

"Oh." She felt like a fool. Worse than that, she was blushing. Luckily she was on the phone to Theo and not with him in person.

"Don't worry. I also have not heard of him before today. How about Sammy the Shark? Familiar with the name?"

"No, sorry."

"He was a popular crooner from the 1960s."

"Really?"

"No, not really. It's an alias we think Gino Ngata is using here in Ireland. Can you run a check on it for me?"

"Certainly. Of course. I'm at my desk, I'll do it right now."

*I'm an idiot, I'm an idiot, I'm an idiot.* Melinda berated herself.

"I'll call you back as soon as I have something."

"I'll stay on the line if you don't mind."

"OK. Who is this guy anyway?"

"He's a loan-shark in Darklow where the skin murder and the assaults took place."

"The country is full of low-lives like these at the moment."

"I know. It is the same in Greece. Parasites who feed off the poor after the banks have already stripped them of everything they possess."

"I'm not getting anything here. What's his connection to the case?"

"I'm not sure yet. He is involved in skin trade and the two assault victims in Sunnyvale owed him money."

"You think that's why they were targeted?"

"I'm not certain. Anything is possible, but for sure he will know something."

"I'm surprised there's nothing on him here."

"Don't be. He's a professional and has been evading Europol and Interpol successfully for the last 12 months. "

"Still.... "

"There may be more to this than just organized crime by the way. Whatever the explanation something here just doesn't add up. Usually skin-trade victims don't leave remains. Harvesters are careful to use everything valuable and then destroy whatever is left. If Sammy is really a skin-trader then you can solve half the missing persons cases of the last 12 months in one go."

Melinda felt her stomach tighten, almost to nausea. She had worked many cases and was a seasoned officer and detective, but this kind of serial murder and mutilation was new to her. Theo continued.

"Healthy adults of sound mind simply disappear and it is a mystery to all concerned. There is nothing to bury, nothing to mourn, not even the certainty of the person being alive or dead."

"Well he's in a good location for his business." Melinda said. "The Wickford Mountains are a graveyard for the disappeared. The proximity to Dublin makes them a perfect spot for bodies to go away forever. I used to go on picnics in the Wickford hills with my family when I was a child. Then I used to go hill-walking there when I was a student. When I was a Garda I used to go for drives to get my mind off the job. Since I started police detective work in Dublin I don't go there any more. Unless it's work."

Theo didn't say anything. He knew only too well the effects a life mired in crime had on people. He personally didn't like waterfronts, forests, docklands, warehouses. The list went on. Even airports brought the horrors of his work life to mind. One reason he liked to fly privately whenever he could.

"The one certainty we have here is the ongoing lucrative trade in skin and body parts and the occasional interception of goods in transit. We know that such things have been coming from Ireland. Without this knowledge it would be questionable if the trade even existed here at all."

Melinda took a hard swallow.

"What does it mean?"

"To leave a skinned and hollowed out cadaver in almost full view on an Irish housing estate in a small town is either some very sloppy workmanship or something very intentional and very sinister."

"OK. Do you want Tom and I go down there and interview this guy with you?"

"Actually I would prefer if it was just you and I."

Melinda's throat went dry. She felt butterflies. She wanted this, but it terrified her, for reasons she didn't want to share with Theo Petrakis.

"But not yet. Hold off. Don't mention him to anybody yet, I don't want some clumsy attempt at intimidation from your department."

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Let me contact the local Gardai anyway, they might know something about his activities."

"Don't do that either. The local Gardai won't tell you anything."

"Don't be silly Theo, this is Ireland, not some corrupt third world country."

Theo bit his tongue. Metaphorically.

"Trust me Melinda, they won't tell you a thing and we do not wish to alert him to our investigation. Not in this way at least. If this is the same Sammy the Shark, Gino Ngata, then he is wanted already on several international warrants in jurisdictions where the death penalty is applicable. It can be assumed that he will not willingly be taken alive. He is thought to be responsible for several police deaths internationally. If the local Garda force were to confront him, and I don't believe they should, they would be in great danger from Sammy and his associates."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Interpol is already monitoring him. Can you find out who is liaising with them from the Irish police force?"

"That would be us."

"I don't understand. I thought you had never heard of him."

"I haven't. I mean that there is no such investigation. If there was then I would know about it already. We are the Interpol *and* Europol liaison unit so there must be some mistake, I was just speaking to Interpol...."

The north exit for Darklow came up ahead.

"Wait Melinda, I'm entering Darklow now. I need to find a place to stay." It had been a long day, beginning with his press conference in Lyon, flying to Santorini for love games with Mirielle, then to Dublin and the Phoenix Park Headquarters, straight to Darklow and Sunnyvale from there. Driving back to Dublin to interview Peadar Crony and now back to Darklow again. He suddenly realized how exhausted he was.

"Just check to see if there is something you are missing, if Interpol has only recently contacted you. Otherwise don't mention a word to anyone. I'll call you back tomorrow. Ciao Melinda."

"Theo, wait ...." He hung up.

Melinda was mystified. She tried to call him back but he didn't pick up. What did he think he was going to do in Darklow at 11pm on a Tuesday night?

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

My chest is killing me. It still has the rawness of a fresh tattoo all over it. The materials aren't quite what you would get on the outside and so pain is a larger part of the process, but that's better. Puts more power and energy into the artwork. We're nearly there but it's not finished yet. Me and my baby back together is only a part of the dream. There's more. We made a good start on this one today, but still plenty left to do.

Where were we then?

Garda Thicke turned around slowly and closed the cell door behind him. Then he turned to face me. I looked up at him and had the unexpected sensation of wanting to vomit. He had already manhandled me, kicked me and thrown me to the ground. It was just me and him now, in a closed cell in the Garda Station. He would do anything he wanted and it would be my word against his. My heart was pounding so hard it was giving me chest pain.

I took as deep a breath in as I could and repeated; "Please...."

The clumsy kick came almost in slow motion but so did my clumsy reaction. It felt like he had cracked my ribs into my lungs like dry firewood. My breathing got even more difficult now. I felt tears begin to well up in my eyes.

*Don't cry Dennis, don't cry. You can do this. I told myself. Pacifism in action.*

"Shut. Up. Last fucking warning Mr. Fucking Tidy Towns."

He left the cell.

I couldn't stop the tears from coming out now. It wasn't the Garda and it certainly wasn't the kick in the ribs, as painful and unexpected as it was. It was the shocking realization that I had been a complete idiot. Not just now, but for most of my life. Worse again, I had just succeeded in pissing away a good half of the time I had to save my son from having his legs broken or worse. I had let him down. I should have been out scaring up money or getting help of some kind, instead there I was, sitting in a locked jail cell late on a Tuesday evening, looking at the floor like a gormless idiot and crying like a child.

I struggled with my breath, gasping to get the air in and calm myself down. I heard the shutter close on the spy hole. Garda Thicke must have been very happy with his work.

The pain in my ribs was searing, worse than anything the loan-shark heavies had done to me but I guessed that I didn't have the right to medical attention while Garda Thicke was on duty.

*Think straight Dennis, think straight.* I was shouting at myself inside my own head. I slapped my face from side to side and sat on the bench. Where had all this begun? The murder, that was it. The murder on the estate. Was that connected to this? Everything had been just fine up until then, and that was only three days ago. Sunday night. Today was Wednesday. First there was the murder, then the attacks, next the loan-shark and now finally, here I was locked up just because I went to the Gardai for help. And where the hell was Sergeant Mike Biggs when you needed him?

Now I have had a nervous break-down once before. It made me a lot stronger as a result, but I was struggling here.

I swear to you, you don't know what kind of country you are living in until you've been arrested.

Maybe you don't need to know what kind of country you are living in.

I ended up sitting on the bench for hours, afraid to move, terrified for my family, trying to connect up the dots, but it seemed like suddenly my brain just couldn't form clear thoughts any more

Eventually, mercifully, I did fall asleep.

I don't remember lying down but I do clearly remember the early morning slap across the face that woke me up.

"Get up Tidy Towns." Thicke was shouting at me.

"Aaahhh!"

You would be surprised how shocking that can be.

"Get up and get out of here now."

I started to get up but it wasn't fast enough so Thicke grabbed the back of my collar and swung me off the bed and through the cell door.

"Up and out the fuck with you."

Somehow, after my experiences of the previous day, this sort of behavior was almost beginning to feel normal.

"Fuck off with you now and I'm warning you, I don't want to see you in here again. Understand?"

I nodded my head and limped out of the Station and into the morning sunlight.

"Tidy Towns?" He shouted after me. "Don't forget your statutory right to a phone call."

My phone rattled out onto the ground beside me where Garda Thicke had thrown it. He appeared to have stamped on it at some point as well.

Hilarious.

The sun is rare in Ireland and usually lifts the spirits when it decides to come out. Today however, it radiated nothing but menace.

I picked up my scratched and cracked phone and texted my son to come and meet me. He arrived shortly. I didn't have the courage to speak to him yet.

"Jesus Da, where were you? We only have 15 hours left."

"Where do you think I was? I told you I was going to the Gardai."

He looked guilty.

"I thought you'd bailed Da." He hung his head. How he could look so grown up and so like a little child at the same time was a mystery to me. He had hung our entire family out to dry, but at the same time he was still my little guy, even if he was taller than me and I hated to see him like this. Somehow it set my thoughts straight again. I couldn't let him down. I could do this. Jesus Christ, God in heaven, on the graves of my mother and father, I would find a way.

"We're going to the bank son, we'll take out as much money as we can and offer it to them, maybe buy some time or at least bargain them down."

I would sort this out. I would not let him or Suzy or Marianne down.

The problem we had however, was that the bank wouldn't open for another three and a half hours.

The longest three and half hours I have ever sat outside a bank or outside anywhere in my life.

The town was dead at that hour except for one oddball jogging up and down Main Street and stopping to stare into the Cash for Gold place or better put, evil



loan-shark pawn shop. Probably looking to buy some person's priceless heirloom or last remaining possession for a song. I know I would never set foot in a place like that. He passed us at least twice and I glared at him each time. I've never hated a jogger so much in my life. Happy nitwit. Not a care in the world.

By 10.00am we were at the cash withdrawals counter. The guy looked sleepy and a little irritated at our promptness.

"Let me have €9000 please and just leave the balance in the account."

He tapped away at the keyboard and waited.

We waited.

"I can let you have €3500 mate. But that would leave only 1 Euro 36 cents in the account. We need to have at least €25 to keep the account open so I can let you have €3475.

"If you want to keep the account open that is?"

"Excuse me? I'd like all €9000 please."

"Only €3500 left mate. Of which €3475 you can have unless you want to close the account."

"No, no, no. Let me see that. There should be €9000. Is there a savings account? My wife has been making deposits every month for the last three years."

He examined the screen.

"Your wife did make some deposits about three years ago. Pretty steady for a while as well, but then there was no activity for a long stretch and in the last 3 months she, or someone, has been withdrawing a couple of thousand at a time. You might want to speak to your wife mate."

"Don't call me mate. You're a bank teller, not my bloody mate."

He shrugged. "Take it or leave it."

"I'd better take it then, hadn't I. *Mate*."

"OK. Large or small bills mate?"

"Large."

"We've only got small, Mr. Small. Hey, that's funny, isn't it? Ha ha."

He began to count out the bills.

"Da, I don't get it. Where's the rest of the money?"

"I don't get it either son. We're short about €5500. Only the other day I asked your mother about this and she said we were up to 9k. She wouldn't lie. I don't know what's going on."

I took out my phone and dialed her number.

"Who are you calling Da?"

"Your mother. She can speak directly to this guy. Maybe she can sort it out."

Will went white.

"Jesus Da, please no. Don't call Ma. She'll go mental."

He looked more afraid than he did when the goons were threatening to kill us.

The call went straight to voice-mail.

"Please Da, no." He was nearly crying again.

I ended the call and put the phone back in my pocket.

"You're right son. It's better this way."

Marianne and Suzy had gone away for a couple of days on their 'girly' mid-week break. Suzy hadn't really wanted to go, she hated missing her Piano practice, but she's a good girl and went along for her mother's sake.

"Let's try and get this sorted out before they come back. If we can work it out then that's all the better, they don't need to know all the details, you know? No need to tell them what happened to me with Rafa or any of that kind of thing."

He nodded.

"We won't spoil their time away."

The teller put our money into an envelope and slid it across the counter.

"There you go mate. Look after that. Don't spend it all in one shop."

Cheeky little git.

We went home and prepared ourselves for Rafa and his side-kick to arrive.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

After a comatose night of rest in the Darklow Bridge Hotel Theo didn't intend wasting any time the following day. The Cash for Gold shop was a prominent local feature in the town and could be seen from the window of his hotel room looking down over the town's main cross roads. The shop was prominent not because of any ostentation, but rather because any open business stood out on the half boarded up and derelict empty shell of Darklow Main Street. He awoke early and decided to go for a run to wake himself up before breakfast at the hotel. He was the only runner out and Main Street was deserted except for two forlorn and anxious looking individuals standing outside the offices of the local bank.

*There is a sad story there. I wonder why they wait so long.* Theo thought. He had seen them as he put his running gear on, and then they were there as he jogged past to look into the window of Sammy the Shark's Cash for Gold outlet. When he jogged past a second time he noticed the older of the two stare at him the whole length of Main Street. He felt a wave of empathy for some reason, although they did not look like beggars and did not ask him for money. The look in the man's eyes was like a glimpse into the gates of hell.

But he had more important things to do.

The opening hours of Darklow Cash for Gold were from 10.30am so he still had time to kill. He had a light breakfast, reviewed his plan for the day and then checked his voice mails. There were three from unknown caller which he assumed were from his creditors. He deleted all three without listening to anything more than the introduction. He knew what the substance would be and did not have time for bankers and collection agencies today. There was a chance that here in this little lost town on the edge of Europe he would find a link to Elissa and that was all that mattered. She had been abducted almost a decade ago. Theo blamed himself. So did his brother and sister-in-law. They hadn't spoken to him since the initial investigation was closed. If there was a chance of finding a warm lead then his financial affairs could be sorted out later.

He watched from the breakfast room of the hotel as one large goon rolled up in front of the Cash for Gold and unlocked the shutters. He was thick set, bald and shaved with several necks rolled up above his jacket collar. Semi-detailed tattoos covered most of his face, neck and head. Some Chinese, some Thai but mostly just common gangland fare. A small queue of incongruous people had formed to the right of the entrance. It was miserable, if orderly. There were old and young, male and female. No-one wanted to be there. The goon didn't acknowledge them and they said nothing to him. After he entered the shop they just stood there. Were they even queuing for the Cash for Gold? There was nothing else in between that Theo could see. He took some pictures with his camera phone, then crossed the road and entered the narrow little premises that was the bane of Darklow's new debtor classes. As he went in, the first person in the queue, a small, shabbily dressed man, stopped him. There was a terrible

smell of rotting seafood. Theo stepped back from him, but the smell only got worse.

"Where are you going?" He asked.

"I go in to speak with him." Theo said.

"The end of the queue is back there."

"I did not know you were queuing for him. Why have you not gone in already?"

"He's not ready yet. He'll tell us when."

Theo checked his watch. It was 20 minutes to 11. The opening hours said 10.30am.

