

LA 3-Way

Published by Ben Borland at OBOOKO

Copyright Ben Borland 2013

OBOOKO Free Edition

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. Although this is a free book, it remains the copyrighted property of the author, and may not be reproduced, copied and distributed for commercial or non-commercial purposes. If you enjoyed this book, please encourage your friends to download their own copy at www.obooko.com, where they can also discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

Cover photo by Vox Efx

Table of Contents

[California 1](#)

[Scotland 1](#)
[The Island 1](#)
[California 2](#)
[Scotland 2](#)
[California 3](#)
[Scotland 3](#)
[California 4](#)
[Scotland 4](#)
[California 5](#)
[Scotland 5](#)
[California 6](#)
[Scotland 6](#)
[California 7](#)
[Scotland 7](#)
[California 8](#)
[Scotland 8](#)
[California 9](#)
[Scotland 9](#)
[California 10](#)
[Scotland 10](#)
[California 11](#)
[Scotland 11](#)
[California 12](#)
[Scotland 12](#)
[California 13](#)
[Scotland 13](#)
[The Island 2](#)
[California 14](#)
[The Island 3](#)
[California 15](#)
[About the author](#)

California 1

Zack Keane's black Corvette Grand Sport eased to a halt by the loudspeaker at the start of the drive-thru lane. "Take yo' order," drawled the kid on the mike.

"Big Mac meal with a strawberry milkshake to take away, please," said Zack, and immediately cursed himself for sounding far too British. It was also the same thing he always used to have back home. "And a side of onion rings," he added quickly, trying to Americanize his request.

"You wanna go large?" asked the kid.

"Yeah," said Zack. Money was no object to a big star like the Zackster.

However, another problem was becoming painfully apparent. In the cooling breeze of the freeway, with his new Ray-Bans absorbing the glare of the sun, eating lunch in the convertible had seemed like a great idea. Now, with the southern California heat already frying the top of his head, he realised it obviously was not.

"...have a nice day," the drive-thru kid was saying, as he finished recapping the order.

"Er, sorry, but I think I should come inside after all," Zack said, and cringed. This was the most British thing he had said all week.

"Move along to the checkout window now, sir."

"I said I wanna make it eat in," he tried again, putting a bit of LA attitude into it this time, although he was unable to resist adding a plaintive, "Please."

"British asshole..." mumbled the kid before the connection was lost in a burst of static.

Zack chose a table by the window to eat his lunch, thinking that although the air conditioning was pleasantly cool, it failed to completely dispel the familiar aromas of child's sick, cheap cooking oil and industrial cleaner. He watched, chewing his burger mechanically, as a large silver Toyota SUV pulled into the parking lot.

Paparazzi.

They had been following Zack ever since Easy Town had won Pop Quest all those years ago, so in theory he should have been used to them by now. Only that was like saying you should get used to mosquitoes if you lived in a swamp, when, in fact, they would always be annoying little shits.

He forced himself to look away and found his attention diverted by a new superhero movie advertised on the paper liner on his tray. The female star was an English actress who had once been part of his late wife Stacey's West End clubbing gang in London. Zack thought back to one wild night in the Met Bar, when the actress – then best known for a low-budget horror set in the Welsh mountains, called Night of the Killer Sheep - had stroked his leg under the table and started licking his ear, whispering hoarsely that she wanted to shag him in the toilets.

He had been only too happy to oblige, of course, although he had at least felt as guilty as hell afterwards. Zack shook his head, wondering how anybody could have been such a thoroughly rotten bastard to the woman he loved. He didn't even recognise his former self these days. It was hard to imagine now, but his loyalty to Stace had simply been washed away by hundreds, or was it thousands, of similar offers. Like a castle made of the sand, washed into the sea.

That would be a good line for a song, he thought, brightening up a bit. Then he remembered Jimi Hendrix had already done it and the newspapers would nail him for stealing ideas again.

Zack glared at the impossibly pretty face on his tray. He had seen the actress recently in an organic supermarket in Beverly Hills, accompanied by her assistant who was pushing a trolley full of ludicrously overpriced shopping, and she had completely blanked him. Zack had wanted some beers but he had been unwilling to pay \$100 for a six pack, even if they were brewed using water from a Japanese mountain stream, and he had left without buying a thing.

He turned his attention to a property guide he had brought with him and spent the next ten minutes circling a number of homes in South Central LA. Then he got up to go, leaving the guide behind him on the counter.

As he accelerated the Corvette back onto the Hollywood Freeway he saw in his rear view mirror a fat bloke wearing surf shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt get out of the Toyota

and jog into the McDonald's. Keane grinned as he thought of the portly paparazzo lurking on some street corner in Compton and the potential headlines in the British tabloids – Loser Keano Hunts for Ghetto Hideaway.

Not that he felt any more confident about his own destination. He knew very little about East LA, other than the fact it was the traditional hub of the city's Hispanic population and had its own problems with drugs and gangs. He drove on, admiring the glass towers of Downtown, before taking the El Monte Busway to the San Bernadino Freeway. After a couple of miles he dutifully followed his sat nav, which somebody had equipped with the voice of Billy Connolly, and took the exit for the Long Beach Freeway, southbound. He turned off at East Chavez Avenue and headed east until he reached the address he was looking for – a two-storey row of social housing apartments across the road from Belvedere Park.

He parked and looked around him, noticing a gritty undercurrent that was quite unlike anything he had come across in LA so far. Sure, there were some pretty dodgy sections of Hollywood Boulevard, and parts of Venice Beach and Santa Monica were not exactly safe to walk around after dark, but this was different somehow. There were no crack dealers on the corner, no gang bangers in souped-up cars and most of the people he could see walking past looked fairly sane, which was a reasonable percentage for anywhere in LA, but still there was something about the area that made him edgy.

It was just a poor, workaday part of town that was not at all glamorous and a little bit depressing...

Of course! Keane realised with a start that it reminded him of home.

The thought galvanised him into action – he was, after all, supposed to be a working class kid made good from the mean streets of Belfast. Surely East Chavez Avenue could have nothing on the Falls Road (although in fact he had grown up in Bangor and had visited the more dangerous areas of his home city very few times in his life).

He got out of the car and pressed a button on the key to lock the doors, acutely aware that they did so with a loud beep and an ostentatious double flash of the indicator lights. Would it not make more sense for the doors to lock silently, drawing as little attention as possible from any would-be muggers within earshot?

The address he was after was on the ground floor of the flats, which were accessed by an outer door fitted with security bars and an intercom. He pressed the buzzer for the home of Rosa Velasco and waited, belching softly and thinking of the Big Mac meal that was now residing uncomfortably in his stomach. Perhaps it had been a bad idea to order those onion rings, after all.

“And they call this place La la land! Man, we got nothin’ on you Brits,” said Tommy Wikowski, shaking his big head. “How did this limey fuck ever get to be a star, anyway?”

The photographer was sitting in the front passenger seat of the silver Toyota, fanning his sweating frame with a copy of Heat magazine. They had tailed Keane at a distance all the way to the East Side and watched him go into some shithole of a condo, but now Wikowski was starting to get seriously pissed off. Wherever they stopped on this bullshit job today, his boss, Andy, insisted on switching off the engine, and therefore the air-con, to save on fuel.

Andy Garner, the proprietor of the Pizzazz News and Picture Agency, looked at Wikowski, all 18 stones of him, resplendent in green and yellow floral surf shorts, silver LA Raiders tank top, Oakley shades and a back-to-front flat cap made from some kind of fluffy white material.

“A limey fuck?” he repeated, incredulously. “Are you in the US Navy circa 1944? This isn’t the Dirty Dozen, man. Nobody says ‘limey’ any more. Jesus, you’ll be handing out nylons to chicks next and re-using your rubbers.”

“Fuck’s eatin’ you?” Tommy snapped, slapping the magazine down on the dashboard. “I can call the asshole whatever the hell I like.”

“Anyway, he’s Irish. Not a limey.”

“Okay, okay, I take it back,” Tommy said, holding up his hands in mock surrender, then spitting: “You’re the fuckin’ limey prick.”

He switched briefly to blocked-nose Liverpoolian, which to Garner seemed to have been the staple US impression of an English accent ever since Beatlemania. “Were you in the navy circa 1944? Are you for fuckin’ real? Maybe limey ain’t so relative no more, but circa? What does that even fuckin’ mean?”

It was Garner's turn to shake his head. Originally from Essex, he had lived in LA for most of his adult life and his accent was now firmly located somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic. He still dropped his aitches but he said 'awesome' more often than anyone from Basildon could ever reasonably expect to get away with.

"Look, shall I just turn the engine on?" he said. "It's too hot in this bloody car and quite frankly you're getting on my tits."

"Finally, jeez. You'd think gasoline was Cameron Diaz's come juice the way you hoard it."

Garner smiled despite himself. "Tommy, man, you are wasted taking photos," he said. "You should be writing the damn magazines."

The air con began to kick in almost immediately and the pair settled into a relieved silence, punctuated only by Tommy's satisfied groans as he sank lower into his seat.

"The fuck is he doin' in there anyway?" he asked, eventually.

Garner looked over at the row of social housing and grimaced.

"No idea," he replied. "But if it's a hooker then she's a bloody cheap one. We could have hit the jackpot here, Tommy. You got him goin' in, right?"

Wikowski nodded and began messing about with his camera, examining the photos he had taken on the digital screen. "I can't see nobody inside the place," he said. "Damn, man, if he's fuckin' some skanky ho' then we need to get 'em together. Maybe she'll give him a kiss goodbye at the door."