"I won't take up much of his time." Theo said. The man took a step back. "Suit yourself." It sounded like a warning.

Inside, the goon was seated, resting his fat elbows on the counter and preparing to sink his teeth into a sloppy breakfast roll. The smell of rotting seafood was intense. Theo nearly gagged. It wasn't the debtor outside but the big man in front of him. A tabloid newspaper lay open as reading material and as a safety net for the droppings of his massive sandwich. He glared at Theo.

"What the fuck do you want?"

"Are you Sammy?"

He took a wide, struggling bite from the bursting roll, forcing as much in as he could and began to chew. Chunks of meat splattered down onto the newspaper. He chewed slowly and stared at Theo, looking him up and down. All kinds of people came into the shop, people in rags, people in furs and designer clothes, local and foreign. Theo was only mildly different from the usual deadbeat.

"Get outside and wait like the rest of 'em until I tell you to come in."

"I need to talk to Sammy. It is about skin."

The thug sat up straight.

"You fucking wot?"

"I am interested in skin. That's all you need to know."

"I don't know what you are talking about mate. Can't you read? It's Cash for Gold, not a bleedin' butcher shop. Now fuck off."

Theo took a closer look at the goon's tattoos. There was a tiger, a 6 pointed star, a badly drawn Chinese tattoo meaning 'insane' although not the 'crazy' type of insane, rather just plain medically insane. Chinese tattoo artists have a lot of fun with uneducated westerners. Most disappointingly for Theo, the skin art connoisseur, this idiot had ACAB tattooed across his knuckles; All Coppers Are Bastards. Breathtakingly unoriginal, or could one say refreshingly retro? Only one tattoo was of real interest, the outstretched ends of a spider-web that extended around to his throat from the back of his neck. Theo had seen this marking before. Blood rushed to his throat, visions of Elissa as she was the afternoon before she disappeared flashed through his mind.

"Six years in prison. At least. A low level enforcer in the loan-shark trade, a thin disguise for the skin-trade. The Chinese character on your neck translates to English as 'retard' and on your knuckles you have ACAB?" Theo snorted his contempt. "I mean seriously, perhaps you should think of going into some other trade you low ranking, badly dressed, underpaid piece of shit. You think that cartoon tiger on your head makes you an 'enforcer'? Go get me your boss before I piss all over you. Tell him that Theo Petrakis from Europol is here and tell him not to fuck around."

Theo ended with a smile. Although he was little more than half the size of Rafa, Sammy's main 'enforcer', he found it hilarious and exhilarating to threaten a

thug twice his size just to see the reaction. Small man syndrome at its most exquisite.

Rafa looked momentarily shocked and outraged. Scandalized even. But then a grin came across his fat, pasty face.

"OK you fucking rodent. We'll see about you then."

He shouted into the back of the shop. As he turned his head a little more of the spider-web stretched around his fat neck.

"Sammy? Bloke name of Theo Petarkis or some such wants to see you. Europol he says."

"You are very kind." Theo added.

A voice came from the back room.

"Show him in."

"Be my guest." Rafa's face was plastered with a mocking grin. He was looking forward to this.

Theo walked carefully by him and found his way along a short dark corridor to Sammy's office. It must be a long walk for the innocent, Theo thought, for the penniless locals who have to come here and beg for extensions on their extortionate loans.

The office was squalid, dark, cluttered. Sammy sat behind a cheap desk wearing a shocking pin-stripe suit. His short black hair was greased back like a Hollywood wise-guy. He was a big man, bigger than Rafa and muscular where Rafa was obese. His jaw was large and square and his tattoos more fine and intricate than those of his henchman. In the dark Theo was unable to make out much of the detail.

The big man motioned to the cheap plastic chair in front of his desk. Theo sat down while Rafa locked up the shop and took his place in the doorway directly behind him.

The seasoned policeman took a breath and felt the adrenaline flow. One way or the other there would be a conflict this morning. His luck and instinct were with him. Less than twenty four hours in Ireland and he was here, ready to harass the most evil and vile scum on the island. Sometimes even he believed the things some of the European press said about him. That he was an avenging angel, a super-cop who struck fear into the heart of organized crime.

While Theo seated himself Sammy took his time to examine him. Finally he leaned forward a little, bringing his large beaked nose and inked skin into the light and revealing the swirl of art that covered his face and neck.

*Elissa*. Theo thought. Had she also looked into these eyes? He took another deep breath. He would need to be calm, controlled, no matter what.

"Skin?"

Theo nodded.

"I should bury you right now in the fucking basement for even saying that word you fucking cunt."

Theo smiled.

"Who the fuck do you think you are mate? Making accusations like that. Taking fucking liberties."

Theo held up his two small, delicate hands to show he was unarmed before reaching into his inside pocket with fingertips to take out his ID.

Sammy squinted.

"Europol. Hahahaha. I thought I must've heard wrong. Now that's a fucking good one. Does anybody know you're here then? Is there anyone else? Hahah, oh my god."

"Mr. Shark ..."

"'Mr. Shark', oh fuck me, Mr. fucking Shark. Whatever next? You are going to make me shit myself, Mr...?"

"Petrakis."

"*Petrarkis*. Oh lovely, great, yeah. Greek then are we? I love Greece so I do. Sunny, cheap, all the kebabs you can eat. Lovely pussy as well. And so easy too. I try to get meself down there a couple of times a year at least. Shag a couple of the local birds, you know. Arse-hole sex is what I like, a bit dirty I know, but then, you lot invented bum-sex, init? Socrates, Plato, all that lot? Dirty buggers I know, but you can't blame 'em, can you? And anyway, most Greek birds don't mind a bit of that, now do they? Filthy lot they are, just the way I like 'em." He looked Theo directly in the eye. "Do you like arsehole sex Europol? With your Missus? Does she like it?"

Theo didn't reply.

"Oh, excuse me, your good lady wife may not even be Greek, how rude of me to make the assumption." He grinned. "Now then, what can I do for you Mr. Europol, International Secret bloody Service Agent?"

"I am here to investigate a crime."

"Now hold on just a minute there Agent Europol and again, please believe me when I say I don't mean to be rude, but do you even have jurisdiction? Since when does Europol send dwarfs, excuse me, I mean 'little people' like yourself, around Europe to ask perfectly honest business men like me stupid fucking libelous questions such as what you have just had the cheek to be asking me?"

"I haven't asked you anything yet Mr. Shark."

"Get out of it. Go on. I mean go. Now. While I'm feeling generous. You have no reason to be here, no reason to be harassing me. Now fuck off before I have to deal with you the old fashioned way for trespassing on my fucking property."

"Sammy, you can throw me out and then just wait for me to come back with the warrant and you will have to go through all the pain of cleaning up your little shithole shop and your home to hide whatever it is you need to hide, or you can just answer a few simple questions and I will be on my way."

There was no reaction from Sammy. But he did stop laughing.

"Now why don't you just relax? After all, I am just Europol. What harm can I do? I can't even arrest you, so why not just help me with my investigation and I will be on my way."

Sammy reconsidered for a moment. Killing a copper no problem, but burying a Europol agent maybe wasn't such a good idea after all, despite what he had been told. A few bogus answers to some general questions might be the end of it as far as his involvement was concerned. Just a right shame that after building up his network and business in Ireland for so long, pocketing all the local coppers and living a virtually anonymous life, now the eye of international crime investigation had him on radar again and in the form of this diminutive, cocky and altogether very annoying little Greek.

"Oh fucking hell. Go on then. Should be good for a laugh anyway."

Theo smiled. Small man syndrome. Always seemed to work with the big guys and Sammy was a large man.

"On June 17th, last Monday morning, the body of a male victim was found in the Sunnyvale estate. Do you know anything about this?"

"Fuck no."

The evening of the same day two local men in the estate were assaulted. Do you know anything about this?"

"No. Is that all?"

"There's more. Do you know what is the international trade in human body art?"

"Sadly, Mr. Europol, yes I have heard of this terrible scourge on those of us" He gestured to his own tattoos, "who chose to express ourselves artistically through skin-art."

"What do you know about it?"

"Nothing beyond what anybody else with absolutely no connection to that abhorrent trade would know." He smiled. "Now is *that* all Europol?"

"Agent Petrakis is the name Sammy and no, it is not all, not yet. Do you know anything about, how should I put it, the trade of loan-sharking here in Darklow?"

Sammy got to his feet.

"That's it. I've had enough, fuck off out it *Petrarkis*, I'm a busy man. I've answered your fucking questions and I've been polite to you, so now you just fuck off before I have Rafa throw you out."

Theo turned his head fractionally towards Rafa. "You mean this fucking idiot here?" He kept his head slightly turned to Rafa but his eyes remained on Sammy. "I'm not ready to go yet so you better make a choice about what you're going to do."

Sammy ground his teeth while his thoughts processed.

Europol.

If they knew who he was why didn't they just make an arrest right now? What about the phone call he had received. Don't worry about him they had said. You can get rid of him and there will be no repercussions.

He stared at Theo. He was still on his feet, hunched over his desk like a giant tattooed bulldog.

"How about it Sammy? If you have nothing to hide why would you want to cause a lot of trouble by throwing me out of here? Or even more foolish, attempting to assault me?"

Sammy was locked in indecision. Unusual for him. He didn't like it. He had already begun the process of calling in all his debts and squeezing his clients for every possible penny any of them could scrape together. Just in case he had to leave the country quickly.

"Come on Sammy. Don't be a fool. Just sit down and send this walking breakfast roll out to collect some debts for you."

The hulking figure sat back down and motioned for Rafa to leave them alone.

"You sure boss?" He asked.

"Go on Rafa, fuck off, you heard your boss. Get your stinking vagina out of here and wash or something, that smell is revolting to me."

Sammy smiled nodded his agreement and Rafa left, his nostrils flaring in exasperation, his spider web tattoo writhing back and forth as he shook his head in disbelief. Right in the centre of the web Theo noted the hieroglyphic eye. He was right. They were connected. He reassured himself of the location of his pistol and felt the familiar light pressure against his skin where his shoulder holster housed his loaded weapon. He had meant what he said to Melinda. There was no

doubt that Gino Ngata would take life if he felt threatened and intangibles such as membership of the Gardai or even Europol were unlikely to prevent him.

"OK Europol, now you have my undivided attention. So what's the deal? What do you really want?"

It was Theo's turn to measure his thoughts.

"I do so hope you ain't gonna waste my time today Europol, I have a lot of loan-sharking to catch up on today, a lot of pensioners and single mums to intimidate if you don't mind, so let's have out with your special desire, whatever it is, and see if we can talk business. This is a safe space right here. Non-judgmental, whatever it is you want, we can talk."

"I don't have any business to discuss with scum like you Gino." The revelation of his identity sliced through Sammy. He fired air through his nostrils like a rhino on steroids.

"May I call you Gino?"

"You better have something very fucking good for me Europol. My patience is wearing very, very thin with you."

Theo worked hard to keep the smile from coming to his face. This was good. Make them angry, infuriate them and the game was already being played.

*I'll find you Elissa, don't worry. I'm coming for you.*

The thoughts flashed through his mind. He didn't want to admit to himself that body parts may be all that was left to bring home to the family of his brother. He knew he had no evidence but experience had taught him that sometimes he just needed to act and worry about the consequences later. This certainty, this essential lack of fear was the difference between him and a thousand other law enforcers.

"I don't care about your loan-sharking Gino."

"If you want me to listen at all Europol, I suggest you call me Sammy."

"I don't care about your skin-trade."

"You ain't got nothing have you?"

"I don't care about your human medical tissue trade."

Sammy was beginning to smile again.

"I don't even care about your pedophilia, your raping, your human trafficking or your police homicides."

"Ha, ha. You must want something very fucking rare indeed from me little policeman. Something very exotic. I can't wait to hear this."

"There is one single thing I care about and if you can help me then all those other bad things will go away."

"Is that so?"

"Trust me. You have a very easy life here. If you want it to continue that way then you had better think about making me your new best friend forever."

"Oh had I then?"

"Tell me everything you know about the girl called Elissa?"

Sammy looked down at his two big hands spread out on the desk in front of him and said nothing.

"Think very carefully Gino, about what you say next, if you would like your tomorrow to be the same as today."

The Shark stared at his hands some more, took a deep breath and then raised his eyes to Theo. His face bore a huge wide grin.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

"Is that it Europol? Because if it is you had better be on your way."

"It's your choice Gino. You tell me what you know and it's the end of our story together. Or, you fuck around and then your tiny, vicious little world begins to fall apart, one arrest warrant at a time."

Sammy didn't move. His grin didn't move. He had been warned about Theo; knew he was coming and had been told not to worry. They had said to just 'take care of him' as best he saw fit. It wouldn't be the first time he had made a law enforcer disappear and he would enjoy the slow task of peeling him down, literally, to the essential weakness underlying all human bravado. But something in him just couldn't believe that Theo wouldn't be looked for, intensively, if he went missing. He had heard of Theo Petrakis before. He wasn't just your average toothless Europol flunky; retired European police force past their prime. He was Mr. Euro Super Cop and he had been causing all kinds of trouble in mainland Europe where the big fish played. Hence the phone call. There was certainly no question that he knew a lot about Gino's criminal past, way too much, so in that sense the game was up. But the big man's instincts had never let him down yet. Despite his enemies all over the world, criminal, legal and personal, he was still on, still wealthy, still powerful, still gnawing and screwing his way through life as much as he ever was.

"Now just calm down there Theo my son. There's no need to get ugly here. First off, hand on heart, I have no idea who this Elissa is, alright?"

"It's your choice Gino." Theo got up to go. An urgency came to Sammy's voice.

"Sit down, sit down. Come on. I don't know who she is but I may be able to find out for you."

"No games Gino. Just tell me what you know or I leave right now."

"Look, Theo, I honestly ain't heard this girl's name before. What's it to me really? I give you the girl's name, you fuck off, end of story. Why would I lie?"

"No games."

"Sit down for fuck's sake. Look, maybe this bird was going under another name or something. Maybe I have come across her but you need to give me a bit more than just a bleeding name."

Theo sat down. Drummed his fingers on the desk and let his gut ruminate. Sammy the Shark was a hard one to read. Ruthless psychopaths usually were. Something in the genetics of their mental illness made them expert liars by nature.

He reached into his jacket and took out a small, worn photograph of a young girl. Not more than 10 years of age. He held it for a moment before sliding it across the desk to Sammy.

The grizzly thug picked it up between one thick finger and thumb. He looked for a moment and then grinned again.

"Pretty girl Theo, very pretty." He gave a salacious grin. "How old is she then, eleven? Twelve?"

Theo didn't move, didn't respond.

"Elissa, very pretty name too. No way mate, I would remember a girl like this. Ha, ha. Believe me." He held up the photo. "May I keep this?"

"Find out something about her." Theo held out his hand for the photo. "You have twenty-four hours to call every vermin you know who is involved in your disgusting trade and get me some information. If you don't I will be back and next time I won't be alone."

He reached out a hand for the photo but Sammy tucked it back into his palm with his thumb and forefinger, just out of Theo's reach.

"Ha, ha. The short arm of the law, eh Theo?"

He returned the photo.

"I'll see what I can do." He shouted for his goon. "Rafa!" The big man lumbered into the room bringing his peculiar body odor with him.