Garner just nodded. He didn't think Keane was shagging at all; in fact, he suspected he was just pissing them around. He had been acting weird for weeks now, shunning the usual celebrity haunts and instead drinking in dive bars and watching British sport on TV, visiting theme parks, unfashionable surf beaches or multiplex cinemas, eating burgers and junk food all the time. Not to mention that trick he had just tried to pull by leaving that property magazine in McDonald's.

It was as if he was trying to do a Britney, cracking up and going all trailer park, but without actually doing anything so outrageous that it could make the papers. It reminded Garner a little of his old pals in Essex, the boring shit they used to get up to on holiday, and even the average Sun reader was not interested in seeing the hated Zack Keane doing the exact same things they did every summer in Majorca or Florida.

One thing was for sure – something was going on, and Garner couldn't help thinking it was all just an act to wind the press up. Or, to be more specific, an act to wind him and Tommy up, as most of the other reporters and paps had begun to move onto fresher, more profitable targets.

"We'll get the bastard," he said, although he was speaking to himself more than to anyone else. "Might take a while, but he's up to something and I'm gonna find out what."

Scotland 1

It all began on a Wednesday afternoon. A beer bottle was thrown across the pub and smashed against the bar in a shower of suds and broken glass. I spun around and saw two men sitting at a nearby table, one of them shaking his head and the other staring directly at me with an expression of furious intensity.

He immediately became my number one suspect.

"Ah hate that bastard," hissed Number One Suspect. He was a bloke in his late 30s with a blotchy face and a wet-look bubble perm, and he was sporting an Adidas tracksuit top zipped up to his chin.

"Aye," said the other guy at the table, "but there wis no need to throw mah beer at him". This fellow had a large, hooked nose, a metal bolt through his left eyebrow and a greasy Mohican, although despite his menacing appearance I was glad to hear him acting as the voice of reason.

I looked around the pub, which was a cavernous sports bar with lots of TVs and a reputation for cheap booze deals. The big Aussie barman was nowhere to be seen and none of the other drinkers gave the impression of even having noticed the bottle smash.

"Let's drink up and go, eh?" I suggested to my friend, Faz, as I shook a splinter of glass off my trainer. But it was too late.

Number One Suspect leapt to his feet and bounded across the room with surprising speed. He leaned into my face and snarled, with bleary-eyed hostility: "What youse did tae that lassie was bang oot ay order!"

"What are you on about?" I yelped.

He prodded me in the chest with a nicotine-stained finger. “Comin’ doon here, actin’ the big man,” he snarled, before finishing emphatically, “when yir nothin’ but SHITE!”

I looked around desperately. The rest of the pub was watching now all right but the bloody barman was still nowhere to be seen. What the hell was this nutter’s problem?

“Come on, mate...” said Faz, putting his arm across Number One’s chest.

“Haunds aff!” yelled the Voice of Reason, jumping up from his seat. “This is between him and the booeey there!”

Faz, to give him his due, waited several hundredths of a second before lowering his arm.

Number One Suspect was now panting heavily and with each ragged breath a bogey flicked in and out of his nostril. This was ridiculous. Here was I, a strapping lad of 26 with three pints of Stella under my belt, being bullied by a drunk who was clearly having difficulty letting go of the 1980s football casual look.

“Piss off,” I snapped, as aggressively as I could, and shoved him hard in the chest.

He stumbled backwards but stayed on his feet. Oh, shit.

Pouncing like a leopard – a leopard on benefits with a penchant for daytime drinking – he flew at me again and swung a wild haymaker, connecting above my left eye with his sovereign ring. I fell over and Number One came crashing down with me, flailing blows around my head and body. Panic flooded my brain and I began to return some punches, landing a few digs but leaving myself open for several more as well. My feet scrabbled on the sticky wooden floor as I tried to flip him over and get on top of the mad bastard.

Then the Aussie barman dragged him off me and the fight was over. From my prone position I saw two other drinkers holding Faz, who was bucking and kicking as though an electric current was running through him. The Voice of Reason, adding racism to his arsenal of unpleasantness, was still flinging insults in Faz’s direction as he sauntered out of the pub.

I staggered to my feet, my heart battering against the inside of my ribcage like a Patrick Moore xylophone solo at the end of a particularly exciting episode of *The Sky at Night*. The Aussie barman had Number One in a headlock and was propelling rapidly him out into the street after his friend when a blonde barmaid arrived at my side and helped me up on to a stool.

“Are you alright?” she asked, speaking with an American accent. I could only nod, dumbly, and try not to stare at her breasts as she swirled a bar towel in the ice bucket and began dabbing at a bloody scrape on my forehead.

Faz returned to the bar. “I should have fucking battered the Neanderthal bastard,” he said, before glancing at the barmaid. “Sorry about the language, love, but he was asking for it.”

He retrieved his pint and took a swig, playing the hard man role to a tee. Personally I thought the Voice of Reason would have cleaned his clock but I was hardly in a position to argue. Looking around for my own pint, I saw an empty glass on the floor and realised I must have dropped it when the middle-aged alky decked me with a single blow. An arrow of embarrassment shot into my reeling brain.

“Dave, will you get more ice please?” the sexy Yank asked, as yet another colleague appeared. Where the hell had they all been two minutes ago?

“Get the lad a whisky,” someone said.

The barmaid, like Florence Nightingale in a tight black T-shirt, pushed back my hair and examined my war wound, her face full of concern. I didn’t mind in the slightest. A double whisky arrived and I knocked it back gratefully.

“Can I get one of those?” Faz asked, but to no avail. Sorry tough guy, only room for one victim here.

“Hold this where it hurts,” said Florence, loading some ice into the towel. “Do you want me to call the cops?”

I turned to look out of the window. Number One Suspect and the Voice of Reason were heading away towards Ferry Road.

“No thanks,” I said, attempting a cocky grin. “I reckon I gave as good as I got anyway.”

Florence smiled kindly but I heard one or two sarcastic murmurs from the other drinkers. Then the Aussie barman returned, slapping his hands together as though he had just dealt with a particularly troublesome croc.

“Weirdest thing,” he said, chuckling. “Guess why that old fart had a go at you, mate?”

“Haven’t got a clue,” I replied, shaking my head.

“He only thought you were Zack bloody Keane.”

“You do look like him, you know.”

Faz and I were sitting in a booth at the back of the pub, tucking into free cheeseburger and chips with another pint of Stella on the side, also gratis. The Antipodean hero – who was called, rather stereotypically, Shane – was also there and the freebies had been his offer, so we had no choice but to listen to his triumphant crowing.

More promisingly though, Florence Nightingale – actually Sandy – had joined us as well, although she was almost as captivated with Shane as he was himself. It was Sandy who had just spoken, however, taking some of the wind out of Shane’s voluminous sails.

“You reckon?” he asked, frowning.

“Yeah, it’s the eyes,” she replied.

“What, the black eye or the other one?” Faz said with a snort.

I glared at him and then turned to Sandy. “People have noticed it before,” I said. “No one’s ever actually thought I was him, though.”

“I can’t see it, mate,” insisted Shane.

“I can,” Sandy said, sticking to her guns. “I thought when you were at the bar, ‘Wow, he looks like that pop star guy. Zack whatever’.”

I suppressed a delighted grin.

“The gadge was wasted, he probably thought I was Imran Khan,” said Faz. He turned to Shane, “Are you sure he wasn’t taking the piss?”

“Yeah, defo. He goes, ‘I hate that bloke’ and I goes, ‘Yeah, well don’t bring it in my bar.’ Then he goes, ‘What he did to that lassie was out of order,’ and I started to think that maybe you were some kind of perv and I should come back and help him kick your bloody teeth in.”

I mopped up a splodge of relish with the last of my burger and tried to catch Faz’s eye. We’d heard this line several times already.

“So I asked what you done, but he goes, ‘Just ‘cos he’s Zack Keane, thinks he owns the fuckin’ town’. Mate, you couldn’t make it up.”

“Right, what would a pop star be doing in a dump like this?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Shane agreed, as I mentally chalked up a point.

Faz, who would normally have picked up on the gag, was unusually quiet.

Shane drained the last of his beer and clapped his hands together. "Right, fellas," he said. "Much as I'd like to sit here gassin' all day we're gonna have to get back to work."

"Cheers, Shane," I said, and Faz lifted his glass in tribute.

He ambled off, leaving Sandy to pick up the empty plates. "Don't let those idiots get you down," she said with a sweet smile.

"We won't," I replied. Feeling emboldened by lager, whisky and several blows to the head, I decided to ask her out on a date. She had clearly been concerned about my injuries and had even noticed me at the bar, so what did I have to lose? She could only say no...

"Listen, Sandy..." I began, but Faz cut me off.

"So do you fancy him then?" he asked.

Sandy looked puzzled. "Who?"

"Zack Keane," Faz persisted. "Do you fancy him?"

"Oh jeez, no way. He gives me the creeps."

I must have looked disappointed, because she patted me on the hand and added, "I'm sure you're nothing like him really, Paul, but the guy is a total dick. I mean, look what he did to that poor girl."

She smiled again and walked away.

"Thanks a bunch, Faz," I said with a sigh, but he took no notice.

"Everybody hates him," he mumbled. "It's perfect."

"What are you on about?"

"Listen," he said, leaning forward across the table, his eyes gleaming. "I've had a brilliant idea."

After a few more pints in the pubs around the Shore we returned to my flat near Leith Links, where Faz finally explained his 'brilliant idea' over supermarket bourbon and Coke. With hindsight, I can't believe that I was stupid enough to go along with him but there you go. Stupid is as stupid does, as Forrest Gump's momma once said.

In my defence, I was totally skint after jacking in my job at Multiplex in a fit of doom and gloom. I was working part-time at my friend Geordie Mike's bike shop but he hardly

paid enough to cover the rent, never mind keep me in the comfortably numb style to which I had become accustomed.

And I was still pretty mixed up over Isla, my ex-girlfriend who had left me for a rugby-playing Edinburgh yahoo about three months earlier. Truth is splitting up with Isla was probably the reason for me being depressed and jacking in my job in the first place, so you could say this whole sorry story is her fault.

Not that I'm bitter or anything.

Before I go any further I should probably explain – for anybody who doesn't follow our fascinating popular culture – a little bit more about Zack Keane.

He is the irritating Ulsterman from Easy Town, the boy band that won the first series of Pop Quest. They had two hit albums before Zack left to become a star in his own right, claiming that he wanted to write his own music and not just dance along to manufactured crap. After a stellar couple of years - including five number one singles, two consecutive Christmas chart toppers and a James Bond theme tune – he cemented his A-list status by marrying Stacey West, the fit actress from EastEnders whose character ran the CD stall on the market.

So far, so Justin and Britney...

Then it all started to go pear-shaped as the tabloids caught Zack cheating on Stacey with a procession of groupies, lap dancers and Hollyoaks girls. His behaviour became wilder and more unpredictable but he refused to go into rehab, despite obvious problems with both drugs and alcohol. However the revelation that pretty much wrecked his career came when a 53-year-old music teacher from Penrith went public with the fact that he had written all of Zack's songs and then been cheated out of his royalties.

Zack took the ensuing flak very badly and moved to Los Angeles with Stacey in an ill-conceived attempt to 'crack the States'. Instead, however, he carried on drinking, getting high and sleeping around until his wife drove her car off a cliff on the Big Sur highway and died.

Whether it was an accident or suicide had never been determined, but Zack's shenanigans were widely blamed for Stacey's tragic and untimely end and the country entered into a period of prolonged hatred towards my doppelganger. Most recently, to cap

it all, Zack got wasted in a Hollywood bar with an undercover reporter and was caught on tape abusing the Queen and all her subjects in the most stridently offensive fashion.

In other words, by the time of our encounter with the two nutters in the pub, Zack Keane was not exactly Mr Popular. And Faz, who is a freelance journalist specialising in celebrity tittle-tattle, knew that as well as anybody. We met at Napier University in Edinburgh, where he was studying journalism and I was studying (yawn) import/export business management. I had come up from Wigan and didn't know a soul in Scotland and I think Faz kind of took pity on me, and we had stayed good friends after university, as I went on to Multiplex and he joined the News of the World in Glasgow.

Which is where he learned to come up with devious ideas like this one...

"It's easy, man," said Faz, grinning broadly. "First off we pretend you're a real lookalike. You know, one of these muppets that go around opening nightclubs and singing at weddings. There are agencies full of 'em."

"You want me to become a professional Zack Keane lookalike?" I asked, puzzled.

"No, a Trevor McDonald lookalike. Fuck's sake, Crombie – yes, a Zack Keane lookalike."

"Okay, smart arse, just get on with it."

"Yeah, anyway, so then we sell a story to the papers saying that you're getting loads of bookings from all these people who hate Zack Keane and want to throw buckets of gunge at him at gala days and carnivals and shit."

"Buckets of gunge? Get real, I'm not doing that."

"That's the genius bit, man – you don't have to. I just write a story saying that you do, make up some quotes and flog it to the tabs. As long as I can get some photos, maybe of you in the stocks while a fit bird throws some tomato sauce and stuff over you, they'll definitely go for it."

"No chance," I began, before pausing... "Hang on, which bird?"

"Aha!" said Faz, wagging his finger at me. "I thought that would get you interested. I dunno, some decent-looking student will probably do it for 50 quid. You could sort that out while I'm setting the rest of it up."

“Yeah, right,” I scoffed. “What do I say? ‘Listen love, I’m not a weirdo or anything, but would you throw a bucket of ketchup over me? Hey, don’t look so scared, I’ll pay you. And I’ll be locked in the stocks.’ She’ll call the bloody law.”

“Don’t be a bawbag,” Faz snapped. “If I can flog this as a picture story we could get at least two or three hundred quid. If it’s a page lead in The Sun nationally, we could be talking a grand.”

“Seriously?”

“At least. We could make two or three thousand if we’re lucky.”

“Wow.”

“Then we go and get pished.” Faz’s grin was wider than ever as he slurped his bourbon and settled back into my sofa.

I nodded uncertainly. There was something troubling me about the plan, even more than the obvious drawback of me making a complete arsehole of myself in the national newspapers.

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You write a load of lies, exploit some young girl to have her picture taken for a fraction of the going rate and then get paid up to £3,000 for it?”

“That’s it. Not bad, eh?”

“And that’s what you do for a living? Where did I go wrong?”

“Get tae fuck, Crombie. Do you want this money or not?”

“Was Bin Laden a Muslim?”

“Are you an English poof?”

To be honest, I probably would have done it for free – I was stuck in a rut and it sounded like a laugh. And if we could make a few hundred each on the side, well, even better. After all, what could possibly go wrong?

[The Island 1](#)

I wake to a painful thud detonating deep within my skull. I am lying face down on cold, hard sand as an icy wind whistles across my back. Waves break somewhere nearby.

I try to lift my head and whimper in pain as a blinding whiteness blitzes my brain. I screw my eyes shut and bury my head in my arms, waiting for as long as I dare before risking a more cautious peek. I am on an empty beach beside a wild grey sea, topped with frolicking white horses.

I roll onto my back and sit up, resting on my elbows. The beach is maybe 500 metres from end to end, backed by sand dunes and surrounded by low, craggy hills. Out to sea I have an epic view over miles and miles of open water; in some places the sun is shining and in others dark showers of rain are tumbling down from the clouds. Across the water I can see a distant coastline, which could be an island or maybe another part of the mainland.

But where the hell am I? It looks like Canada or Norway or somewhere else cold and forbidding by a freezing northern ocean. I decide that I am still in Scotland.

I stand up and cough a mouthful of stomach bile onto the sand, tasting stale whisky in the back of my throat. I take a deep breath to prevent myself from throwing up.

It is only then that I notice the box.

A large cardboard box that once contained salt and vinegar crisps is sitting on the beach, not three feet away from me. I am puzzled - how had I missed this before? It was though it had just appeared there from out of thin air.

I hear something behind me and I whirl around. There is nothing there, however, only the wind whipping through the grass on the dunes. Maybe, I think, when I look again at the box there will be a mysterious old crone standing next to it, cackling as she releases a raven into the heavens...

There isn't, of course, but my physical aches and pains are quickly being replaced by an eerie, dreamlike fear. I still have no idea where I am or how I got here, but a half-submerged memory is beginning to tell me that it had not been a happy journey.

I stumble to the crisp box and look inside. It contains a length of rope, a metal first aid kit, a Thinsulate hat and gloves, two silver foil packs of dried food, an Army-surplus water canteen and a note, on A4 paper, in a plastic wallet.

It reads: "Paul. A man is coming to the island to kill you. He is on a jet ski – please don't imagine that this is not the truth or the game will be over before it has begun. Take what is in the box and run. Good luck"

Suddenly, above the crashing of the surf and the rushing of the wind, I can hear the heavy wet slap of a distant jet ski. I quickly gather up the items that have been left for me and I run, stumbling, up the beach and into the shelter of the dunes.

California 2

Zack had performed in front of 100,000 people at Knebworth, headlined a charity concert for Africa at the new Wembley Stadium and done numerous live televised gigs before a global audience of millions. But the long wait in Rosa Velasco's living room, perched on her plastic-wrapped sofa, was making him more nervous than any of those things.

This was the first step on his road from perdition, his personal journey to repair some of the bad, bad, baaaad shit he had done. People had always said Keane was a well-balanced individual – he had a chip on both shoulders – but even he recognised now that his paranoia had spiralled out of control over the past couple of years.

He had once been a fairly happy-go-lucky guy, despite the vanity, selfishness and all-consuming obsession with becoming famous. After all, these were hardly unusual personality traits in 21st century Britain. But to the surprise of pretty much everyone who knew him, not to mention himself, he had gone and actually achieved his dream.

Reality television had turned him into a pop star and then, thanks a twinkle in his eye, a soulful singing voice and some clever management, especially from the Svengali-like genius behind Pop Quest, he had moved up a level and become a grade one celebrity.

Known by his first name alone. Robbie, Kylie, Dizzy, Amy... Zack.

They – the media, the viewers, the fans, the bloggers, everybody, just they - had built him up, up, up into the rarified atmosphere of the superstar.

And then, of course, inevitably and in time-honoured fashion, they had knocked him down again. For a long time, Keane had been incredibly bitter about the way he believed he had been treated. After all, he was hardly the only singer to get rich off the back of somebody else's songs, or to use drugs, or to sleep around, or to turn his back on the

shitty old country and move to Hollywood, was he? Was he? For fuck's sake, it was ridiculous.

Then... well, then Stacey had died. Driven her car off a fucking cliff. A proper rock star's death, only it wasn't the rock star that had bought the farm that day, it was his wife. And there were millions of people who wished it had been the other way around, not least his record company – live fast, die young, sell a shitload of downloads. But he had been at home, stoned off his tits and drunker than Gazza on one of his worst days. And contrary to popular opinion, he had no idea what she had been doing away up there, halfway to bloody San Francisco, mooching around the old hippy villages that dotted that stretch of the coast. There had been no argument before she had gone, no furious accusations, no slamming of doors. In fact, he couldn't even remember the last time he had seen Stacey before it happened.