"Get this little piece of shit out of here." He winked at Theo.

"No need for that Mr. Shark, I can find my own way out." He looked at Rafa. "Keep your sweaty stinking hands off this suit breakfast roll." Rafa drew back. Theo turned to Sammy. "By the way, nice tattoos. That little tear-drop by the left eye, tell me, did they hold you down while they made it?"

"Get him out of here!" He screamed at Rafa

"No need, no need," he gave Rafa a stern look of warning, "I am going. Bye bye for now Gino. Here is my card." He had no time for the little charade of pride between gangland boss and flunky. "You have 24 hours. Don't let me down."

After his interview with pure evil Theo went back to his hotel. He put through a database cross-reference request to the Hague for Sammy/Gino to see what else he could find and then called detective Casey to see if she had found the Interpol liaison officer for him yet.

"Detective Casey? It's me, Theo. Do you have anything for me?"

"Nothing Theo, there is no Interpol investigation relating to Sammy the Shark or Gino Ngata."

"Impossible."

"What did you find out? Is it the same guy?"

"My interview with Sammy was most enlightening Melinda. Yes, this is the same guy."

"How can you be sure?"

"The tattoos. Gino's whole life is right there on his skin. His face is covered in Ta Moko."

"Ta Moko?"

"Yes, Maori tribal markings and his are authentic."

"Tribal tattoos?"

"No. Ta Moko. They are different. Tattoos are inscribed with needle and ink, but the Ta Moko is a design carved into the skin using the Uhi, a traditional chisel formed from a fragment of Albatross bone. The stain is made from charcoal or from burned caterpillar flesh and fungus."

"Eewww. Sounds awful."

"There is nothing awful about it Melinda. It is a powerful tradition, highly ritualized and with great meaning to the recipient. Of course it is painful too. All part of the process and worthy of respect. Unfortunately Sammy's Ta Moko are the real thing."

"I don't understand, is he a criminal or not?"

"At one time he may have been held in genuine respect but unfortunately there is a twist to his markings. While most facial Mokos depict tribal and personal history, Sammy's are a slightly more modern version. And something doesn't add up. His name, is Ngata, a North Island name."

"So?"

"His Moko are all South Island."

"Can't it just be that his family moved?"

"I don't think so. Even those who move still have links with their traditional roots and maintain these connections in the Moko. I would guess his name might be Koata or Rarua or maybe Te Ati Awa, but not Ngata. I think he is covering another identity."

"So he's not Sammy the Shark obviously, but he's not Gino Ngata either?"

"Exactly. And there's more. The style of his moko and some of the precise markings identify him as a member or ex-member of a particularly sinister urban Maori gang based in Australia."

"Australia? I thought Maoris were from New Zealand?"

"They are, but there are plenty of Maori gangs in Australia, especially Melbourne and Sydney. One of them is the DMS or 'Dope Money Sex' gang of Central Auckland which has spread to the Bankstown suburb of Sydney and from there the DMS formed links to international Asian and South American drug and people trafficking gangs."

"From these origins Sammy's gang evolved and was shunned even by the maturing old boys of the DMS. This new gang specialized in making money from all the trades that even the DMS found taboo; child porn, the use of child 'warriors', organ 'donation' and of course always the latest and hardest drugs. Most taboo of all, particularly for those of Maori descent who hold a reverence for the art of tattoo, is the skin-trade. The purchase and sale of hi-value skin work to discerning international connoisseurs, predominantly from the wealthy countries of South East Asia, but also occasionally from Western buyers of American and European origin."

"Good God."

"That's not all."

"OK. Tell me." She noticed she had accidentally copied Theo's verbal mannerism. She was glad again that she was on the phone and not speaking face to face. Luckily he did not seem to notice.

"There is a tear-drop tattoo on Sammy's cheek."

"Tear-drop?"

"That's right. Just under his left eye."

"Pretty standard that isn't it? Means you lost someone while in prison, right?"

"The tear-drop tattoo has different meanings depending on where you get it. Or where it is given to you. In Australia and New Zealand no-one willingly has this mark put to their skin. It is a mark of humiliation at the hands of other prisoners, a warning to the prison population about who and what you are."

"Even if Sammy is not involved in the crime we are investigating, we need to watch him for the crimes he is involved with."

"I don't understand Theo, what does it mean?"

"There is one kind of crime other convicts don't like to be associated with in prison."

"You mean he's a sex offender?"

"That's right. A pedophile. Or at least his fellow prisoners thought so and I would have no doubt that they are correct. Are you sure there is nothing on Sammy?"

"Nothing. No investigation, no record. Are you sure he's so dangerous?"

"There is one more thing?"

"Jesus Theo, what else are you going to tell me? Does he eat children as well?"

Theo paused. The remark was flippant but he didn't want to talk about such things, not unnecessarily anyway. He didn't want to think about them. In his world, even if not encountered yet, anything and everything was possible.

"Maybe not that Melinda, but trust me, you will need to get your superiors involved here, we may need special branch, SWAT teams, you never know."

"You mean the Emergency Response Unit. We don't call it SWAT here."

"OK, whatever you have, please get them."

"I'm not sure who you think you are Theo, or who you think I am, but this is Ireland, Republic of. We'll need a bloody good reason to bring out the heavy guns."

"There is good reason Melinda. They are connected to something much bigger. Whatever is happening here goes far beyond local trafficking in Ireland."

"You'll still need good evidence for that."

"Have you alerted G2?"

"The Irish secret service?"

"Yes. The intelligence service."

"We don't work very much with G2. They're more military, terrorism, international threats."

"Get in contact with them and see if they know anything about Sammy or one of his bagmen Rafa."

"Uh... OK, I'll do that. But seriously Theo, we're going to need a lot of evidence to get the ERU out."

"Don't worry, we'll get it."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Tattoo artists."

Great. Melinda had followed Theo's rise to stardom in the fight against international crime, but this was all he had? He expected her to take a giant professional risk that could blight her career while he nosed around the tattoo parlors of Darklow town?

"They are always a good place to start for this type of crime. Can you do a police database search on all tattoo artists in Dublin and surrounding counties with criminal convictions and then call me when you have the results?"

"OK Theo. Will do. By the way, did you hear about Michael Nulty?"

"No. Is he beginning to recover?"

"Recover? He died an hour ago."

While his cross-reference against the Interpol database was under way Theo headed back out into the streets of Darklow Town. There was one artist in particular he wanted to meet. Travis McGinty was Peadar and Michael's tattoo artist and it would be hard to ignore a dead client, especially one who had been killed for the tattoos you gave him. He called the number he had for him but there was no answer. He found him easily enough from Peadar's directions.

Phat Tats, was the name and the catalogue art in the window included some rudimentary tribal and traditional skin art, already a step above the other couple of skin peddlers he had passed on Main St. Stepping inside the tiny, brightly lit shop revealed some excellent proprietary art work; some on the walls, some on the waiting clients.

Skin work was taking place in the middle of the shop while the other clients watched and waited. The artist was wiry, gangly, far too long for his trade but expertly hunched over his client. Thin, craggy, shaven headed, a good fifty years of age with a small white goatee dangling under his chin. The art visible on his neck, shoulders and arms was high quality, tasteful and eclectic. There were some fresh, raw Sak Yant markings protruding from under his wide, upturned collar and he moved a little carefully as though still in pain from the work.

"Take a seat man." He said to Theo without taking his focus off the work.

The seats were small and the little room was crowded. Only one seat remained and was already half occupied by an overweight long-haired leather clad middle-aged biker on one side, and a hulking, skunk-haired, tracksuit wearing, junkie football dad on the other. Theo looked down at his own bespoke Hong Kong vicuna and lambs' wool fiber suit. He decided to remain standing. There were several more customers to go but Theo didn't mind, in fact he always enjoyed watching the beauty of good skin art slowly taking shape under the hand of a skilled artist.

For the simple ones the artist was unnaturally fast. He had a steady hand and an excellent eye for detail. Only one client received anything of note, a beautiful custom made design with a Cambodian motif. Very impressive.

Once the last client was gone Travis introduced himself.

"How are ya bud? Travis is my name. What can I do you for?" He extended an inked hand.

"Pleased to meet you Travis, I would like to talk about tattoos, Ta Moko, and Sak Yant in particular. If you can spare me a little of your time."

Travis was uneasy, he gave Theo a second look as though noticing his pristine, manicured appearance for the first time. He did love to talk tattoos though, especially with someone who understood his art.

"Drop by drop fills the bamboo'." Theo translated the Khmer lettering form Travis's right forearm. "I like it. Did you go to Cambodia to get this?"

Travis smiled. He was surprised.

"I thought you looked more Greek than Cambodian bud. No, there's a Cambodian bloke in Manchester who does them. Flew over for a lads weekend away, you know? Ha, ha. Nice though isn't it."

"And accurate too. So many people with foreign tattoos end up with garbage or insults."

"Not if you're part of the trade though and I do speak a bit of the lingo as well. So listen bud, I'm nearly ready to close up here. What kind of art would you like?"

"I don't need a tattoo Travis, but I do need your help. I'm from Europol."

"Euro what?"

"Europol. I'm here to find out what happened to the man who was murdered, mutilated and stripped of his tattoos on June 17th."

Travis was deadly serious now.

"I don't know anything about that bud. So listen, nice to meet you and all, but I need to close up shop here if that's it?"

"Travis, forgive me, but I have a good instinct for people and I am absolutely sure that you are going to be able to help me with this."

"Well my instinct is pretty bleedin' sure I won't, so I'll ask you nicely, one more time, to leave the shop. All right?"

"Did you know that two more local men have also been assaulted on the Sunnyvale estate? They had skin removed from them. The second one died last night in hospital from his wounds. His name was Michael Nulty. He was a client of yours."

"Never heard of him. Now I'm telling you mate, get out. Now. I don't know anything so you can hop off home."

"What do you think will happen to your trade Travis, if suddenly more people begin to lose skin here in your neighborhood? People who have gotten tattoos from your shop. Your country is in a bad recession and your clients, they are not exactly of the affluent classes, are they? I see the quality of your art, it is very good I admit, but you are in a very little corner of the world here and nobody yet really knows the significance or the detail of these murders. But they very soon will and once the news gets out, well, I hope you have some other trade you can count on or you may be forced to join your customers in the queue for social welfare payments."

Travis took another long look at Theo.

"Are you sure he's dead?"

"Yes of course. The Gardai just informed me this afternoon He died at midday."

"Jesus Christ." His craggy face scowled at the floor.

"I spoke to his friend Peadar today."

"How's he doing."

"He'll be OK. He was luckier, but they might come back for more and he isn't guarded in the hospital."

Travis stared at the floor.

"Did you know that your art had come into such demand Travis? Only high quality art of course. Not the holiday souvenirs, girlfriend's names, football teams and other rubbish. Did you know that it is becoming quite common to lose these things in other parts of the world?"

"I've heard of one or two cases alright but not here in Ireland."

"Just one or two cases? Travis, I am full time investigating only this type of crime. It used to be that human beings were actively harvested for organ donation, but some years ago someone of entrepreneurial spirit decided to remove some skin as well as deeper tissue. Nowadays it only makes sense to harvest body parts from people who have interesting skin art. The skin can fetch more than the transplant organs in many cases."

"Don't tell me anymore. None of this has anything to do with me and I don't want anything to do with it."

"You don't have a choice Travis. The trade has become so lucrative that the top buyers are now placing orders for specific types of skin."

"Get out."

"Do you know what that means?"

Travis moved threateningly forwards. "I said get out." Theo didn't move.

"It means they need tattoo artists to fulfill the orders." The two men were very close together. Travis was an old Karate black belt. He hadn't trained in a long

time but he could still recognize the physical confidence in another accomplished martial artist.

"Is that an accusation?"

"Occasionally there are orders now for living organs, live beating hearts to be removed and filmed for the pleasure of the client."

"Shut up! That's enough. I told you I don't have anything to do with this."

"They put the tattoo to the victim that they would like to own and then they take it away. It is a very interesting business Travis and now it is right here next to you. Maybe even you have something to do with it already, perhaps without knowing it." Travis's breath betrayed his agitation but still he said nothing.

"Your art." Theo looked around the little tattoo parlor "It is very good. Certainly good enough to get a price on the skin market. And you've been busy. Plenty of 'cattle' to fulfill orders."

Travis's hands jerked into a close range jab but Theo was ready. The tall man's bony hands were bent back over his forearms in a move that Travis recognized and knew he could not easily break.

"OK, OK. Let me go for fuck's sake." Theo squeezed a little harder before pushing him away.

"Which school was that?" He asked. Theo straightened his suit, adjusted his cuff-links.

"You need to talk to me Travis. Unless you want to be drawn far deeper into this than you are able to survive."

Travis rubbed his old shaven head and sucked in his gaunt cheeks.

"Look, Theo, I'm just afraid OK? This stuff scares the crap out of me. I just don't want to get involved is all."

"I think we both know it's too late for that, wouldn't you agree?"

Travis nodded his head.

"Tell me," Theo said, "Do you have any children?"

Travis lifted his gaze from the shop floor and looked into Theo's eyes with a malice that took even the seasoned investigator by surprise.

"What do you know about my son?"

Bingo. Emotion. Pay-dirt The shameful currency of Theo's interrogatory art. There wasn't time to hate himself, only time to move on, close in, get nearer to the heart of evil in small town Ireland.

"He got himself into trouble, didn't he?"

Travis's chin trembled.

"I can help you Travis. And I can help him."

Travis looked down again. He put his face into his hands and began to shake. Theo looked at his watch. He needed to be patient.

When Travis raised his head again he was laughing.

"You don't have a fucking clue mate do you?"

"Tell me about your son. Before it's too late."

"It's already way too late for him Theo. He's gone. Missing bloody person."

"Have the Gardai been informed?"

"The Gardai? Don't make me laugh. Yes they've been informed but he was 'known' to them, know what I mean? They think he's just off on one of his holidays. But he ain't. He's dead. They got him."

"Who got him?"

"Who do you fuckin' think?"

"Gino?"

"Who?"

"Sammy."

Travis nodded his head and gave Theo a searching look. He took out a silver cigarette case, engraved with swirling ta moko designs and popped the lid. Nine neatly rolled joints lined the container.

"Smoke?"

"No thank you. How old was your son?"

"19."

"Were the tattoos yours?"

"A few of them, yeah. The biggest and best of them."

"Ta moko?"

"Ah, ah," he nodded, "Sak Yant."

"Cambodian or Thai?"

"Thai."

"The market is very strong for these at the moment."

"So it seems."

"Don't blame yourself Travis."

"Why would I fuckin' do that? I'm gonna get these bastards, twist them 'till they fuckin' bleed and then skin them. When that's done, I might be nice and then kill them as a good deed."

"Forget about it Travis. You won't win. It will go wrong for you, trust me."

"Can you do any better?"

"You help me. Give me the right information and I will get them. I promise you."

Travis lit a thin spliff and took a long, deep drag.