They hadn't really talked much at that point, to be honest. Once, yeah, sure, once it had been great. He really had loved her, of course he had, and he knew that part of him always would, but somehow it had all just fallen apart. So there had been no big fight before she died, mainly because both of them knew there was no point fighting anymore, it was over, and that at some point soon Stacey was going to leave him and return to London.

Then things had got really bad. His lovely young wife had died a horrible, harrowing death; surely he had deserved some fucking sympathy, for Christ's sake, not the barrage of hate that came his way...

Keane took a deep breath. He wasn't going to go there again. People can be cruel, he told himself, Stacey was a popular girl, nobody really hates you – they just hate the image of you that they see in the papers.

This was a tactic he had been using for a few months now, reassuring himself mentally and blocking out any negative thoughts. It seemed to be working, too. It wasn't anything a shrink had taught him, although he had been to a fair few of those. In fact, his recent recovery had little to do with any external help, at least as far as he could see. One morning he had woken up and just known, deep down, that the worst was over.

Since then he had cut down on the booze and stopped the drugs; he was getting to the gym a couple of times a week and going for runs on the beach; he had even taken a few

fishing trips up into the mountains and, click, suddenly he was in a better place. More recently, he had made himself a mental checklist of targets and some of them involved the righting of past wrongs in a bid to balance out his karma them – a bit like the guy from that TV show, My Name Is Earl.

His thoughts were interrupted as Rosa returned to the living room. She looked at him suspiciously as she walked to the glass-topped coffee table, setting down a tray containing two mugs of coffee and a plate of chocolate biscuits.

“Kit Kats, just like choo like,” she said.

Rosa Velasco was 67 years old, a squat figure with a single eyebrow that curled across the centre of her forehead like an over-protective centipede. But she cooked, cleaned, shopped and ironed like a dervish, and could chase off unwanted callers with just a blast of her ferocious stare. She even remembered that he liked Kit Kats.

It was time to cut to the chase. “Rosa, I want you back,” said Keane.

Rosa’s eyebrow rose in the middle, as though the centipede were negotiating a small obstacle in its path. She set down her coffee mug and looked at him appraisingly, something in her dark eyes making him want to get this over with as quickly as possible.

“I’m sorry,” he went on. “I shouldn’t have fired you and I apologise. I want you back as my housekeeper. It would be the same hours as before but you can have a 50 per cent raise.”

“There was nothing wrong with my work.” It was a statement, not a question.

Keane shook his head. “Your work was excellent,” he said, solemnly.

Rosa nodded, but said nothing. Instead, she sipped her coffee and motioned for Keane to do the same. He drank a mouthful of the scalding liquid and then took a Kit Kat from the proffered plate and opened the wrapper, breaking off one of the fingers and dipping it into his coffee.

“You know, I definitely like these more than Breakaways,” he said. That was why he had sacked her, over Breakaway biscuits. He had developed an urge for the chocolate-covered snacks he had enjoyed as a kid but Rosa kept returning from the supermarket with American ones – Yo Yos, Twinkies, Oreos, when he had told her that the only Yank brand he liked were Kit Kats. Finally, coming down from a long night of cocaine and gin,

he had lost his rag and yelled at his housekeeper over a plate of damn biscuits until his head spun and white foam collected at the corners of his mouth.

Rosa shrugged, although her eyes were smiling and Keane felt as though he had passed some kind of test. “The chocolate melts too easy,” she said. “Plus they cost a fortune from the British shop. Excuse me one second.”

She stood up and walked out into the hallway. Seconds later Keane heard her footsteps – she was remarkably swift on her feet for her age – tripping up the staircase.

Something in her expression had told him that she was going to accept her old job back and Keane, content now with his coffee and his Kit Kat, was able to examine the living room more closely. In all the years that Rosa had worked for him, he had never been to her home – why would he? – and he realised that he hardly knew the woman.

He stood up and looked at some family photos on the windowsill; there was Rosa with a handsome chap who must have been her husband, and another showing Rosa, the husband and a young girl, smiling on a beach somewhere. There were a several more shots of the girl, charting her progress from happy toddler to sullen teenager and finally, to a Latin beauty with gorgeous deep brown eyes and a slightly dodgy early 90s perm.

Keane remembered hearing of the late husband and even a nephew, a wild teen whom Rosa had always spoken of with a sad shake of the head, but to the best of his knowledge she had never mentioned a daughter. He wondered why there were no recent photographs of her.

Just then he heard Rosa’s footsteps descending the stairs and he quickly replaced the frame as she returned to the room. She was holding out a metallic Breugler watch.

“Here,” said Rosa, thrusting the watch at him “Choo never gave me any severance pay so I took this from your bedroom.”

“Oh,” said Keane, accepting the watch. “Thanks.”

Rosa’s tone and body language were so defiant that he didn’t really know what else to say, and he realised he was on the verge of apologising – apologising! For forcing her to steal his watch!

“But it wouldn’t be right to keep it if I’m gonna come work for choo again,” said Rosa, breaking into a smile for the first time that afternoon.

Keane took the watch and slipped it onto his wrist, feeling it pinch against his skin.

“Too tight, huh?” asked Rosa.

“Maybe a little,” Keane said.

“Choo put on weight. Looks good, too.”

Despite the drugs and the drink his weight had always been fairly steady but after Stacey died it had dropped to an all-time low. Of course, paparazzi photos of his gaunt appearance had prompted a frenzy of speculation back in the UK. Heroin addiction? Stress-related anorexia? All explanations were taken as a sure sign of guilt.

In truth, Keane had simply lost interest in eating. During that period Rosa had often arrived for work with a bowl of beef chilli or a dish of chicken enchiladas. She would leave them in the refrigerator and sometimes, late at night, he would heat up and devour the Mexican food. Rosa would then remove the grease-smeared crockery without a word the next day and Keane had always wondered whether she realised that her kindness had been practically the only thing that kept him alive.

“Thanks,” he said now, simply. He removed the watch and began fumbling with it, looking for a way to adjust the length of the strap, but feeling Rosa’s eyes upon him he just put it in his pocket.

Christ, this was awkward. Keane found his eyes drawn again to the photographs on the sideboard and the mystery beauty with the bad perm.

“Is that your daughter?” he asked.

Rosa coloured and walked quickly to the photos, lifting the largest frame and clutching it to her chest.

“Sorry,” said Keane.

“No, choo should not be sorry,” said Rosa, taking a deep breath and turning the photo around for him to see. “This is my daughter, Anna. She died.”

“That’s terrible. Do you mind me asking what happened? She looks so young.”

Rosa smiled but her eyes remained sad. “Choo know all about dying before your time, jovencito,” she said. “My Anna was 19 when she passed. It was 1992, all those years ago now! There were riots, all over LA. Some police beat up a black man, it was very bad.”

“Sure, I remember. Rodney King. So Anna was killed in the riots. Christ, that’s terrible” he said, aware that he was repeating himself. After all the people who had

struggled awkwardly when confronted with his grief, it was strange to hear himself doing the same things.

“She...” Rosa stopped and turned the frame around so she could look at her daughter’s face. “It is still very difficult for me to talk about,” she finished.

Just then, the front door opened and Rosa quickly put the photograph back on the sideboard.

“Hey Gran’moms,” came a voice from the hallway and seconds later a teenage boy came striding into the living room. He was on the chunky side – Keane thought again of all those nourishing bowls of high-calorie Mexican food – and wore knee-length combat shorts, a black and white check shirt over a plain white T-shirt and a black Oakland Raiders baseball cap.

The kid stared at Keane suspiciously, as though he were a door-to-door salesman he had caught red-handed in the act of ripping off his granny. So much for cracking the fucking States, Keane thought bitterly, this donut doesn’t even recognise me.

“Who dis?” he asked, indicating Keane with a dismissive upwards flick of his chin. He had a bum-fluff moustache and goatee that looked as though it would blow away in a light breeze.

“This is Mr Keane, my ex-boss,” replied Rosa.

Keane smiled. “I’ve come to offer your grandma her old job back,” he said, pleasantly. The youth reminded him of the gang bangers he saw hanging around crime scenes on the TV news, although that description could apply to half the teenagers in LA.

“Huh,” said the kid, turning to address Rosa. “You shoulda told me you been fired, Gran’moms.”

“Andre, why would I do that? You know how choo get all crazy, shooting your mouth off about things.”

“But how’m I s’posed to stick up for you if I don’t even know some asshole fired you?” he replied, his voice rising in anger.

Keane decided not to take the ‘asshole’ thing personally. “Hey, Andre,” he said. “Your grandma is coming back to work for me, so its cool.”

The boy snapped around towards him. “You keep out of this, man,” he said. “Its lucky for you I dint know you sacked her already.”

Keane revisited his earlier assessment of the youth as being “on the chunky side”. In fact, he probably weighed at least 18 or 19 stones, and with that one menacing step across the room he had somehow been transformed from an East LA version of Billy Bunter into something altogether more menacing.

“Whoa!” said Keane, throwing up his hands. “Calm down, I said your grandma has her job back. With a pay rise.”

“She ain’t my grandma, bitch, so stop calling her that.”

“Andre Hernandez!” said Rosa, shooting up out of her chair like a bottle rocket.

“There will be no cursing in my home.”

Andre glared at Keane, but the fire had gone out of his voice when he replied: “Yes Gran’moms.”

“Now, choo bring your fat backside out here in the hall with me.”