"My son Rocco met Sammy only recently. Not more than four weeks ago. In a beer garden. We were together. Beautiful summers day, you know? We don't get too many of them around here. Anyway, I recognized the cunt. Everybody around here knows him. My son knew about him as well but neither of us owed the fucker any money. Like I say it was a sunny day, Rocco had his shirt off and he was showing off his tattoos. I mean, that's what they're for with young lads, right? He was only a kid, still learning. Anyway, Sammy came over to us and asked Rocco where he got the big Yant on his back. It was one of mine. One of the best ever. Destiny, kinship, protection, honor and courage. Everything that Rocco was about. I tried to shut him up. Warn him, you know? 'Cause I know what that cunt is all about and I didn't want his business.

"'Me Da.' Rocco says and nodded at me. Sammy wanted me to work on him but there was no fuckin' way. He asked for an appointment but I told him I was booked out. 'Till when?' he asked. 'Until you're dead.' I said to him."

Travis coughed and gave a grim laugh.

"Should've just given him the fuckin' tattoo."

"It would make no difference Travis. If he wanted Rocco's tattoo he would have taken it anyway."

Travis gave him a haunted look.

"About two days later I got a call from one of his guys. Rafa. Big smelly fucker. Sammy wanted me to come in and do some work for him. He said it wouldn't be polite to refuse. I told him to fuck off and asked him if that was polite enough. He told me I could either make the ink or they would take it. One way or the other it was gonna end up with them. I didn't take him seriously, although I did tell Rocco to watch himself while he was in town.



"A couple of days later and he went missing. I fuckin' knew something was up, but Rocco has run away before so the cops weren't interested. They still aren't."

"So how do you know it was Sammy?"

"How do I know? The fucker called me to tell me it was him. He still wants me to work for him. After that? Fucking cunt."

"Are you sure your son is dead? Have you seen his body?"

"I'm sure. Don't ask how, but we know he's dead."

"Who's we?"

"Me ma and me. His sister as well. One or two others."

"You have a daughter too?"

"That's right. Fifteen years of age."

"Where is she now?"

"Do you think I'm telling you? What if Sammy gets his hands on you? No way mate. The fewer people know where she is the better."

"Where did your son go missing?"

"He was at his training club up in Dublin. MMA, you know? He was a champion. He left a bit later than usual to get the last bus home to his mates flat and that's the last he was heard of."

"Are the police still looking for him?"

"I told you, they aren't interested. But they fuckin' ought to be because it could be one of them next."

"What do you mean?"

"He owns them down here. Debts. They're all in to him."

"How do you know so much about Sammy and his business?"

Travis tapped his nose, winked.

"That's not good enough Travis. I need to know what you know if you want me to keep your daughter and you alive."

"Look. It's the clients mostly. Most of them owe money to the fucker and one or two have even been up to that house of his to have the frighteners put on them."

"To the Cash for Gold?"

"Ah, ah. That's where it all begins. When it gets serious you get an invitation to his eco-house out in the mountains."

"Where's that?"

"You don't want to go up there mate, not without a fuckin' army."

"If I need it, I will bring an army with me."

Travis didn't look convinced, but he took out a note pad and began to jot down a map with a Biro. Theo's heart began to race as he watched the lines fill out into a definite location.

*Elissa. Don't worry. I come for you.*

Travis stopped drawing.

"What is it?" Theo asked.

The tall, gaunt man thought for a minute. Maybe this was it after all. This guy was better than the Gardai at least. Ajarn's tattoo had taken he himself out of the picture and replaced him with someone else. Why couldn't it be this guy? But there was a mark on the forehead of the guy in the picture, a crescent shape. He looked at Theo. No mark.

"There's something else you need to know."

"OK."

"He has something belonging to me."

"Go on."  
"Something from Rocco."  
"The tattoo?"  
Travis nodded his craggy head.  
"Why hasn't he shipped it already?"  
"Not sure. Maybe he wants it for himself."  
"OK. This can help Travis. Take my card and call me if you have...."  
"There's more. And don't, for fuck's sake, give me your card."  
He put the neatly embellished square back into his pocket.  
"I know where he has the skin."  
"What do you mean?"  
"The skin. Rocco's tattoo. I know where he keeps it."  
"So where is it?"  
"It's in his office safe at his house in the Wickford hills."  
"How do you know it's there?"  
"Don't worry about that. Just trust me. I know."  
"Well this is not useful Travis. Either you tell me how you know or you might as well forget about it, there will be nothing I can do."  
"I have eyes in Sammy's house."  
"Who is it?"  
"Can't tell you. Won't tell you."  
"Then forget about it. Why you have even bothered to tell me I don't understand."  
"You get that skin and you have the bastard, simple as that."  
"So if you know where it is, why don't you go and take it?"  
"If it was that easy the guy wouldn't be in business as a loan shark. He's a fuckin' psycho man. You don't need proof of that. Anyone goes in there half cocked or even fully cocked will end up the same as Rocco. Do you know who Rocco was?"  
"He was your son."  
"He wasn't just any kid. He was a martial artist, a champion, no-one could beat him. He was on his way to the top. MMA. Cage-fights, the toughest guys around."  
"So? He was only human. You can be heavyweight champion and your wife beats you to death while you sleep, I've seen such things happen."  
"Not to Rocco it couldn't."  
"Well he was a human being, wasn't he?"  
"He was protected."  
"By who?"  
"By these." Travis motioned around the room to the photos and the artwork.  
"He believed he was protected by his skin-art?"  
"Not 'believed' Theo. He was. My son was bullet proof. Literally. Nobody could touch him. In the ring he had to string them along just to give the punters their money's worth."  
"Do you really believe this kind of thing Travis?"  
"Have you been out to the far East Theo? You sound like you have. You must have seen some of the things these guys can do."  
Theo looked at Travis, weighing up his options. He had plenty to tell, but hated to talk of these things outside certain circles.  
"Where would your son have found someone to give him such a tattoo?"

Travis searched in the drawer of his work bench and drew out a pen light.

"Turn off the lights there." He pointed to the switch on the wall and then pulled the shutters down outside the main window. When it was dark inside he rolled up the left sleeve of his black t-shirt and clicked on the pen-light.

His arm was covered in tattoos which showed up as dark shadows under the black light, but one mark fluoresced more brightly than the others. Theo recognized it immediately. He looked Travis in the eye then bowed his head fractionally.

"OK." He said and clicked the light back on. "So how did they get your son if he was so well protected."

"I'll tell you how, but only if you promise me something."

"Go ahead."

"I want that fuckin' scumbag dead."

Theo's phone buzzed in his pocket. The ringtone identifier let him know instantly that it was his boss and that it was urgent. "Malaka." He hissed. "Travis, I have to take this call, please excuse me." He ducked outside the shop and left Travis to mull over what he had already revealed, what he had to gain or lose by telling more.

In just a few moments Theo was back.

"OK, tell me."

"Look, Theo. No disrespect mate, but I think you'll have to leave now."

"I can get him Travis. I will take him down, trust me, if this information you have is correct, I just need a reason to believe you."

"Didn't I give you enough?"

"Look, I respect your tradition Travis, and I respect everything that you had to do in order to gain that mark, but you have seen what they are capable of, you saw what happened to Rocco. You know that Sammy is beyond these things and that he is worth more to us alive than dead."

"I don't see it that way."

"Take him alive and you can squeeze him, make him reveal more secrets about his associates, his buyers, his suppliers. You will get back your son's tattoo, I guarantee you, but you have to help me."

Travis took a long time to think.

"Sorry Theo. You're just one guy, no tattoos, just Europol for Christ's sake. Even if you catch him who knows what time he'll do or what he'll tell. Probably sweet fuck all. If you need more information, come back with the Gardai and a warrant, otherwise, look, I'm thanking you, but now you have to leave."

"I'm not leaving Travis." The two men faced each other. Travis weighed up his options. He was a skilled martial artist, ex Muay Thai regional champion and protected by some powerful Yants. But Theo was a professional and showed no signs of hesitation or fear. He was also at least 20 if not 30 years younger than him and already waiting for a move to be made so the element of surprise was not in his favor.

"Who are you looking for?"

Theo was surprised but didn't show it. The voice was that of an old lady's, slightly American and came from directly behind him although he hadn't heard anyone enter the shop.

"My friend and I are just discussing something, would you mind just giving us a few moments together?"

"Your friend is my son and I don't believe I've ever heard of or seen you before mister, so maybe you should just turn around and let me take a good look at you before you get the hell out of here."

Theo sighed. "I'm only trying to help."

"That's what the cops always say." Betsy drew up a chair and sat down next to Theo. "Have a seat policeman." She offered him a chair. Theo hesitated. Betsy's tone changed. She was focused, intent and looked away from Theo towards the floor.

"If you want to find her you have to listen to me."

"What did you say?"

"You heard me. Sit down."

"Sit down? I want him out of here now Betsy." Travis said. Betsy gave him a sharp look and he backed down.

Theo considered drawing his weapon and putting it to the old ladies head. Or maybe to her son's. This was about Elissa and these two fools were wasting time. He sighed again, then sat down.

"OK. Now tell me what you have to say."

"You lost her a long time ago, didn't you?"

"Is this some kind of game?"

"You don't have to answer." The old lady said, "Just let me do the talking."

Where there was a hint of Elissa he could not help himself. He was bound to listen beyond any reason or wisdom.

"She was ten years old, or maybe a little older, but not much."

Theo didn't move. He didn't want to give anything away. "Go on." He said.

"She's related to you. Not a daughter, I don't see any children for you. Not yet anyway. Maybe a niece? Yeah, that's it. Am I close?"

"Just say what you have to say. I'm listening."

Betsy continued.

"You and she were very close. Very. You were like a big brother and sometimes a father. She adored you."

Theo tried to hold on to himself. He wanted to take the old woman and shake the truth from her. How could she know anything about Elissa? Unless she was involved.

"Then she disappeared. It was a beautiful summer's day. Somewhere south of here, maybe your own country? Mediterranean. I can see a beautiful blue sea. You leave her nearby for a moment to buy ice cream. You can't understand it but she likes mint and chocolate chip together."

Theo jumped to his feet and in one flowing action he had his pistol pressed to Travis's forehead, between the eyebrows, he held the back of his head with the other hand.

"Where is she?" He shouted.

Travis went rigid, his eyes pointing inwards to the gun barrel at his head. Betsy froze in shock. She hadn't expected this reaction, she had just been reading the signs as she always did.

"It... it... it's not that easy." She stammered.

"Make it easy!" Theo shouted. "Or I show you how easy it is to put him in the ground." He jerked Travis's head back and forth.

"I'm just a psychic, that's all, I get images, I see people, I can't know all the details."

"Is she alive?" He hissed.

Betsy faltered, the truth was that she didn't know. All her images and readings had come from Theo himself, she had seen no vision of his missing niece, had received no communication. But she wasn't going to tell him that. He was looking for Sammy the Shark. He had the air of someone who could take him down, but he did not have the distinctive crescent shaped mark required by the prophetic tattoo on Travis's back.

"She's still alive." She whispered.

Theo choked back tears, tried to swallow into his dry and anguished throat.

"Where is she?"

"She's not here."

"Lies!" He shouted, pinned Travis's head down by the back of his neck and turned his pistol to Betsy. "I know she's here. She's in this country. She is nearby. Now tell me old woman, what do you know?"

Betsy jerked her hands high above her head. Her eyes darted to her son to make sure he was OK. Her bluff had to work.

"She's being held captive. Not here though, somewhere North, yes, North."

"It's not good enough. What do you see?"

"It's not clear. She's north of here, it looks like Dublin. Maybe."

"You're coming with me." He pushed Travis to the ground and pulled Betsy to her feet. "If you are telling the truth then you won't mind coming with me. And as for you? " He turned to Travis. " I want that information. The next time I return I won't be so nice. The world of skin trade is not a nice one Travis and you are a very small fish in a very small pond. Trust me, if you want any kind of justice for your boy you will learn to help me. Talkative Understand?"

Travis exchanged a glance with Betsy, rubbed his head, then nodded his affirmation.

"I can't go with you." Betsy said.

"You go with me or I arrest you right now for suspicion of involvement in human trafficking. You expect me to believe you are having visions about a missing person, about a case I'm working on, and that you have nothing to do with it?"

"You aren't working on the case. It's a cold case. How could I know about the day she disappeared? Do you think I kidnapped her? That I was there?"

Theo pulled her in closer, tightening her old check shirt around her scrawny neck. "Why not? I have sent all kinds of people to jail for trafficking. Just because you are old doesn't make you innocent."

"Your sister and you shared a bedroom together in a small farmhouse when you were children. You were very poor."

Theo said nothing. He tightened his grip.

"There is a picture of a Chinese man on the wall. He smiling."

Theo stared into her eyes. "How could you know this?" His mother had raised him and his sister almost alone while his father spent time in and out of prison. She was a Buddhist and always had a picture of the laughing Buddha on their bedroom wall. It was distinctive. Every other household was Greek Orthodox. His mother was always an eccentric, from then until now. But no-one knew about that old tattered picture of the laughing Buddha on their bedroom wall. It was long gone before Elissa was born and his sister and he never spoke about their impoverished childhood.

"Tell me!" She shouted at Betsy. The old woman quailed in fear.

"Leave her alone man. She's psychic. True as God. If she says your girl is alive then she's alive. Trust me."

Theo's gun shook in his hand.

"And if she says she can't go with you it's for a reason."

"Malaka!" He shouted. "Fucking Ireland. Everywhere psychics and eccentrics." He lowered the gun. "Shit." He lowered Betsy back into her chair. "OK. Tell me. Where do I go? How do I find her?"

"That's better. You have to trust someone, right? You're alone here. The Gardai won't help you."

Theo nodded his assent. But Betsy was wrong. There was someone he could count on.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Detective Casey put down the receiver and swung back to her desk. Another dead end. G2 had no information on Sammy the Shark or Gino Ngata. He was unknown to the Gardai.

If he was anybody at all.

Theo Petrakis wasn't making her life any easier and as excited as she had been to have the famous European policeman come to Dublin it could have happened at a much better time. In fact, it could hardly have happened at a worse time. Melinda was young, beautiful, fit and athletic, poised for a successful career in law enforcement, but for the past three weeks she had been struggling just to get through each day. It took longer and longer to get out of bed each morning and eventually she had been forced to do her make-up in the car on the way to work one day. A practice she abhorred and was correspondingly inept at due to lack of practice.

Tom Dunne, her partner and senior had of course commented. He was the type who always would.

"Did you do your hair on the back of a motorbike this morning? Ha, ha." He said. She gave him a look from hell.

"Eh, only joking of course. You look lovely." He checked their surroundings quickly and then leaned in to give her a peck on the lips. She pulled away from him. "Ah come on babes, it was only a joke. You always look gorgeous to me!"

That was ten days ago and there had been several in-car make up sessions since then. She was getting better at it. Monday and Tuesday morning she had made it out of bed early and done her make-up at home. Only later she realized why.

Theo Petrakis.

She hadn't met him yet, not face to face, but eventually he would make an appearance at their office. She was 27 years of age. Could she really be acting like this over some guy she had never met? Without a personal appearance from the police superstar the effect had soon worn off and already this morning she had found herself in the same funk as in previous weeks. Now Theo was asking her to do impossible things with no evidence and the great policeman seemed more like the crazy lucky fluke policeman from professional hell than the impeccable agent of the law she had expected him to be.

There was a beep on her phone. A text message from Tom Dunne. 'We have to talk.' It said. They had already had coffee together, mostly in silence. Why would he text her now? She had a sense of foreboding and with listless energy tapped the screen to return the call.