Rosa marched out of the room and he followed her obediently, like a battleship being led by a tugboat. Keane sat down on the plastic-covered sofa, listening to a hushed and heated exchange of views from the hall. Rosa seemed to be doing most of the talking and when the pair came back in Andre had reverted to sulking schoolboy mode.

“Now, let’s start again, shall we?” Rosa said.

“Good idea,” said Keane.

Rosa glared at him. “How about choo stand up then? Isn’t that usual when choo are introduced to a person?”

“Sorry,” mumbled Keane, dragging himself to his feet.

“Good. Mr Keane, this is Andre. He’s my great-nephew, not my grandson. Andre, this is my employer Mr Keane. Now shake hands.”

They shook, Andre’s heavy-lidded eyes refusing to meet Keane’s, who in turn was trying not to grimace as his hand was crushed by the youth’s meaty fingers.

“Andre has something to say to choo, Mr Keane,” Rosa went on.

“Yeah, sorry for calling you a bitch,” drawled Andre.

“Andre is in his final year at Garfield High and he is still learning that the world doesn’t owe him a living. Now, I mentioned one final condition attached to me accepting my old job back.”

Keane got a sudden chill as he realised where this was going.

“I would like choo to employ Andre to work in the garden part-time. He’s got a green thumb and he’s a nice boy, deep down. Plus, he’s strong as an ox. Choo have my word that he will do a good job.”

Keane looked at Andre and then back to Rosa. “What about a gardening job around here?” he suggested. “Beverly Hills is a long way to go to cut grass.”

“I’m afraid there’s some bad elements around here I’d rather he stayed away from,” said Rosa. “This is non-negotiable, I’m afraid Mr Keane.”

Keane shrugged. He was supposed to be making amends for all his bad behaviour and his treatment of Rosa ranked up there among the worst. The big lump would mow the lawn a few times and then start skipping work until he could be sacked. And if he started any of his gangster shit, his neighbourhood had more armed security guards than Belfast Airport.

“Oh, hell. Why not,” he said. “Welcome aboard, Andre.”

Scotland 2

“You want your head read, mate,” advised Geordie Mike, who had The Sun open on the counter of the bike shop. My grinning face was peering out from page 21, underneath the headline ‘Splat The Double’.

In the photo I was liberally splattered in pink goo and locked in a pair of wooden stocks. What really caught the eye, however, were the two topless models kneeling beside me, their boobs practically brushing my ears, nipples pointed skywards like miniature pink cannon taking aim at a swarm of invisible bumblebees.

I don’t mind telling you, looking straight at the camera had called for a dizzying feat of concentration.

Completing the pose, both girls were holding aloft upturned plastic buckets, caught in the act of pouring the pungent mixture of tomato ketchup and salad cream all over my head.

“Come on,” I said, nodding at the paper and failing to disguise my glee at how our clever little plan had worked out. “I get to have a laugh with two half-naked birds and get paid a load of cash for it. What’s not to like?”

“Aye, you might be laughing now.” Mike muttered. “You won’t be on Sunday, when Granton Star are kicking you all over the pitch.”

“They kick me all over the pitch anyway,” I said, reaching up and spinning a wheel on one of the mountain bikes on the wall rack, before attempting to defuse the situation. “It is weird though. Who’d have thought such a shite story would get in so many papers? That’s the second time I’ve been in The Sun this week.”

“You’re not kidding,” Mike said, jabbing his finger on the page. “Listen to this bit, ‘Paul says Keane’s legions of female fans used to line up to snog him – but now they can’t stand the sight of him.’ What a load of bollocks.”

“Hey,” I said. “Faz writes it, not me.”

“Well, we already knew he was a lyin’ bastard,” Mike said.

Mike and Faz had never really seen eye to eye, ever since we were in the pub one time and a gang of cyclists clad in tangerine Lycra came in. “Look at those wankers,” Faz declared, a bit too loudly, before Mike walked away without a word and spent the next half hour chatting with his pals from the West Lothian Wheelers.

Now he flipped rapidly through the pages until he reached Hagar the Horrible and Striker. The cartoons must have had a soothing effect, because he sounded much calmer when he next spoke.

“You know what is weird?” he asked. “You don’t really look owt like him and yet nobody seems to take that into account. Its like that bloke said, everybody gets fifteen minutes of fame. This must be yours.”

“Warhol,” I said, nodding. I had been thinking of the same quote myself all week.

Mike glared at me. “There’s no need for that, smart arse,” he snapped.

The bell above the door tinkled before I had chance to explain and a harassed-looking woman walked into the shop, dragging a snuffling toddler. She hustled to the counter and asked for an inner tube for a three-wheeler all-terrain buggy.

“We get loads of people wanting these, love,” Mike said, smiling cheerfully but darting a fierce glance at me as he turned to reach for a box on the shelf. “Mothercare charge a fortune for them, an’ all.”

I sighed and reached over for the bundle of newspapers before retreating to the back room.

It was Thursday and so far this week my supposed career as a ‘hatealike’ had already been featured in seven national newspapers. On Monday – typically a quiet news day, Faz had said – the story had made a few lines on the celebrity pages of the Sun, the Star, the Mirror and the Record; all the tabloids that habitually snapped up any mention of Zack Keane.

The following day, the Daily Mail, the Glasgow Herald and, bizarrely, the Scottish edition of The Times all ran a few paragraphs, although with what I thought was quite a sneering attitude – and none of them would have to pay for the story as it was already in the ‘public domain’. Quite a few websites had also nicked it for free.

But then Faz got a call from The Sun news desk in London, saying they wanted to do a follow up picture story with their own photographer and two Page 3 girls. The rest was history....

For the original photos, Faz had eventually got a neighbour of his to throw wet sponges at me in the back green behind his flat. But although she was a nice-looking girl nobody had actually used the shots, just cropped out my head and used it alongside a photo of Zack Keane.

To the editors of the Currant Bun, of course, bare breasts were prized above gold. And so Ashleigh and Lisa had flown up from London with a ‘snapper’, a glum Cockney named Stu. Both girls were friendly enough, and I wouldn’t have said no to either of them (particularly Ashleigh), but it was obvious from the outset that this was just another day at the office.

Driving over the Forth Road Bridge, high above the flinty waters of the Firth and with the Ochils glowing softly on the northern horizon, they hadn’t even paused in a long and well-informed chat about The X Factor to glance at the view. Stu spent the crossing staring lugubriously out of the window, before declaring, “Last time I was up ‘ere it was for Madonna’s wedding.”

When we reached the shoot, in the centre of a picturesque Fife village called Culross, Ashleigh and Lisa threw off their tracksuits and bras with such startling abandon that we could have been in a studio at Canary Wharf rather than a well-to-do commuter enclave bristling with Land Rover Discos and A-listed houses. Curtains twitched furiously and the number of male dog walkers increased at the rate of Ebola bacteria breeding in a Petri dish. The good burghers of Culross had obviously not seen anything like it since the last witch-burning.

Afterwards, soaked in kitchen waste, I realised that I hadn't brought a change of clothes or even anything to have a wash with. We drove all the way back to the airport with the windows open and the car smelling like the aftermath of a food fight in a busy Brewer's Fayre.

Then the shop bell rang again, shaking me out of my daydream, and I put the kettle on to make a conciliatory cuppa. Plonking a teabag into Mike's favourite Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles mug, I thought again of our match with Granton Star on Sunday – in particular the psychotic centre half with all the Hearts tattoos. What would he make of all the coverage, I wondered? Perhaps he was a Guardian reader.

It was probably for the best that it was all over now, I decided. We'd had a laugh, made a bit of cash and I'd got a tale to tell the grandkids. So what if I'd made a complete idiot of myself in the process?

Then my mobile rang. It was Faz.

"Mate, I've got another follow up sorted," he said. "And its pure genius."

An hour later Faz was parking his metallic blue VW Golf down a cobbled side street in Gorgie. The tang of roasting hops seeped into the car, but as I got out another smell undercut the aromatic daily gift from the McEwan's brewery to the people of Edinburgh.

"I can smell sausage rolls," I said, my stomach gurgling as I picked up the unmistakable scent of fatty pork baking in a cheap pastry shell. "Is there a Greggs around here?"

"You're in Scotland, Crombie," replied Faz, locking the Golf with a piercing double beep. "There's a Greggs around everywhere. But hurry up, I told the guy we'd be there by half past."

We walked down the street and stopped at a grimy doorway. A small brass plaque on the wall read 'Frank Fleming, Talent Agent. Edinburgh. London. Aberdeen'. The lights in the office were all on, even though it was shortly before lunchtime one a beautiful June day.

"Is this it?" I asked, a bit dubiously.

"Yeah. I told you he's no Max Clifford."

"Fair dos," I said. "Well, lets get it done then. Then we can go and have a bite to eat in the pub after. I told Mike I'd be back by two at the latest."

Once inside, a receptionist wearing gold-framed glasses on a chain glanced at us over the top of a Harry Potter book – one of the pretend serious ones with an adult cover - and told us to take a seat. I settled into a plastic chair and began to read a copy of Variety from a few years ago.

There was a feature about Pop Quest that carried a small photo of Easy Town, including a fresh-faced Zack Keane peering out from amongst his band mates. The others all resembled spray-tanned underpants models and their careers had pretty much sunk without trace – apart from occasional appearances on reality TV shows and the like – while Zack had gone on to mega-stardom. I looked closer at Zack in his heyday. He had dark hair, dark eyebrows, stubble and a big shit-eating grin – if you had to say he looked like anybody, it would probably be Colin Farrell. And nobody had ever mistaken me for the boy Farrell.