"What is it?" She said.

"Babes." He always called her 'babes' when he had something to feel guilty about. She hated it.

"What is it Tom, I'm busy with this Sunnyvale stuff."

"Yeah, yeah, me too, I know. It's not that it's... it's us."

*Oh Jesus Christ. Not again. Not now.*

Tom was a tough guy. She was attracted to him because of that. But he was a loser boyfriend and a total loser relationship. It was inappropriate, against the rules and worst of all, the idiot was married. Melinda had done it again. The golden girl, so talented, good looking, the envy of all her friends in looks, talent and career. Only one thing never went right and Tom Dunne was the perfect example. She had even stopped telling her friends about her bad relationships any more

Nevertheless, somehow she had thought that this time, just maybe, because he was a policeman too, it would make a difference. He would understand the crazy career, the obsessions, the dark humor, the dark lows and the soaring highs of success that couldn't be shared with anyone else.

"Please Tom... not now..."

He ignored her. "It's not working out babes." She ended the call and didn't answer when he called back. She almost ran to her boss's office. "Have to go. Not feeling well. I'll call later." She didn't give him a chance to respond. Tom managed to catch a glimpse of her leaving the car park. He protested uselessly as she drove away.

"Bleedin' birds." He muttered.

Melinda drove for nearly two hours, going far up into the Dublin mountains until her fuel gauge began to get low and then returned to her flat in the Dublin suburbs. She picked up a training bag and headed to the city's Southside and Ireland's only full roller derby rink. The 1960's iconic American sport was her way of relaxing and releasing aggression safely. It also gave her a killer body and the opportunity to use some of her more interesting covert martial arts moves when opponents got nasty. There would be an open training session on at this time of the morning, she could join in, maybe see a few friends unrelated to work. One great thing about roller derby; you could forget all about your real life and just be your alter ego for an hour or two. Melinda's derby name was WMD: Woman of Mass Destruction. She certainly felt like destroying something that morning.

She put on her league strip with the focus and intent of an undertaker. There was only one other woman in the locker room, a girl really. Another late arrival for the training session. Melinda didn't recognize her. She trained mostly evenings and weekends so there were plenty of daytime women she hadn't met. This girl was striking though. She had the kind of looks you couldn't ignore; statuesque, blonde, athletic figure and dressed to kill. In fact she wore a long leather coat, a little incongruous for the summer day outside. She was fully dressed in roller derby outfit underneath and had travelled through the streets with her skates on. Melinda mumbled a hello but the girl ignored her. She looked keen to get into the rink. Melinda noticed a stain on her shorts. They were red but there was a dark bloody spot in the crotch, right between the legs and running down an inch or so on her left thigh. Must be having a heavy period, Melinda thought. She considered stopping her to let her know. After all, she would want someone to do the same for her.

"Excuse me." She said. The girl rolled by her. Melinda noticed an odd tattoo on the back of her neck; a small eye at the centre of a spider web. "Excuse me." She said a little louder. The girl turned to look at her. She was smiling, but not in a friendly way, more dazed or trance-like. In fact, she looked a little tweaked to Melinda if the truth be told.



*A real detective is always on duty.* Her father had always said.

But her father had been a criminal and she loved him no matter what, despite everything, despite her own career.

"You have some blood on you." She said. The girl gave her a confused look, still smiling. Melinda pointed to the stain in her crotch. "In there." She said, and gave an awkward smile. The girl's eyes opened wide, she threw her head back and gave a long, loud laugh. Then she straightened up again and looked directly at Melinda.

"You want some?" She said.

Melinda was momentarily taken aback and before she could answer the girl was gone. Inexplicably, she felt like she was coming to tears. She had only been trying to help. It had been a difficult morning already. A difficult week. Why couldn't someone just be nice to her? She wiped her eyes, took a deep breath and stood up to face the mirror on the wall next to her locker.

*I should arrest that little twaker's ass right now.* She thought.

But she wasn't here today to be a policewoman. Just for today she was WMD. Woman of Mass Destruction. No responsibilities other than to slam that girl a mile out of the rink.

A text beeped through on her phone. It was from Tom. 'Hey Belinda,' it began. *Not again,* she thought, *can't that idiot even send a text without screwing up.*

He had sent it to her instead of to the new young detective Belinda Cochrane who had started in the department last month, 'are you free for that drink tonight? I got rid of some baggage today and feel like being a naughty boy.'

Her breath went for a moment. She thought about texting him back. She thought about bursting into tears. She thought about smashing her head into the mirror beside her. Finally she hissed to herself: "Come on Woman of Mass Destruction. Let's go start a fight." She grimaced at her reflection, making her pretty face as menacing as she could and then thought of the girl with the stain in her crotch.

"Yes I fucking want some you dirty little bitch."

She turned and skated down the hall to the roller derby rink.

The teams were just assembling. A girl gestured for her to come over. "Hey, I know you." She said. Melinda didn't recognize her. "We need a jammer and you're it." She pushed the double-starred Jammer's cover over Melinda's helmet and pushed her back to the jammer line, 30 feet behind the already formed line of blockers. The girl with the stain in her crotch from the locker room was wearing the pivot helmet cover. This meant she could be turned into a jammer mid-play. She stared at Melinda, stuck out her tongue and gave a long lick in her direction.

*OK crotch stain, you picked the wrong day to mess with WMD.* She noticed the letters VD printed large on the locker girl's t-shirt.

*Original. Not. Skank.*

When the whistle blew Melinda shot through the engagement zone almost immediately and past the jam, beginning to lap right away. The opposing jammer was also good, losing the pack soon after Melinda. But this wasn't the girl she was after. She wanted to punish crotch girl. She allowed the other jammer to catch her up, pass her out and then pulled a favorite trick. She crashed herself and the other girl to the ground in a heap and faked a foul. The other jammer was sent, shouting the obligatory obscenities, to the penalty area.

VD took over as jammer. She grinned, ran her finger up her crotch, took a good long sniff and then blew it over to Melinda like a filthy kiss.

*Keep trying little girl.* Melinda thought. She had always been a master of bottling up anger, an emotional handicap that found its only useful outlet in the pain and revenge of the roller derby. The girl wouldn't know what hit her when it happened. When the jam kicked off again VD got ahead of Melinda and stayed there, just out of reach, taking her to her furthest extreme of speed and anger but always outpacing her.

*You're fast dirty crotch, I'll give you that.*

Melinda was super fit but this girl was making her look like a turtle on roller-skates

*Wait 'till I get you.*

Melinda knew she was slowing down as the rest of the pack began to get closer to them. Then VD, out of nowhere, seemed to stumble and Melinda went in for the kill as she had hundreds of times before; a barely visible side-swipe would slam the girl face down into the boards.

"Eat this." She said as she closed in.

When she opened her eyes the girl was on top of her, the stain of her bloodied crotch pressing into Melinda's gagging mouth. Her arms were twisted painfully over her head in a submission hold she couldn't imagine and didn't want to. It felt like she had been there for hours, she was exhausted, more exhausted than she had ever been before in her entire life. She couldn't tell if it was concussion or not but there was an eerie electronic glow coming from underneath the girl's shirt. And she still looked tweaked. But how could a high meth-head possibly have done this to her? Suddenly they were surrounded. The girl was making elaborate explanations and apologies. The other women were shocked.

"A here love, it's only a bleedin' game." One tough inner city lady said. "Do you want to leave her bleedin' paralyzed?"

"She surprise me. I was down and then she come at me from on top, like to attack, not for pass me. Just my reaction Not want to hurt her."

"Well you did a fairly good bleedin' job of it anyway."

Melinda tried to get up.

"Don't you move love. You wait until the ambulance boys have you braced up."

Now the tears started in earnest. "Ah here love, come on, it's only a precaution, you'll be all right. The silly bitch didn't mean it. Her and her sister a out of their heads. Sure the other one was told not to come in any more."

Melinda was too upset to explain why she was crying. Even to herself. The other women released VD who gave a quick glance down to Melinda. A sneer crossed her mouth for a micro-moment and then she was gone.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Unless you've been there, you can't understand the knot this kind of waiting puts in your gut.

Neither of us wanted to eat, read, watch TV, not even talk. We just sat and waited and ran through scenarios in our minds. It was the new longest wait of my life, vastly out classing the time we spent outside the bank. That one had only involved meeting a bank teller. This one, if we could stick it, would probably lead to our legs being broken. How do you mentally prepare for that? I felt like a cold fish preparing to put its jaws onto a jagged hook.

When the bang finally came to the door I had to force myself to move. It was like I was cemented to the chair.

I know I've said it before that I'm not easily intimidated, but this was different and God was I feeling scared. Not scared for myself. Not entirely anyway. That's what made it ten times worse. I wouldn't honestly have worried about a broken finger or two for me, or even a leg if it would protect my children, but not being able to do anything if they chose to punish Will... that was truly terrifying, mortifying, humiliating.

And then the aftermath. Explaining it all to Marianne, how I had screwed things up, made the wrong decisions and left our little boy with broken legs. Football was one of the only things he was even half interested in for God's sake.

Our whole lives could fall apart. Everything we had put together, Marianne and I, in our quiet ordinary little lives and our quiet ordinary little home. All our kids had every had to fear was not having the latest iPad, iPod or whatever else was doing the rounds of teen popularity.

*Just let us keep our old lives God, please.* I was praying. Chanting almost. I'm an atheist, but as the old saying goes, there are no atheists waiting for violent debt collectors to break their children's legs.

Nevertheless, somehow we got through the hours and the hammering on the front door wasn't going to go away.

I forced myself to move, but it felt like I wasn't connected to my body any more, like I was walking on the moon. Whatever that feels like.

Opening the front door of my boring little home was going to change everything in our lives forever. One way or the other.

Not opening the damn door would change everything as well and neither of the scenarios were good.

*Come on Dennis Small. You can do this. These guys are just common criminals. You've got the whole of society on your side.* Except Darklow Garda Station of course and Derek Reilly. Oh yeah, and local politicians weren't interested either.

I motioned for Will to stay where he was but I needn't have bothered. The poor kid was frozen, stuck to the kitchen chair.

I took a deep, deep, deep breath and made a very long walk to the front door.

*Just run. Get the fuck out of here.*

*No way.*

*You can't run a way from your problems. Get it over with now.*

My mind and my heart were racing.

I watched as the door opened and I guess it was me that turned the latch although I don't remember doing it. The same big bruisers as the previous night, Rafa and his hulking, menacing, terrifying side-kick.

Rafa leaned in and picked me up by the lapels. The jacket shoulder linings cut into my armpits and began to split. I couldn't take my eyes off the big, ugly, monstrous spider web tattoo on his neck. The same as local hard-man Derek Reilly only a bit bigger. It wrapped all the way around to his throat.

Funny the things you notice when you are in fear of your life.

I should have been thinking about what to say to stop these morons from crippling me and my son.

"Nice tattoo," I said, "does it mean something?" The words came out of my mouth but they might have come from Mars. It was some kind of involuntary trauma response, beyond my conscious control.

It stopped him. For a breath at least. He was surprised. So was I. He didn't stop for long though.

"You cheeky little toe-rag," he lifted me up until our noses met. I gagged with fear and the disgusting smell of rotting seafood that was his calling card, "never you fucking mind about my tattoos mate, where's my fucking bread?"

Language Always so foul-mouthed. As though things weren't bad enough I had to deal with that as well.

"Here." I struggled to get the bundle from my pocket and then handed him the envelope stuffed with exactly sixty €50 notes. Three thousand Euro in all. He counted it, placed it neatly into his coat.

"Where do you want me to start, *sir*?" He asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You owe my boss 36 large and all I have here is six fucking monkeys."

I was confused. Monkeys? 3000 divided by 6 equals 500. One monkey = €500. Right. Like I should have been able to decipher his loan shark street language.

"Until I receive the outstanding 33 grand, where would you like me to start the damage? Would you prefer the house? Or would you prefer I start with you personally. *Sir*."

"Personally?"

He leaned in closer. "Yeah. As in your 'person'." The grip on my jacket lapels, shirt collar and chest hair began to choke me. I began to feel sick in my stomach.

"The house." I gasped.

"Thought so. Most people say that. Although occasionally you do get the odd exception."

He nodded to henchman number two who produced a baseball bat. Tool of the trade I suppose. Number two took a look around and then motioned to our living room door.

"How about in here?"

Will was in the kitchen. Damn. It would have been better to start there.

Rafa nodded and hauled me over to the door to get a good view.

Henchman number two's eyes settled onto something that brought a smile to his face. I followed his line of vision to our daughter's beautiful Bechstein model 8 piano with its polished Rosewood case. Insured for €9000, the amount we paid

for it and worth way more to a loan-shark in one piece than in splinters all over my cheap living-room carpet.

"Guys. Please...."

One arching blow was all it took to destroy 6 to 8 months of timeless craftsmanship. One blow and one horrible cacophony of battered keys. So easy to destroy, but I would like to see one of those morons try to make one.

"Lovely," Rafa sighed, "I've been waiting for this all day."

I realized also that the insurance policy I had wouldn't cover this. I knew that because I was the one who drew it up.

"You idiot, I could have paid a quarter of the debt with that...."

Rafa laughed.

Then he nutted me.

"Only one fucking idiot I see here *sir*. Ha ha."

After that the rest of the damage didn't take too long and nothing was quite as shocking as seeing the Bechstein shattered down the middle by a tattooed gorilla with a baseball bat.

Will had been completely right.

We should have just sold the damn thing immediately. Gotten it out of the house. Now all I had left was the remaining €8500 to pay off and the insurance policy cancellation fee.

I watched as the crazy dream rolled on.

A goon in my house smashing things with a baseball bat.

Ireland. Wickford. Darklow. Sunnyvale. People come here on holidays to get away from the stress of the big city.

I began to feel dizzy. The bat swung again and again, smashing and battering all the mementos of our struggling, lower middle class lives together. Bottom to middle of the range stuff all of it. The piano had been the only item of real value, but nonetheless, these were some of our most treasured possessions.

Eventually it was all over.

"I find the living-room is generally a very effective place to start destroying a house Dennis. Do you know why?" Rafa said.

I shook my head.

"Because it is the place where families most often relax together."

I stared at him, uncomprehending.

"You don't need to be relaxed right now mate. You need to be out there getting our money for us, init?"

I nodded my head.

The telly, sofa, armchairs, coffee table, pictures, bookcases, glass cabinets, and stereo system were all nicely and thoroughly done.

I don't even want to talk about the piano.

"By tomorrow mate, or you're next. You don't want that, now do you?"

He was right.

A very short hour later my wife and daughter arrived home. I was still sitting in the broken arm chair I had collapsed into. Will was trying to tidy up the broken pieces of our family portraits, shards of glass and broken dishes. At least I'd saved him his legs though. It could have been worse.

"You're early." I said.

Marianne didn't speak, she just gaped.

Where do you begin explaining?

"Loan-shark. Will is in debt for 36 thousand Euro They'll be back in just under 23 hours to collect."

Easier than you would think if you know how.

My daughter was in tears on the floor next to the remains of her piano.

My wife still gaped.

"Why's there only €3500 in the bank account?"

The gaping turned to panic.

"I meant to tell you..."

"Tell me what?"

More gaping.

"Look... that's not important now. I don't understand this. A loan-shark? What for?"

"A ring."

"A ring?"

"For his girlfriend."

"What girlfriend?"

"Fiona."

"Fiona Mulligan?"

"Ah ah."

"Not..."

I nodded in the affirmative.

"Fiona bloody Finnegan?"

"Ma." Will pleaded helplessly.

Marianne took a deep breath and then slowly, slowly exhaled.

"What are we going to do?" She always was and always will be an amazing woman. I thought she would have finished wrecking the house in anger, but she consistently managed to surprise me and now her self-control brought a modicum of calm to us all.

Then it came to me. My next bright idea.

"OK. Now I can go to the police. Garda Thicke wanted evidence? Here it is. Now they'll have to declare a crime scene and make a report. Prints will be taken, all the usual. We'll have the protection of the law. I'm not going to let this criminal scum rule our lives. This is why I pay taxes. This is why I obey the law. This is why I work hard and this is why ordinary people like me don't have to be afraid of these low-lives."

The silence was deafening.

I picked up the phone to make the call.

"Put the phone down." Marianne was serious and very calm.

"Huh?"

"Put it down."

I was confused, I have to admit. I rarely would contradict anything that Marianne advised. Over the years I had learned, often the hard way, not to doubt or oppose her.

"Just look at what happened to you last time Da." Will added. "What evidence do you think the Gardai will get here? These guys may be scumbags but they aren't stupid. They were wearing surgical gloves." He was right. They had both worn gloves." There'll be no prints. Nothing to prove they were here. And anyway, like I already told you, the Gardai are as afraid of them as we are."

Marianne nodded her head in agreement.

I put the phone back down. My world was see-sawing under my feet. I felt off-balance. How did my wife and son even think they knew this? We had no connection to the law other than to make complaints about public order, coordinate Tidy Towns and neighborhood watch activities and charity events.

Then, my daughter's voice was a surprise in all this. She was the quietest one in the family.

"You guys can't be serious".

She was incredulous, indignant.

"Where's my piano gone? What happened to it?"

"Jesus Christ." Will rolled his eyes. "Is that all you're worried about?"

"Shut up you. This is all your fault anyway you stupid idiot."

Will's chin began to tremble. "Ma?" He pleaded. Suzy was surprising everyone.

"That bloody piano was the only thing I had." She was exaggerating obviously, but metaphorically I could see where she was coming from and I could see she was fighting back the tears as well.

"Where are we living?" she continued. "Is this a war zone? Of course we can go to the police. Whoever did this doesn't deserve to get away with it, no matter what Will did. Besides, this was my piano, not his, so they owe me. Come on Dad, don't listen to them. I'll go with you."

Sense at last, I thought. Suzy was certainly a smart kid. Only 15 and already with concert pianist potential. Nothing like my poor old Will all his bad luck.

"If you go to the Guards, I'm leaving now." Marianne was as serious as I had ever seen her.

"What's going on here? Where are we? We live in a small town. I sell insurance for a living. We own a small house and we do Irish dancing and yoga and go on fishing trips and..."

I was lost for words.

"What the hell is going on? Marianne?"

"Dennis, please... ask me anything else. Please. I'll explain everything later, just don't ask me to tell you now and for God's sake, please don't go to the police."

The tears really started then. Marianne first, then Suzy. Will wasn't far off either. Marianne never cried. Not under stress anyway. Maybe for a tear-jerker movie but never under pressure. Things weren't adding up and I couldn't make any sense of it, but whatever the explanation, I just couldn't watch her cry.

And I had to trust her.

"Dad? Mum? Are you serious?" Suzy screamed through her sniffles and tears.

"OK." I took a deep breath and looked at Marianne. "What do we do now?"

I deserve whatever I get for this kind of stupidity. Only family can make you this crazy.

## **End of SKIN, Part One of the Tattoo Series**

Thank you for taking time to read Skin. If you enjoyed it, please consider telling your friends or posting a short review. Word of mouth is an author's best friend and much appreciated.

## **BODIES, Part Two of the Tattoo Series: Sample Chapters**

### **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

Security in London's Heathrow Airport had never been tighter. Joshua Johnston was a tall man, 6 feet 5 inches in bare feet, but he was the small one. His younger brother Daniel was 6 foot 8 and the three inches had always made a difference. Still, however, Joshua was the boss. Therefore he had designated his little brother to carry the satchel with the satellite phone terminal. It was only a mildly suspicious piece of hand luggage. Airport security is familiar with these items due to their popularity with journalists in recent years. Daniel could be trusted to explain why he needed one in Ireland. He had also given the medical kit to his brother. Three syringes, one filled. Two vials of insulin clearly marked with professionally preprinted identifying pharmaceutical labels. Capped lancets with a glucose meter marked with the manufacturer's name. Glucagon kits in their original containers. The security official was of Nigerian ethnicity, like Joshua and Daniel themselves. He recognized the facial scars that marked out their family and tribe across their cheeks. He didn't have any himself, being born in the UK to parents from Lagos, but he knew them. Facial scars would indicate that the men were probably not from the city.

"What's with the satellite terminal?" He asked.

"It is the reception in Nigeria. The phone system is very unreliable." Daniel answered.

"No worries," the guard said, "sounds like a good idea, should get one myself." He looked at the diabetic kit. "Be careful," he said, "my mum's a diabetic. Just ask the flight crew if you need any help." Daniel smiled and repacked his things.

Joshua was the next in the queue. He had kept the most interesting items for himself. They were not part of the delivery, but they were required nevertheless. Strapped under each arm he carried ornate forged steel blades, ceremonial daggers, razor sharp, designed for surgical accuracy. The metal detector sounded as he stepped through. A tall young security guard ran his hand-held detector over him and then reached asked Joshua to raise his arms when the device began to whine.

Joshua began to breathe deeply and rapidly.

"Are you alright sir?" The young guard asked. He looked up into Joshua's eyes and then took a step back. The big man was glaring at him and breathing loudly through his nose, forcing the air out in short bursts. The young man went a little blank and then motioned for him to go through. His colleague at the desk noticed something was wrong. "Sir." He said. "Step over here please." Joshua turned slowly. Daniel had already walked away. He was holding the delivery and was already through. Besides, he trusted his older brother. Joshua looked down into the eyes of the guard, still breathing in short bursts and mumbling something under his breath. The guard knew it was a northern dialect but it was one he didn't understand. He went cold as he looked into Joshua's face and his vision



closed into a dark tunnel. His father didn't believe in Ju-ju, traditional magic and witchcraft, but his mother had always warned him to be careful; that it was for real. For a moment he felt extreme nausea and could see only the burning eyes of the tall stranger, surrounded by a swirl of moving facial scars. He gagged, then shook his head. "Go on sir. Have a nice trip." Joshua smiled. "Thank you little brother." He said, and walked on.

By comparison passport control in Dublin was non-existent. Although Joshua and Daniel Johnson were both Nigerian by birth they had long since acquired falsified EU passports. Joshua was Belgian and Daniel French. The Irish immigration officer studied both passports for a long time and then ran the usual checks. It wouldn't matter because both passports were authentic, stolen in blank batches from lax town halls where the embarrassment of losing them was greater than the need to report the incidents. Joshua gave the little pink Irishman a big smile as he received his passport back again. The little man smiled back. "Welcome to Ireland." He said.

When his brother had also been cleared they walked through to arrivals. They had only hand luggage and would be returning to London the following day once their package had been delivered. They were the couriers of choice for a number of high profile gang-lords. Although affiliated by family and tribe to one particular ethnicity in the dark underworld of London's Nigerian Mafia, they had been skilful enough to branch out and now earned delivery money from crime gangs of diverse affiliation; Asian, South American, Polynesian. Their record for successful delivery was unequalled.

Daniel held out his hand to Joshua once they had passed through customs. He handed his brother's blade to him and he slid it under his coat where its scabbard waited. He yawned then asked "What time are we meeting her?"

"We have three hours to go. We will eat then find her and carry out the exchange."

Leaving the terminal building they found the taxi stand and walked to the top of the queue. A tall German business man was waiting with his bags.

"Excuse me." He said loudly. "The end begins there." He pointed back down to the end of the long snaking queue.

"I don't think so." Daniel snarled into his face. The tall man was taken aback, long enough for Joshua and Daniel to get into the car.

"Did youse two not see that there's a bleedin' queue back there?" The taxi driver was small but loud, in his 40's and worried that he might not get paid.

"Drive." Joshua shouted at him. He put his foot to the pedal. "Where to bud?" he said nervously.

"Somewhere to eat. The centre of Dublin. Something with good meat."

"No worries bud, I know just the place."

"Go quickly, my brother and I are hungry."

The driver's name was Stuart and he was gregarious by nature, but not today. He didn't like the look of his fare at all. He didn't love foreigners at the best of times and Nigerians may have been as low on his list as you could get. He decided to stay quiet and just drop the boys off at the most notorious den of racist thieves that he could think of; a small pub in the docklands mostly frequented by criminals and prostitutes. The pub itself was a front, and a very poor one, for a Dublin criminal gang and was legendary for punch ups, shootings, even kidnappings.

Thirty minutes later he pulled up outside and indicated the door to his customers.

"This is it boys. That's €30 for the ride and you can eat all you want in there. Very friendly staff and great food."

Daniel handed him a €50 and said; "Keep the change."

"Thank you very much sir." he said, feeling a little guilty now about dropping them off at Dublin's worst and most hazardous eatery. "Look, if you don't get what you want here, there's plenty of other... "

It was too late. They ignored him and walked into the pub.

"Jesus," Stuart hissed, "I hope youse'll be alright." He consoled himself with the thought that they were big lads and could probably look after themselves. And anyway, he had tried to offer them alternatives.

The pub was deserted except for the bartender and a group of men playing cards at a table.

"We're closed." The barman said.

Joshua looked at the opening hours printed clearly on the window and then at his watch. "Your schedule says that you are open. We are hungry." A small, wiry man with sleeve tattoos and a vest didn't turn around as he spoke.

"The man said he was closed, so he's closed. Now fuck off out of it."

Daniel exchanged a glance with Joshua and they smiled.

"Why don't you stand up, turn around, come over here and tell me that," he paused, "little white boy."

All five men at the table jumped up and the barman reached for a sawn-off shotgun under the counter. The little man in the vest was on his feet but still didn't turn around. "OK," he said, "now I'm standing up." He turned around and saw the two huge brothers before him. "My, my, aren't we two big bloody baloobas?" He added. He slowly walked over to Joshua. "Here I come." He said. He stopped in front of him, looked up into the deeply scarred face and prepared his expletive. Joshua began to breathe fast and deep again. A surge of terror filled the thug's eyes and he began to back away.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

By noon the following day I was in front of Sammy the Sharks 'office' on Main Street, otherwise known as the Darklow Cash for Gold shop. His henchman Rafa wasn't there but I recognized baseball bat wielding henchman number two.

He had his back to me as I walked in and the tattoo on the back of his neck was right there to be seen, just as it was the night before when he was smashing our home to bits. The same as Rafa's, the same as Derek Reilly's.

An eye, right on the back of his neck, surrounded by a thick spider web, low down, towards the big bony vertebra at the top of his spine and stretching around to his throat. Filthy, trashy, boring. God how I hated the sight of it and of him and of all his foul-mouthed kind.

"Hey!" I said it as loud and brassy as I could, still strengthened by the courage my family had imbued me with. I was trying, on some level, to be less mediocre than I would usually be.

The thug didn't move.

"I'd like to see the boss please." I said a bit more quietly.

He turned around slowly. It was a warm day and he had on a vanity t-shirt; a couple of sizes too small in order to show off all his predictable tats and steroid pecs. His arms looked like they had a disease with the amount of ink on them.

"I'm the boss mate. What you got?"

I wanted to see the boss because I still didn't have near enough to pay off the debt. In the intervening hours we had brought all our jewellery, except our engagement and wedding rings, to another cash for gold place out of town. We figured that Sammy and his boys were unlikely to give us a fair price. We raised 25 hundred Euro that way. We sold our car for €1000 at the local second hand dealership. We took cash advances on our credit cards giving us another €2000. I borrowed money from my sister and two close friends coming to €7000.

Marianne couldn't raise anything. Not from her family, friends, nothing. She was becoming more of a mystery to me and she still refused to disclose the reasons why our bank account was so short of money.

We could have sold a few things from the living room and raised several thousand, but of course Sammy's henchmen had destroyed everything. So in total I had exactly €16500 Euro plus the €475 I held back yesterday and we made up the odd €25 with bits and pieces of change around the house. We had €17000. Taking away the €3000 already paid, this meant we were now only short €16000. Pension funds to be cashed in, which would take at least a week, plus some prize bonds, would come to just under 10k. Let's call it ten thousand to keep things simple. This meant we were only €6000 short.

There was hope.

That would be in the real world of debt of course, not in this fantasy world of twisted, evil, leg-breaking and furniture smashing debt.

"It's Will Small's debt. I'm Dennis. His father." And proud of it you thug. "I've got everything." Henchman two raised his eyebrows, surprised, as though he hadn't really expected us to be able to pay it off. "

Oh yeah. I remember you. Last night, init? You really got all the bread?"

My voice was shaking. We were so close to getting back to normal again, if these scumbags would just take this money we could say goodbye to their disgusting world forever and get back to our normal, decent lives.

"What's your name?" I asked him, wondering where my courage, or stupidity was coming from.

He smiled.

"Give me everything you have, Dennis. Now. Or I will break your fucking legs right here, right now before I take my fag break. Init?"

Another smile.

"You can break my legs right now, before you take your fag break," maybe I had nothing to lose any more? "and then tell your boss how you just lost him his 36 grand." More smiles. From him of course. "Or you can take me to your boss right now. I'll hand him over his money, he'll be happy, you'll be happy and most importantly of all, I will be happy."

I nearly soiled my pants, but those words really had come out.

The big idiot rolled his eyes and then laughed.

"Ha ha. What is the fucking world coming to, I ask you. This job ain't what it used to be. And you mate? You are fucking unbelievable."

He gave me a menacing stare like a dog wanting to bite someone. "Wait here Small." He went into the back of the shop, leaving me alone.

I tried to relax but there was a horrible dull pounding, like heavy road works, that was setting me on edge. I glanced out the window to see what it was, but I didn't see anything. Then I realized it was the sound of my heart pounding with fear. My eyes were beginning to sting. My breathing began to close in and the room started to turn.

Great. All I needed was to pass out in front of Sammy and his hard men

My thoughts were getting confused. I was struggling to follow them in my head. We were so close to getting it all back again, our lives, with just a few bits of broken furniture to clean up.

Weren't we?

As for the money? Well it was just money, wasn't it? We would eventually save it up all over again, pay back our friends and family.

The question was though, would the heavy come back with his boss, with a baseball bat, or with both? Either way it wouldn't be easy.

Time stretched out. Every heart beat made it harder to breathe.

I could still have turned and run.

But then it was too late. He was back. Alone. No Sammy the Shark. He was holding an extended telescopic baton in his right hand.

"OK mate. You come with me. I can't fucking wait to see this."