To be honest, in the Variety photo there wasn't much of a resemblance between Keane and myself, either. It was only when he got a bit older, left the band and started to become really famous – around the time I was at university – that people started to pick up on it and the ribbing began.

Barely a party went by when one stoned Home Counties twerp or other didn't tell me I looked like 'the Zackster, dude'. Still, it was only a passing similarity at best and I admit it did me no harm in the nightclubs. Of course, you didn't have to look like some dopey pop star to pull at a student night in Edinburgh.

Still, for many years we would never have got away with this stunt. Comparing Keane then and his gaunt, haunted appearance these days, it was depressingly clear that it was only after years of alcohol and drug abuse, failure, ridicule, depression, suicide

attempts, binge eating and crash dieting – mostly on his part – that the two of us were beginning to look alike.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, chaps.”

I looked up from the magazine to see a man come bounding in to the waiting room. He was probably in his late 50s, with a head of thick, white hair, red framed glasses and a Hawaiian shirt open at the collar to reveal a necklace of wooden beads. We stood up to say hello.

“You must be Faisal,” he said, shaking Faz’s hand in a very business-like fashion, before turning to me and performing a hammy double-take.

“And you must be Zack Keane. Booo, I say, booo,” he cried, in best panto tradition, grabbing my outstretched hand with both of his sweaty mitts. “I jest. You’ll be Paul, of course.”

Still holding my hand he called over to the receptionist, “Claire, will you be a darling and bring us in some coffee. And why not nip out to Greggs and get some of those Danish pastries, there’s a girl.”

He gave a last squeeze of my paw, then immediately clapped his palms on my cheeks. “Aaah, you’ll dae fine,” he said, beaming as he turned me one way and then the other in the migraine-inducing office light. “Like two peas from the same pod. And a fine pod too, if I may say.”

Then he finally let go of me and beckoned us both into his office, saying: “Come in, come in, and tell me all about your crackpot scheme.”

Faz was suppressing a smirk. I glared at him and gave a nod towards the front door but he dutifully trooped in behind Fleming.

“It’s gone way better than we hoped,” said Faz, after quickly outlining the story so far. “And now I’m hearing from magazines, radio, even television. Paul could end up on ‘I’m a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here’ or something crazy like that.”

This was all news to me and to be fair Fleming didn’t look all that convinced either.

“I dare say he could,” he said. “But it sounds like you have everything under control, Faz. What do you need from me?”

“I need you to register him as a lookalike,” replied Faz. “If this does get big, then it wouldn’t take much digging to find out that the back story is all just, you know, bullshit.

But if we're registered with you, on the website and everything, then nobody can prove that it doesn't stand up."

"Apart from me," Fleming said.

"Apart from you. But then why would you do that when you're getting ten per cent?"

We had argued about this in the car and it still sounded to me like we were just giving away a cut for no good reason. It was hardly bloody Watergate we were trying to cover up after all. Still, Faz had done okay so far so I had agreed to leave it to him.

"Fifteen," said Fleming, his voice losing its jolly timbre all of a sudden. "That's my going rate for all clients, especially fraudulent ones."

Faz glanced at me but I just shrugged, and then we all looked up as Claire arrived with the coffee and cakes.

"Okay, fifteen," Faz muttered. "But you've got to make it look legit, right?"

"Splendid," laughed Fleming, rubbing his hands together and leaping up to take the tray. "Claire, we're going to take some publicity shots of dishy Zachary Quack here. Be a dear and fetch that nice black sequined shirt from the wardrobe will you?"

As Fleming followed her from the room, Faz leaned over and squeezed my knee.

"This is just the first part, man," he said, gleefully. "Wait until you see what I've got lined up for you tomorrow night."

I vacuumed the front room, opened the windows to let in some fresh air and pushed all my dirty washing under the bed. Then I took it out again and put it in the washing basket. Why hadn't I done that in the first place? I laughed nervously, shaking my head.

I decided I needed some air myself so I took out the rubbish and the recycling and then walked to the shop for a bunch of flowers and a bottle of wine.

The flowers were easy – they were all half dead anyway, so it wasn't like there was much of a choice to agonise over – but the wine had me dithering for 20 minutes. What did the average Page 3 model drink? I ended up getting three bottles for £10, then another three, and nearly tore my arms off walking home.

By now the flat was pretty chilly so I closed the windows and turned up the storage heater (in order to be uncomfortably warm the following lunchtime) and began choosing

a soundtrack for the evening (The Jam, Blondie, The Rolling Stones – golden oldies).

Then the phone rang. It was Faz.

“Mate, how you feeling?”

“Fine, no worries.”

“Yeah? Cool. What you got planned for the delectable Janine G?”

“I thought a pizza and a couple of DVDs, and a nice bottle of wine. Nothing too fancy, like you said.”

“Aye? What DVDs you got?”

“Ray, that one about Ray Charles. And Dodgeball.”

“Oh great. A film everybody’s seen 20 times, and some depressing shite about a blind piano player. Man, you know how to treat a lady.”

“It won an Oscar.”

“So fuckin’ what?”

I said nothing.

“And a pizza. Home made I hope?”

“No, Dominos probably.”

“Fuck’s sake, Paul. I hope you got some decent wine in, I told her you were a classy bloke.”

“Get stuffed, Faz. You said not to go to any trouble.”

In the background I heard a car door slam and a female voice said something that I couldn’t make out.

“Its Paul,” Faz said. “He says you’re having pizza.”

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“And he’s got a big box of extra large johnnies,” Faz went on, cackling.

“Yeah, ribbed!” said a third person, a man. I could hear the female voice, which presumably belonged to Janine G, groaning in protest.

“Faz, who else is there, you moron?”

“Hang on, Janine. He’s saying he’s got a strap on and a jumbo tub of Vaseline. Paul, you are one filthy bastard. Ha ha ha ha.”

“Faz, you twat, where are you?”

“Just coming down Leith Walk, man. You’d better get the Vaseline on the radiator to warm it up! Ha ha ha.”

The line went dead.

Bollocks. I took a can of Tennent’s from the fridge and took a long grateful swig, feeling nervous as hell.

When Faz had unveiled the latest stage in his plan over lunch in the pub it had seemed too good to be true. A ‘kiss and tell’ for the Sunday Sport. He had set it all up with a reporter in London and arranged for a Scottish Page 3 girl called Janine G to come around to my flat that evening.

The Sport would get some grainy shots of her arriving, which would run on the following Sunday alongside topless photos from her portfolio and a photo of me. I had already decided I was going to call off sick for the match against Granton Star.

Besides, Faz admitted that he didn’t have any control over what the paper was actually going to write. The basic idea would be that the model had shagged me because she fancied Zack Keane, but beyond that it was up to them – it was all made up, so they could effectively say what they liked.

I didn’t care. Incredibly, we were getting paid £2,000 for it and I got to spend an evening with a glamour model to boot. We were obviously not going to do anything – I mean, of course that was too much to hope for – and so I had dutifully made up the spare room. After all, it was hardly likely that my captivating chat, animal magnetism and lumpy sofa, even if it was positively swimming in male pheromones, was going to lead to a night of unbridled passion.

Or was it?

Realistically, I knew that Janine G would be completely unmoved by a semi-drunken and ultimately fairly boring evening, enlivened only by the five Ds of Dodgeball and pepperoni indigestion. But on another level, a hopelessly sexist, misguided and misogynist level, I couldn’t help thinking there must be at least a chance that after a glass or three of wine she’d lead me to the bedroom, strip naked and drill me mercilessly into the mattress? Wasn’t there?

Janine slipped off her jacket to reveal a low-cut black top decorated with sparkly stones. As she deftly popped the can lid and took a drink of lager, I tried my hardest not to glance down at her cleavage, although it seemed to be exerting some kind of magnetic pull over my eyeballs.

“Take a picture, it’ll last longer,” she snapped.

“Sorry. I only...” I stopped, my cheeks burning. This was the surely worst possible start to the evening.

“Ah, don’t sweat it. It goes with the job,” Janine grinned and bit her lip. “I’m just a bit jumpy,” she said.

“Right, well, erm, come through and sit down.”

We went into the front room and Janine sat down while I peeked outside. Faz and the snapper were still there.

“So, how do you know Faz?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t really. Darren does.”

“Is he your, erm, other half then?” I said, nodding to the window. I felt distinctly uncomfortable at the thought of her large, shaven-headed boyfriend staking out my flat all night.

Janine spluttered. “You taking the piss?”

“Hey, sorry. None of my business.”

“Nah, Darren’s just the snapper. Believe me, if my fella was outside, we’d both be climbing out the back window.”

Somehow, this did little to restore my confidence. I took a healthy swig of Tennent’s as my mobile rang again. It was Faz.

“It’s me,” he said. “Listen, before we leave you to it, Daz reckons it would be good to get a shot of you two canoodling at the window.”

“Canoodling?” With his Cowdenbeath Pakistani accent, it was perhaps the most bizarre expression I ever heard Faz come out with. And it had plenty of competition.

“Yeah, canoodling. You know, cuddling and that. You could even have a snog if Janine is up for it.”

I glanced at Janine, who was studying the back of a CD case/listening attentively. I realised how random my last word must have sounded.

“She’s...” I began, thinking of her menacing boyfriend. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Come on, it’ll be a long lens shot at the window. There’ll be far more of Janine on display in the paper, anyway.”

“Yeah, but still.”

“There’s good money in this, don’t forget.”

“Ok, give us a minute.” I had to admit the thought of any sort of noodling with Janine did have its attractions. I snapped the phone shut.

“Listen, they want a picture of us together at the window.”

“Okay.”

“They want us to, er..”

“Canoodle?” Janine said, finishing my sentence and raising an eyebrow.

She stood up and we both went over to stand by the window, facing each other a little awkwardly. Janine took a deep breath and I wondered how much she was actually being paid for tonight, which made me feel more than slightly sleazy. Then she slung her arms around my neck and, as I breathed in her perfumed warmth, she pushed us both a deft step to the right so we were standing into the centre of the shot and kissed me.

I was transported back to the school disco, first snogs in the dark to the strains of Robbie Williams. There was beer on her breath and for the first and probably only time in my life I knew what Tennent’s would taste like in heaven. An unmistakable pressure began to build in my boxer shorts.

“Easy tiger,” Janine said, pulling away. “That’s all you get for pizza and beer.”

“Wow,” I said, shaking my head like a wet dog. “How about if we get some garlic bread too?”

My phone beeped. It was a text message from Faz.

“U jammy fucker ☺,” it read.

An hour later we were most of the way through an extra-large American hot and starting the second bottle of wine. Janine was laughing at Dodgeball and I was enjoying my best night in years. Could I be in love already?

“You know, I met him once,” she said.

“Who? Whyte Goodman?”

“Very funny. Zack Keane, the bloke you’re supposed to look like.”

“Really? What’s he like?”

“A dick.”

I laughed. “That’s what everybody says.”

Janine looked at me appraisingly. “You know, your mate Faz said this lookalike thing was all his idea.”

“It was. Fair play to him, he came up with it.”

“I thought at first he was full of shit, but now I’ve met you...well, you can tell.”

“Tell what?”

“That you wouldn’t have thought of it. I thought you would love yourself, you know, Mr Big Shot Pop Star Double.”

“Oh yeah, well, you’ve described me to a tee there.”

“But you don’t, you’re just normal. That’s cool.”

“Oh right. Well. Thanks a lot.”

“No problem. And you don’t even look that much like him. You do a bit, but I’ve met him and, to be honest, he’s better looking.”

“Really, I mean it, thanks a lot... but you should stop now.”

“Yeah, but he’s a bawbag.” Janine was chuckling now.

“So where did this historic meeting take place?”

“About four years ago in London, darling, when I was just starting out modelling. It was in some club. He was totally wankered and came over to me and my mate, swigging a bottle of champagne, and just goes, “Don’t suppose yer fancy a shag then?”

Janine attempted an Irish accent and I snorted red wine down my nose.

“Never. What a chancer,” I said, while at the same time thinking, ‘How cool would that be?’

“Yeah, then he leers at my mate and goes, ‘You know, two’s up. A 3-way, like’. So I goes, ‘I’ll gie you two’s up’ and flicked the Vs at him. He just gawped at me, like he’d never been knocked back before, then wandered off. My mate was fuckin’ ripping. She goes ‘That was Zack Keane, you dozy bitch’ and went after him.”

“Bloody hell.”

“Yep, and shagged him too. You’d think I’d be proud, girl power and all that, but I still kick myself now sometimes. Don’t get me wrong, he was a complete twat but how often do you get the chance to fuck a rock star? I mean, I’ll never get an offer like that in Clatty Pats now will I?”

There was a natural lull in the conversation at this point and I took the opportunity to drink almost an entire glass of red wine.

“So, what do you think of that then?” asked Janine, after a while.

“Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“I think... How cool would it be to be Zack Keane?”

“Ha ha, you wanker, maybe you are Mr Big Shot Double after all.”

Later, when we were starting third bottle and watching Ray, Janine began to tell me about her Scots Italian ancestry – it turned out I hadn’t been far off with Spanish, after all.

The G in her name stood for Giacomo and her grandfather had come from the north of Italy to run a successful café and chip shop in Port Glasgow, before moving the family to Shawlands. Her dad had expanded the family empire, and Janine, along with her two sisters and one brother, had enjoyed a comfortable existence in Glasgow’s southern suburbs.

Her mum, a Roman Catholic beauty from the East End, had been a fashion model and Janine had always harboured vague ambitions for a similar career, albeit ones she never discussed with her father or brother. They hadn’t taken it too well, apparently, particularly when she quickly moved into topless work, lured by the big money...

To be honest, although I already knew that I was hopelessly in love with Janine, I had quickly come to realise that she could go on a bit.

I poured us both another glass and continued to study her glorious curves, while nodding and making suitably serious/concerned/amused faces at what I hoped were the correct points in the story. She had pulled her legs up under herself on the sofa and I found myself transfixed by the shape of her thighs.

“...So then he just snapped the poor guy’s fingers. That’s when I first realised that Ryan was big trouble, but of course it was a bit late by that point.”

“Sorry,” I interrupted, shaken out of my reverie. “Who snapped somebody’s fingers?”

“Ryan did, to the guy in Bellahouston Park who was flirting with me. Have you actually been listening?”

“Course I have... I thought I must have misheard, that’s all.”

“No such luck, I’m afraid. Ryan’s a psycho but as we were engaged by then there wasn’t a lot I could do.”

Engaged to a finger-snapping psycho? How much of this tale had I missed? The last bit I recalled was Grandpa Charlie finally forgiving his nephew for firebombing an ice cream shop in 1987. Who the bloody hell was this Ryan?

“So is he the guy you were talking about earlier on? When you said we’d both be climbing out the window if he was here.”

“That’s him.”

“You didn’t say you were engaged.”

“Well, we’re not. I broke it off with him months ago. Last year, in fact.”

“But you’re still going out with him?”

“No way.”

“You said he was your boyfriend.”

Janine glared at me for a second. “No, I didn’t.”

“Hey, okay,” I said. “No worries. We can change the subject if you want.”

“Sorry,” Janine sighed and went on. “He’s not my boyfriend, but I still see him now and again. I can hardly avoid him. He’s always in the clubs in town and he’s pals with my brother Robbie, so he’s round at mum and dad’s a lot.”

I reached for a slice of cold pizza as, on the telly, Jamie Foxx became involved in a bar fight. As a blind heroin addict piano player, I didn’t rate his chances.

Although they were probably better than mine once Ryan got his hands on me.

“Don’t look so worried, he’s hardly going to come after you,” Janine said. “I’m in the Sunday papers loads. I do this for a living, dummy.”

I wasn’t convinced and it obviously showed.

“Anyway,” Janine smirked. “I reckon you’d only merit a First Crow.”

“A what?”

“That’s what he says. You know the kids rhyme, Three Crows Sat Upon a Wa’?”

“No.”

“You probably don’t have it in England. Never mind.”

“You can’t tell me I’m a First Crow, then not explain what it means.”

“I’m pulling your leg. Ryan won’t give a toss.”

“Yeah, but what does it mean?”

“Okay, the rhyme goes ‘The first crow, is greetin’ for his maw’, like he’s been given a fright. The second crow fell and broke his jaw, like he’s been beaten up. The third crow, he couldna flee at a’, like his legs have been broken. And the fourth crow, he wisnae there at all, like...”

Janine broke off and smiled. “Its just a daft wee thing Ryan and Robbie and them say.”

“Wasnae there at a’. Like he’s been murdered, you mean. Jesus Christ. He’s a fucking gangster.”

“No he isn’t, he’s just a big numpty. That’s Glasgow for you, everybody thinks they’re a hard man. Honestly, don’t worry about Ryan, go and open another bottle and let’s get really pished. You can tell me about your love life. Your mate Faz reckons you’re depressed over your ex.”

“He’s got a bloody big mouth,” I muttered.

But, inevitably, I started raking over the whole Isla situation again, embellishing it slightly (massively) for comedy value. Ray finished, largely unwatched, and I began playing my selection of oldies.

We polished off the third and also the fourth bottles of wine and at some point we must have started on the fifth, because it was half empty the following morning.

And also, deep into the early hours, we repeated the kiss from earlier by the window. Only this time it was more urgent, more real and there was a good deal more canoodling going on, certainly on my part. I felt my first ever pair of Page Three breasts and they did not disappoint. And even after four and a half bottles of wine I got a hard on that could have hammered in nails, which Janine held lightly, for at least 30 glorious seconds.

And then she must have gone to bed in the spare room, leaving me to fall asleep on the sofa. At least, I assume that’s what happened because that’s where I woke up the next morning. To this day I remember absolutely nothing beyond Janine grabbing my todger. Perhaps it was like that Vulcan Death Grip thing that Dr Spock used to do on Star Trek;

the Page Three Cock Grip, a martial art taught to all Sun and Daily Star babes to disable priapic pop stars, lecherous record company executives and coked-up television presenters.

Anyway, by the time I came around, Janine Giacomo had gone. She left a nice note to say thanks for a lovely evening but explaining that she had to go to work. It also included with her mobile phone number and I was left with a massive hangover and a dilemma – had we really hit it off together or was it just the booze?

It was a question to which I would never find the answer because, by the time I saw her again, small talk wasn't really on the agenda.

California 3

In six days during the spring of 1992 widespread rioting across Los Angeles County claimed dozens of lives. Thousands of people were injured, tens of thousands of homes and shops were looted or burned and military rule was imposed across large swathes of the city before order was restored. The violence followed the acquittal of four white police officers in a high profile brutality case, despite incriminating footage of them beating a black motorist.

The motorist, a man named Rodney King, had an extensive criminal record and the police had chased him across town at speeds of more than 100mph before he stopped. Two passengers in the car were arrested without incident but King, according to the LAPD officers, violently resisted. He strenuously denied this allegation, and said he had fled because he feared being returned to prison for no good reason.