Shrinking the baton he tucked it into his overcoat and then wrapped one big paw around my left bicep. He brought me through the shop to the back door, dragging me like a school child and shoved me into the back seat of a shabby looking 2002 Mercedes C class. Not exactly flash. More of an aul fellah's car really. I wasn't alone in there. My co-passenger was a skinny, ratty guy wearing a black shirt and black pants. His hair, balding at the top, was oiled and brushed into the memory of a 1980s hairstyle. He had a tattoo as well. A tear drop under

his right eye. On his left hand he had a gold pinky ring the size of a chicken nugget. One of the scumbags who robbed my son of his pawned and borrowed money?

"I'm Dennis." I said and extended my hand to him.

He punched me in the face.

I cowered away from him. I still wasn't used to this kind of treatment, despite Garda Thicke's manhandling, despite my experience of Rafa and his duffing up techniques.

We drove out to the countryside and then up into the hills of county Wickford. There was complete silence. Neither of them spoke. Except for one phone call. The balding grease monkey beside me answered his mobile in yet another thick cockney accent.

"Yeah. It's me. No. Just here with a mook and Jermaine."

"Jermaine?" I heard myself say. "Nice name." Nerves or courage, I couldn't tell the difference any more. Jermaine looked fiercely into the rear view mirror.

"Ma and Da were fans of the Jackson 5?"

The cockney monkey next to me realized his balls up.

"Fuck. Gotta go."

At least now I had a couple of names if this thing ever did become legal. I guess something in me just wouldn't let go. Something in me still believed the law would sort these guys out in the long run.

Jermaine hadn't reacted to my use of his name so I decided to press it a little further.

"Nice tattoo there Jermaine," I referred to the spider web/Egyptian eye tattoo on the back of his neck, "does it mean something?"

He didn't answer or move, but ratzo rizzo to my left punched me hard in the face again, this time his chicken nugget ring caught me right between the eyes and left me dazed and bleeding.

"Shut up and put your head between your legs."

He shoved me forward and leaned down hard on my neck leaving me no way to track where we were going. We had been headed west, but soon I was completely lost.

When he finally let me back up for air we were in the middle of Wickford nowhere. Mountains, forest, none of it I recognized. The road was just a country lane and as we got out of the car Jermaine pulled out a pistol and stuck it first up my left nostril and then into the back of my neck.

Theatrics. Effective ones.

"Walk."

He opened a gate into a field in which there was nothing but a hill of grass with a path leading down to it.

"Please don't kill me." I think I said. I'm not really sure. I think one of them hit me again, but also not sure about that. All I could think of was my family. I couldn't leave them like this. Not yet. They still needed me. Christ, the kids were only 15 years of age.

At the same time another part of me was relieved in a sick and terrified way that it would soon all be over. They would bury me and then my worries would be ended. I wouldn't even have to tell their scumbag boss that I was only carrying seventeen thousand Euro, thus leaving him a good few 'monkeys' short of a tree. Once they gave me the order to turn around or kneel down or whatever the hell it would be I was going to leave it all behind; the coping-class, over-educated,

underpaid, obeying every law, paying every tax only to be treated like an idiot by your boss, your government, your police force and even your own damn family, wife and kids.

God I love them.

There would be nothing left to lose.

Freedom.

I made up my mind. Once they gave the order I was going to go mental on these two idiots.

"Shut up you fucking tart." Jermaine gave me a whip of his pistol.

"You're here to pay in full, init? You've been a good boy so far, now keep going."

I stumbled down the path and as it rounded the knoll I could see that it wasn't just a hill but some kind of hobbit-like eco-house disguised as a hillock. On one side it was a rolling green mound for the cows and on the other side all glass and metal and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Sammy's HQ. The Shark was conducting his main business from here, lost in the Irish countryside, hidden under a layer of lush green local pasture.

They shoved me inside, across the hall, up a narrow spiral staircase and through a doorway into a darkened room. Thick floor to ceiling length curtains blocked out any external light.

It took me a minute or two to compose myself and look a round.

A burly figure in the shadows across the room stood over a washbasin. There was an expensive looking desk, some high quality chairs and artwork on the walls. It was an office.

The shadowy figure was turned a little sideways from me. He was wearing a wife-beater vest with Flash Harry pin-stripe pants and city trader suspenders hanging down from his waist. As my eyes adapted to the shadows I could make out Italian mob hair as well. The thug, and I was assuming this was Sammy the Shark, would have cut a ruggedly stylish figure except for the filthy looking street tattoos all over his arms and creeping up the visible side of his face to the left temple.

He was drying off the back of his thick muscular neck and his freshly shaven chin.

As he turned I followed the spread of tattoos up the back of his neck and under his greased and shiny black hair.

There was an enormous flat screen telly on the other side of the room. The sound was turned down but images of Amazonian Indians smoking jungle grass and skinning an animal filled the room with an eerie glow.

*I swear I'll kill all of you.*

My fear still had the better of me. Fear equals hatred, equals violence. A little courage would be all I needed. Step out of the mediocre. Save your children.

The big man turned an eye towards me as he toweled his chin.

"Mr. Shark." I tried to say the words but nothing came out.

He slowly turned all the way around to take a look at the cocky punter who had demanded his attention. There were tattoos all over the rest of his face as well. His skin looked like tree bark it was so covered in lines, webs and spirals.

Not great for job interviews I thought.

No accounting for taste really is there? Bloody facial tattoos, uniform of the self-selected social outcast. Nevertheless, even I could see that these weren't

your regular weekend warrior, football dad tattoos. Even I had to admit that there was something terrifyingly impressive about this art which put shivers down my spine beyond physical control.

He took a good long look at me.

"This it?" He asked.

Jermaine nodded.

"Fuck me." He seemed exasperated, disappointed

"Well?" He said, directing himself to me.

My stomach heaved.

"Mr. Shark."

My voice was a whisper.

"You wot?"

"Mr. Shark." I managed it a bit louder.

"Look mate. You got my fucking money or ain't you?"

"Yes," I struggled with the wads of cash in my coat pocket, "it's everything we have sir."

"Everything you have? What the fuck does that mean?"

"€17000 sir," he didn't move, "plus the €3000 we gave you yesterday, plus the €10000 that we will have by the end of next week. That comes to €30000 sir. Only €6000 outstanding."

He held up an index finger.

"If you would be so... umph."

Jermaine smacked the back of my head.

"Thank you Jermaine. Now please forgive me Mr. Small, I must be hard of hearing. I thought you said you was all of €6000 short. That must be a mistake because if it weren't there would be no reason for you to stand there in front of me and of course, no reason for me not to have my boys skin you alive right here and now, in front of me, while I eat my fucking breakfast. Do you understand?" I didn't. My mind had stopped working again. Breakfast? It was the afternoon. "Now please do clarify Mr. Small."

This had to be a game they played. A sick game, but a game nonetheless and one I couldn't escape from. I was about to give him €17000 in cash for God's sake. Who would say no to that?

"There's nothing else to give sir. If you could wait just another two months or so then I'm sure we can pay a bit at a time until we figure out a way of clearing the balance in full."

Sammy drummed his fingers on the desk and gave me the occasional look.

"Listen mate, you ain't fucking Europol or Interpol or some fucking thing, are you? Taking the fucking piss?"

I shook my head vigorously.

"We are just hard-working, honest, decent people sir. My son made a very foolish mistake which we will be happy to rectify on his behalf. If you will just give us the time sir... please."

I could smell my own sweat, fear, weakness and of course, adrenaline.

His fingers began drumming the desk again.

"It would have been a bit more sir, except that your associates destroyed a Bechstein model 8...."

"You wot?" He shouted.

"A Bechstein...."

"Are you making a complaint about my workmen?"

I looked nervously to Jermaine.

"Not a complaint really...."

"Did you hear me say the fucking complaints department were open?"

"No sir."

"Then shut up."

The tattoos were dense on his neck and face, running all the way down his arms to the knuckles on both hands. His cheeks had tattoos, most of it ethnic, tribal. Very authentic looking. To my mind anyway. I was beginning to think that maybe he might actually be some kind of crazy tribal Mafia warrior psychopath lost over here in Ireland. I wasn't an expert, but some of them looked a bit like the Thai or Cambodian body art I had seen on the internet during my little bit of investigation into tattoo crime. It all looked like very specific art, with meaning, but none of it made any sense to me. The more I could see of his face the more unreal it looked, the more petrified I became.

He stared at me for a long time then reached slowly into the top drawer of his custom made Parnian desk. I recognized that alright, not because I ever had a chance of owning one but because I had insured a few of these luxury items in my time and knew that some of them went to six figures.

Sammy the Shark must have been doing well for himself. Could a small time, local thug like him really afford this kind of quality out here in the wilds of Wickford?

He took out a stylish handgun and placed it carefully down on the desk in front of him. It wasn't just any gun. It was a Swiss made Hammerli Lenzburg 208 Jubilee special edition pistol with gold inlay and carved walnut grips. I had insured a couple of these too and I have a good memory for detail. This one alone looked to be worth a good two to three thousand insurable Euro.

After calculating the price I remembered that in addition to their value as collectors' items that the Hammerli Lenzburg could also put a hole in my head the size of an egg or shatter a knee-cap into irreparable splinters.

I looked down at the weapon and then back to his mask-like face, his cold, vicious eyes and I couldn't take it any more I dropped to my knees and began to cry like a baby, choking.

**End of Sample - to continue reading download [Bodies](#) now on Amazon.**



**GUN LAWS**  
**PART ONE OF THE MURDER WATCH SERIES**  
**SAMPLE CHAPTERS**

**Chapter 1**

Jesus Christ. Tightest fuckin' gun laws in the country and still this shit happens."

Detective Molloy had seen it all in his time. The shooter still hadn't offered himself. He was sitting on the ground in back of the Boston Monitor building, holding a gun to his head. The detective wouldn't have much to do until the SWAT Team mopped things up.

So far there were just three people dead.

So far today that was.

It was five people that week in total. Mostly security guards by the looks of things or 'Protective Services' as they would be described in the statistics on workplace homicide. One of them was sitting back in his chair at the rear entrance to the building, with a hole the size of a human fist through his throat.

"Damn fuckin' shame."

Molloy threw a jellybean into his mouth and chomped on it.

"Third time this week too. Can you believe that? Say, how long you think this fuckin' thing is gonna go on for?"

The SWAT team lead, J.J. Finnegan, gave him a sharp look.

"Hey guys, shoot that fucker and let's go home'. Is that what you wanna hear Molloy? Worried your fuckin' dinner will go cold in case this thing drags on?"

"Jesus Finnegan, calm the hell down will ya? It's just another 'workplace'; don't get all crazy on me. These things are all the freakin' same anyway."

Over on the ground the presumed perp was weeping.

"I'll fuckin' kill all a you bastards first. You won't fuckin' take me alive you cocksuckers."

Finnegan cocked an eyebrow. "Can you believe this guy? OK boys, one false move and be ready to take the shooter down."

Shocking?

Maybe. But it was no surprise to the remaining Monitor guards that this was happening on their own doorstep. The Boston Monitor security crew had always been a magnet for loners, aka potential mass murderers. Rosy Panicker had been a site manager with the South Boston Security Company for just shy of two decades. She was responsible for every hire the company had made since 1994. She knew her guys weren't the most outgoing people in the world, but that didn't stop her from hiring them. How can you expect a bright, talkative, friendly people-person to sit alone in total silence 6 to 12 work shifts per week, 8 to 16 hours at a time?

Forget it.

Those extroverts who tried it never lasted long and Rosy was left to cover the holes in the schedule, rehire and retrain the next warm body for the job. Introverts were a whole lot easier to find and way more dependable.

She had hired Theodore Williams only three years before the SWAT Team incident. He was already 81 years old. He had worked steadily for six months,

mostly overnights, before he showed any signs of wear and tear. If supervisor McManus hadn't been asleep in the locker room for the whole of that night, resting his bum leg, he would have seen the upright corpse seated at the Boston Monitor rear entrance. Most of the day staff passed Ted 'Bugle Boy' Williams, on their way into the building and noticed nothing unusual. Drivers flashed their lights and drove through without a look in the old man's direction. Closer investigation later revealed that Bugle Boy's last worldly act was a failed effort to lift a Boston Cream donut to his mouth. It only got as far as the dented aluminum desk in front of him.

It was 8 a.m. before supervisor McManus finally noticed that old Ted hadn't entertained the other guards with his impression of a bugle call to signal the end of another long night shift.

The supervisor felt his stomach go sick, his chest tighten.

"Williams, you old bastard, you ain't sleeping on me are you?"

Locating Williams at his post, he immediately saw the hard rigor mortise in the Boston Cream. Another squint and he could see it was in the man as well.

"Oh my freakin' sweet Jesus. Another one, another one...fuckin' God almighty, we gotta start hirin' 'em before they get to the fuckin' dyin' stage. This is a newspaper not a fuckin' nursing home."

McManus's stubby hands began to sweat. He could feel the hard won position of night supervisor slipping away from his stubby, perspiring grasp.

"Oh my freakin' God. Fuck you Williams. Fuckin' Bugle Boy my sweet Irish ass. Bugle fuckin' bastard is more stinkin' like it you frickin piece a shit, no good fuckin' bum."

He plucked the rigid pastry from Williams' hand and gnawed through it in anger.

"Stinkin' old bastard."

He limped off to call Rosy Panicker to inform her of the situation. He expected nothing less than the full power of her wrath.

"Yeah Rosy, we got us a little problem here...yeah, I know, I'm sorry, but it can't wait, yeah...yeah...sorry...but we got a death on our hands here..." McManus held the phone away from his fat ear as Rosy exploded in pre-emptive rage.

"Yeah, that's right, a death."

"A death? McManus....this better be good or I'll make sure it ain't the only death, do you hear me? I mean do you freakin' hear me McManus?"

"Sure Rosy, sure..."

"Don't you 'sure' me pinhead... just spit it out; what did you screw up this time?"

"It's Williams..."

"Sweet Jesus, that poor old guy, what am I gonna tell his wife."

"Nuthin' Rosy, she died last August."

"Well I gotta tell someone right? Hah? McManus? Unless you was thinkin' of dumpin' the poor old guy in the Charles River, hah?"

McManus was silent. Rosy paused to regain control of herself.

"Jesus McManus, how'd it happen, go on tell me, I'm waitin'."

"Well he just up and died Rosy, you know? He was an old guy; we gotta start hirin' 'em younger..."

"Don't say it McManus, don't push it...just tell me the whole frickin' story, no short cuts, alright? Out with it."

“Well, Jesus Christ, I dunno, I guess he died not so long ago, sometime this mornin’...”

Rosy’s North End nose didn’t buy it for a second.

“Alright then...early in the morning you say? And you can say that accurately and honestly ‘cause in all the 8 inspection rounds you religiously did last night, Williams was sittin’ there, in the pink, smellin’ of roses.”

Again she paused, apportioning to McManus the length of rope he needed to hang himself. Several long seconds went by but the canny supervisor held his peace.

He should have known better.

“So help me McManus, if I find out Williams was sittin’ there all night long, that poor man, sittin’ there rottin’, while you and them other clowns was sleepin’ through my shift...so help me McManus...you know what I’ll do to you, don’t ya? Hah? Ya know it ain’t no good lyin’ to me, so if you got somethin’ to tell me, now is the time.”

“Swear to God Rosy, I checked every hour. Williams was a little quieter than usual but...”

Rosy hung up the phone. McManus was pale. A drip of cold sweat slithered down his back.

*Oh my fuckin’ leg*, he thought and grimaced in pain.

Why did I have to even fuckin’ try?

The paramedic needed only one scant look at the remains.

“For the love of God...how long has this poor guy been sittin’ here?”

Rosy was well placed to hear the remark and well placed to observe McManus squirm and glisten with sweat.

“Ya ain’t fired McManus. But you ain’t supervisor no more. Get outta my sight for Christ’s sake.”

He stood for a moment half-looking into the big woman’s eyes like a rebellious schoolboy. He picked up a flashlight from the supervisors desk and his knuckles went white as he held it low by his side.

“Get goin’ McManus. I’ll see ya for duty tomorrow.”

He didn’t move. His right hand, heavy with the flashlight swung back and forth in a nervous arc.

“Don’t push me McManus. You ain’t lost your job yet.”

“What’s goin’ on here?”

Rosy’s little brother, Vinny Panicker, had strolled into the office and sized up the situation.

McManus took a deep breath.

Two Panickers.

“You got a problem McManus?”

“Cool it Vinny, Macky ain’t got no problem. You was just about to scam outta here right?”

He nodded his head and slunk away, his bad leg disappearing through the Monitor back entrance. Rosy gave a little snort and a smile came to her lips. She winked to her younger brother but he wasn’t convinced.

“Jesus Rosy, you gotta watch yourself with these fuckin’ losers. All it takes is one of these guys to come back here with a...”

“Don’t say it Vinny. And you know I don’t like you using that language in front of me when it ain’t necessary.”

“I’m just trying to look out for you sis. You don’t know when one of these guys is gonna lose it. Maybe you need a little protection around here.”

“Since when did I ever need you to look after me Vinny?”

“Ah jeez, Rosy, I’m just worried about ya is all. Have you thought about that idea? You know the m...”

“Stop it Vinny! Will ya? Please? I hear where you’re comin’ from but these guys is all talk, you know that. How many years we been here, seen ‘em all come an’ go. ‘I’ll kill ya’, ‘I’m comin’ back for you’, blah, blah, blah. We heard it all and here we are still standin’. If it’s ever gonna happen, I’ll know. Trust me, I know these guys like I know my own pantry and if I need your help you know I’ll ask for it, OK hon?”

Her little brother smiled and she turned back to Bugle Boy and the paramedics.

“Let’s get this poor guy outta here.”

In the locker-room, McManus slowly and painfully leaned against the wall as he let down his wide trousers. There was a picture of a busty naked blond holding pom-poms at the back of his open locker and one of an AK-47 on the inside of the door. He stared at the gun and struggled to put his pants on without bending over. His right hip and knee were more painful than usual.

*Gettin’ fuckin’ old*, he thought.

Michael Keogh had just arrived for duty and watched McManus with dull, pale, sullen eyes.

*Moron*, he thought, *trying to fool Rosy. What a fucking dope.*

Keogh wouldn’t have even thought about it. He had long since decided to abandon all methods that purported to achieve anything, anywhere, at any time at all and he seemed to be getting along just fine.

“What the fuck are you lookin’ at?” McManus shouted. “Fuckin’ Irish donkey. You fuckin’ wait and see if I don’t teach that bitch a lesson. Yeah, I ain’t afraid to say it, you fuckin’ Mick. And that jerk off brother of hers too, you hear me?”

Keogh bowed his head and looked away without a word.

## Chapter 2

Murder Watch.

That's what Vinny called it and that's what he had tried to get his big sister to consider. He had thought about 'Shooter Watch', 'Loser Watch', 'Loner Watch' and a few others, but he liked the sound of 'murder'. More urgent, more punchy. He'd been talking about it for a long time. A watch list for the collection of brooding misfits on the security team to try and preempt violent behavior and come down hard in advance. Vinny saw the guards as so many enemies to be spied on. Rosy saw them as a family of old-timers and lonely under-achievers she needed to look after. Michael Keogh was one they agreed on though. He was harmless. The kind of guy who just liked to get by and mind his own business.

That's what he had been doing earlier that morning on the No. 34 bus, going over the Charles River when a harsh voice drilled into his ears from behind. The bus was stuck in traffic on the bridge.

"And I said to him, 'you just can't do things this way!' Know what I mean? And then I walked right outta there and straight into Jim's office and I told that weasel the same thing I told Bob. 'You just can't do things this way, you gotta have procedures'. Like what a freakin' concept. Then later on, the network goes down *again*, surprise, surprise. So Bob takes all of us out to lunch. Guess where? Yeah, you betcha. Same old dive, same shitty service, same lousy menu..."

On and on she went. Loudmouth. The quiet Mr. Keogh hated it, but he didn't have a choice and somehow he just couldn't block it out this morning. The words invaded his brain and drowned out his own thoughts. He waited as long as he could before turning around to see who the bigmouth was.

Nobody else lifted their eyes, not even the tiniest bit of concern.

*What is wrong with these fucking sheep?* He asked himself.

His eyes found the culprit and she was every bit as unpleasant as he had feared; cavernous dripping allergy prone nose, mounds of shapeless, colorless, big New England hair, and a body so laden with fat that only the bare outline of a human form could be seen beneath.

Keogh glared, his eyes narrowed, his nostrils and lips twisted in disgust.

"Shut the fuck up!" He just barely, timidly mumbled, not really intending to be heard.

The backlash was furious.

"Hah? What's with this guy?" She said to the little male companion squeezed in next to her.

"Ya got me Suzy. You better ask him again."

"Got something to say buddy? Do you care to repeat what you just said like a fuckin' man? Or ain't you got the balls?"

The volume rose and swelled with mounting aggression.

Most travelers on the bus hadn't noticed the exchange yet and those who had weren't interested, but Keogh was already mortified. He began to sweat. He was outraged at the lack of an apology for the loud annoying public conversation

but stung into even deeper silence by the attack. In his imagination, the whole bus was a mocking audience, lapping up his shame. Was he going to just sit there and take it? What kind of a wimp was he anyway?

Stay cool Mikey, stay cool. Just let it slide.

The angry woman gave him a good look over; security guards' uniform, fake-fur collar, tin badge, atrocious nylon slacks, plastic shoes.

"Heh, heh, hooooh! Looks like we got us a high achiever here. A regular big time security guard."

The dirty look and mumbled words had been enough for her. She was ready for the slap down. If the whole bus wasn't an audience yet, she would soon change that.

"Hey everybody, look what we got here. Hey you! Yeah you, security guard... security guaaaaaard!!!" She bellowed. "I'm talkin' to *you*."

She shouted the words into the back of Keogh's head.

The weary morning travelers didn't have an option anymore. Yes, like it or not, this was happening.

"What's a matter with you? I thought I heard you say somethin'. You got somethin' to say, say it loud and clear security guaaard. Don't be shy now."

The bus jerked forward a foot or so and stopped again.

Keogh suffered.

"I oughta go over there, tear off that fancy fur collar and shove it up yer ass security guard. Hah? How 'bout that?"

Keogh bowed his head and said nothing.

"Hey buddy, could you move that shiny head of yours a couple a inches? The glare is hurtin' my eyes over here."

Keogh held on.

"Don't make me get physical on you security guard, 'cause I freakin' will if I have to."

"She will buddy. I seen her do it before." The little man chimed.

Keogh had noticed in the last twelve months or so that stress like this made him breathless. He should have known better than to get involved, he wasn't able for it. But somehow, he couldn't let it go.

Turning around to face her, his eyes bulged, his face burned tomato red. He opened his mouth ready to shout her down and just as the words found his lips, the bus gave a great jerk forward, whiplashing Keogh in his seat and aborting his outburst.

The passengers gave a collective snort of pity and laughter.

"Haw, haw, haw! That all you got piss-boy? Hah?" The big lady mocked.

His chest got tighter, his breathing shorter. In the corner of his eye, a little boy was staring at him. He forced himself to stare at the ground.

Better to get off the bus and walk the rest of the way to work.

"That's right piss-boy, you shut up and stay right where you are you fuckin' loser."

When the stop finally came, Keogh stood up and queued to get off.

"See ya now buddy. Take care of yourself Top Gun. And get a freakin' hat for that dome a yours; I'm going blind over here."

The door began to open and seeing freedom, Keogh's pride rose again.

"Why don't you just shut up?"

He should have known better.

“Did all of you hear that? Hah? Did you? You should of just got off the bus security guaaard. You should a just got off the frickin’ bus.”

Keogh didn’t know what to do: jump and run, or try to save face by taking her on. His decision came too late anyway. She thundered down the aisle in a heartbeat, wrenched the clip on fur collar from around his neck and waved it over her head like a trophy.

“Come on piss-boy, why don’t you get your collar back?”

Keogh reached but she was tall as well as fat. He would have to jump. Or he would have had to if she hadn’t shoved him out onto the street, sloshing up to his ankles in a filthy sidewalk puddle.

“Here, stick it on your head and keep your brain warm.”

She flung the collar out of the bus as far as she could. Keogh stumbled to catch it. By the time he had it in his hands, soiled and sopping wet, the bus had moved on.

The traffic was slow and the next stop wasn’t that far away.

That bitch will laugh out of the other side of her face when she sees me waiting for her at the next stop with a steak knife aimed at her throat.

He paused. Stared into the rain.

She fucking deserves it. God knows.

But what about that kid on the bus? Would he deserve to see that? Of course not.

He wrung out his collar and clipped it back on to his jacket.

There was always an excuse, wasn’t there? A good reason to do nothing at all.

Turning south, he headed towards the Boston Monitor. After all, he didn’t want to be late for the guard he was going to relieve from last night’s shift. Today was his tenth anniversary of immigrating to Boston from Ireland. ‘Count your blessings’ his mother had always told him.

*I should call her,* he thought.

It had taken McManus six long months to regain the position of night supervisor. A full half year in the solitude of the underground parking lot, mired in perpetual disgrace, surrounded by the bad smell of printers ink, car oil, natural gas, and of course his own ever-present body-odor infused into the synthetic fibers of his uniform. Rosy re-instated him because unlike poor old Bugle Boy and a dozen others still employed, McManus actually did have a pulse and as such, was generally an asset to the South Boston Security Company and in particular to the moribund Boston Monitor security team.

He was sitting, basking once again in the glow of his supervisory power, surveying the front-lobby of the Monitor when he saw the bedraggled, dripping-wet figure of Michael Keogh arrive for work.

“You made it Keogh, you fuckin’ bum. Jesus fuckin’ Christ! I thought you fucked up again Irish. Got me waitin’ here like always. You ready to go or what?”

The obese guard had already emerged from behind the lobby desk and impatiently waited for Keogh to accept the post. Every day they worked together McManus subjected him to a barrage of complaints, insinuations, accusations and insults. Today, as always, the punctual Keogh was on schedule, if cutting it a little fine.

“It’s 7:55 McManus. I’m on time.”

“On that fuckin’ Irish time Paddy. On that fuckin’ Irish time. Here, sign the goddamn book and let me get outta here. I worked enough Goddamn time for your sorry Mick ass today already. I ain’t here so as you can lie in bed all day pickin’ yer ass Danny Boy. Know what I mean?”

Keogh’s black stare into the fat guard’s face spoke for him.

“Hey, I’d love to stay here and chat all day long Mr. Freakin’ Sunshine, but strange as it may seem I actually got some better things with my time I can do than stand around here talkin’ my jaw off with some steamin’ wet Mick as just dragged his ass in outta the rain. So long Keogh, see ya later.”

He turned one more time to Keogh as he left.

“Say, you seen the new guy yet?”

“What new guy?”

“Wait ‘till you see what we got workin’ for us now. Freakin’ Kunta Kinte, straight outta the freakin’ jungle. Calls himself ‘Moses’! Jesus Christ. Fuckin’ Moses, like he’s got ten commandments up his ass for us. Just wait, you’ll see. So long Keogh. Don’t fuck up too much today, OK. You hear me?”

Keogh packed his things under the lobby desk and stood half in a dream, only slightly aware of the world around him, his soaked collar dripping down onto his jacket and pants. He thought about the things he could do to McManus if he had him tied in a basement somewhere. None of them seemed sadistic enough. He promised himself, all talk aside, to really, no to really, really and truly do something this time to get revenge on the loudmouth jackass. No backing down, no chickening out.

Something would have to change. Keogh needed help, needed someone to hear him, needed to hear the words of someone around him who might bring him back from the edge of his personal abyss.

The cruel voice of the big fat bully on the bus resounded in his mind and he fully expected to see her time and again on his way to work every day.

I’ll stab his fucking balls off with a steak knife the next time he falls asleep with his fat legs open. I’ll fucking do it this time.

It was a promise Keogh had made before and he even had a blade ready for the job. Just buying it had made him feel one step closer to redemption, to actually just maybe really and truly doing something for once in his life. It was in his bag right then and there. He could have taken it out on the bus. He could take it out right now as McManus limped away.

He reached into his bag and closed his fingers around the ultra-sharp blade.

Easy as fucking pie. Right in the back of his fat fucking head.

**End of Sample - to continue reading download [Gun Laws](#) now on Amazon.**



## **Ebooks by A.J. Malone**

### **Murder Watch, Part One: [Gun Laws](#)**

How would you feel if you could see the future but had no ability to change it? What if you knew disaster was coming but all you could do was hope and pray? What if someone could teach you to read the thoughts and feelings of others but not how to save or help them? Would you take that gift? Would you do everything in your power to make it yours?

Michael Keogh takes that chance. He wants it more than anything else in his life and is willing to die, maybe even to kill for it. His strange new work colleague Moses Tah, an immigrant from the battle-scarred West African state of Liberia claims the ability to give him these powers, but is he for real? If Moses does possess the powers that Michael wants, will he be able to gain them? If he can learn them in time, will they be enough to change the destiny of the people around him? Lives are at stake; families, friends, colleagues, innocent bystanders. Will he be able to save them from the impending disaster that looms in the corridors of the Boston Monitor newspaper?

### **Murder Watch, Part Two: [Killing Time](#)**

Killing Time brings the suspenseful modern day psychic Odyssey of Keogh and Moses to its inexorable conclusion. If you have completed part one you simply have to know what's going to happen in part two.

Moses has defied all odds and drawn nothing but strength from the violence and fear around him. Will this be enough to protect him from the hatred of those he has disappointed? Will he be able to prevent the terrible disaster that looms in the corridors of the Boston Monitor? Will he run and hide or will he match brave words with brave actions? Sometimes knowing what's coming next just isn't enough.

### **The Tattoo Series**

Vol. 1 SKIN - you just read it!

Vol. 2. BODIES

Vol. 3. THIEVES IN LAW - in progress

Vol. 4. THE BLUE LANTERN - in progress

Vol. 5. INNO'S NIGHTMARE - in progress

## **About A.J. Malone**

A.J. lives, breathes and works in Ireland, just south of Dublin City. When he's not writing he's running around the county doing loads of other stuff. You can find out more about him and his books at:

[www.authorajmalone.com](http://www.authorajmalone.com)

## **Acknowledgements**

I'd like to thank all my guides, gurus, friends and family. A big thank you to the Spirit in the Sky as well.