Whatever the truth, one fact is not in doubt – that King, while lying prone on the ground or crawling on his hands and knees, was Tasered, kicked in the head and beaten with police batons for more than a minute. No attempt was made to handcuff him during the beating.

A resident of a nearby apartment building, a man named George Holliday, filmed the incident from his window and later released the footage to the media. With its heady mix of crime, race and police brutality, the King beating became an international news story

and the four officers, Stacey Koon, Laurence Powel, Timothy Wind and Rolando Solano, were charged with assault and the use of excessive force.

On Wednesday, April 29, 1992, more than a year after the tape was recorded, a jury of ten whites, one Hispanic and one Asian acquitted them on all charges.

The unrest began almost immediately as a crowd gathered to demonstrate outside the LA County Courthouse, although the trial had been held in neighbouring Simi County. More spontaneous protests took place across South Central LA throughout the afternoon and early evening, each becoming more unruly than the last. At the intersection of Florence and Normandie in Compton, angry black residents confronted a large group of LAPD officers, forcing them to retreat. The rioters began looting stores and attacking cars.

As TV helicopters hovered overhead, white motorist Reginald Denny was dragged from his truck and beaten unconscious. A local black man, watching the assault unfold on his television, rushed out into the street and drove Denny to hospital. Minutes later, Guatemalan migrant Fidel Lopez was attacked and almost killed by the same group of thugs. He was rescued by Reverend Bennie Newton, who yelled at the mob: "Kill him and you'll have to kill me too."

Others were not so lucky. After a night of sporadic looting, arson and murder, the second day of the riots dawned on a city that was utterly unprepared for such mayhem. It was obvious the authorities did not have a clue what to do, and the unrest began to spread from district to district.

In Koreatown, an enclave where there was already tension between the Asian store owners and black youths, a feeling that they had been abandoned by police led to urgent appeals on Korean-language radio for armed protection. More helicopter TV footage showed merchants firing automatic weapons at the looters in a bid to protect their property.

Finally, at around noon on the second day, a curfew was ordered and the California National Guard was called in, although it would be hours before they began to arrive in the city. The riot was now completely out of control, and the murders, arson and looting peaked as darkness fell on Thursday evening. Televised appeals for calm from, among others, Bill Cosby, Rodney King himself and President George Bush were largely

ignored. Power cuts across much of South Central LA on Friday were more successful in keeping people off the streets, although a hardcore of rioters continued to wreak havoc throughout the night.

On Saturday, three days after the violence erupted, the arrival of thousands of battle-hardened US Marines to support the National Guardsmen and law enforcement officers already on the streets finally and rapidly restored order. In truth, the grunts did not have a major role to play as the riot was already losing its momentum. Tens of thousands attended a peace rally in the city that afternoon and the US Justice Department announced that it would examine the verdict in the police brutality case.

The curfew was lifted and the riots officially declared over on Monday, May 4. Fifty-three people had been killed, including 25 blacks, 16 Hispanics, eight whites, two Koreans, one Algerian and one Indian. Twenty-two were killed by gunshot, ten of those after being fired on by police or soldiers, eight died in car wrecks or hit and runs, six in arson fires, and five were beaten, stabbed or strangled to death. There were 48 male victims and 22 murder cases were left unsolved.

Five women died. Juanita Pettaway, one of three robbery suspects killed when their getaway car crashed; Lucie Maronian, a 50-year-old teacher's aide who was stabbed protecting her son; Betty Jackson, a driver killed in a car crash; Carol Ann Benson, an apparent hit and run victim; and Juana Espinosa, a 65-year-old killed by gunshots fired at a police patrol car.

None of the victims fitted the description of Rosa Velasco's daughter.

Keane got up and showered before going downstairs in shorts, flip flops and a Manchester United shirt. He had a mug of coffee, a bowl of Bran Flakes with blueberries and slices of banana and read the British sports pages on his iPhone at the breakfast bar. He could hear Rosa vacuuming in the lounge. After days of fruitless research, he was tempted to simply ask his housekeeper exactly what had happened to her daughter.

Then suddenly another thought struck him. He had searched Google for anything and everything to do with the LA riots and Anna Velasco, but he had not checked the LA Times online archive.

A few clicks later and he had the answer: Police cannot rule out further riots victims, ran the headline, over a story from July 1992:

LAPD officers are still investigating five missing persons cases linked to the Rodney King riots and are actively considering the launch of several new homicide investigations, writes Arno Perez.

The most likely murder case relates to the disappearance of Julian Clay, an insurance salesman from Reno, Nevada, who was visiting Los Angeles on business towards the end of April.

Mr Clay, 48, has not been in touch with his wife, Clare, or his employers since April 30, when he called home to say he was planning to stay an extra night at his Altadena motel in order to avoid trouble on the roads.

Jack Brewer, manager of The Four Roses motel, revealed to the Times that he had told police he saw Mr Clay leave the parking lot in his car with an unidentified female at around 9.30pm that same evening.

His car was later found in an overflow parking lot at Long Beach shipping terminal, but police have never traced his female passenger who they believe will hold vital clues in his disappearance.

A further homicide investigation is looming in the case of Laurence On, a Korean American man who is known to have been involved in the armed defence of Koreatown.

On, 18, had travelled from his family home in Fullerton at the request of his uncle, Ji On, in order to help guard against looters at his electrical goods store on West 5th Street.

He was last seen at some point in the early hours of April 30, during some of the most serious disturbances in the area.

Two further murder cases are being considered, into the disappearances of Jaywill Taylor and Stewart Williams, two young African American males from the Compton area. Both were known gang affiliates with juvenile convictions for various offences.

Police are believed to be confident that all four individuals were killed during the civil unrest, although with no bodies and a backlog of active homicide investigations there may be little appetite for new proceedings at the district attorney's level.

The final case involves the disappearance of aspiring actress Rosa Velasco, 19, from East Central Los Angeles. Her parents, Pete and Rosa, reported her missing on May 4, the final day of the riots.

Former classmates at Garfield High described Miss Velasco as a model student, and her agent, Murray Wall, told the Times that she had recently been offered a part in the courtroom drama LA Law.

“Anna had the world at her feet,” he said. “But I guess sometimes kids just take off like that.”

Keane bookmarked the page and tucked the iPhone into his pocket before swapping his flip flops for a pair of trainers, slipping on his Ray Bans and heading out into the southern California sun.

Murray Wall’s offices were located above a laundrette in Van Nuys, not exactly the heart of movieland but not a million miles away from it either. Keane, who had no desire to ever set foot again in any kind showbiz agency, low rent or otherwise, parked up outside and called the office from his mobile. He was put straight through to the boss.

“Mr Wall,” he said. “My name is Roy Keane. I’m here in LA on business from Ireland and I wanted to ask you a few questions about one of your former clients.”

“Oh yeah?” growled Wall. “I’m a busy man, Mr Keane.”

“That’s why I’ll happily pay for your time,” Keane replied. “If you’ll just step to your office window you’ll see me parked outside.”

“What?” Wall said, and a few moments later Keane saw movement behind the blinds in one of the upper windows.

“That’s right,” he said. “A good looking Irishman in a black Chevy, sure you can’t miss me.”

“Why the hell don’t you come in then?” asked Wall, and Keane could see him more clearly now. A scowling face, florid cheeks and bald head.

“Its too nice a day to talk indoors,” said Keane. “Like I said, I’ll make it worth your while but if you don’t want to talk...”

“No, no, no, wait there. I’ll be down in two minutes.”

They drove west, towards the airport.

“Can’t you close the roof on this damn thing?” asked Wall, as the Corvette idled at the first set of lights. “I get sunstroke.”

“Sure,” said Keane, flipping a switch.

“Nice wheels,” said Wall, as the roof began to close over their heads. “I always liked the Grand Sport. All these knuckleheads today go for the Z06.”

“Yeah, I looked at the Z06 but I wanted a convertible. It seemed stupid not too, what with this climate.”

“I thought you were here on business, Mr Keane?”

“Call me Roy,” said Keane, with a friendly smile. This guy was sharp, he thought. “Listen, this might be easier over a drink. Is there a bar or somewhere we can go to talk?”

“I might know a place or two,” said Wall, seemingly in no hurry for Keane to get to the point. “Turn in here, the Hampton Inn.”

Wall led them into the hotel, nodding at the receptionist as he went straight through to the bar and settled himself down on a stool in the back corner. The barman came right over and, without prompting, poured a Michelob Dark and a shot of Jim Beam and placed them on the bar in front of Wall.

“Hey Murray,” he said, before looking expectantly at Keane.

“I’ll have the same,” Keane said, placing two twenties on the mahogany surface. “And I’m paying.”

They didn’t speak until after Keane had his drinks and the barman had returned to watching CNN.

“So,” said Wall. “You wanna tell me what all this is about? I assume it isn’t all a ruse to get me drunk so you can take me upstairs and fuck me.”

Keane laughed and then picked up the whiskey. “I wanted to ask you about Anna Velasco,” he said, before killing the shot.

Wall raised his eyebrows and downed his whiskey with an equally easy flick of the wrist. “Not heard that name for a long time,” he said. “What’s your involvement?”

“Her mother works for me,” said Keane. “I want to help her find out what happened to her daughter.”

“So she never turned up, huh?” Wall shook his head and began sipping his beer.
“That’s a surprise.”

“A surprise? How?”

“I always assumed she took off with some boy or other, maybe she was pregnant, who knows? Her old man was a bit of a hard-ass, as I recall.”

“I never met her dad. You remember her mother?”

“No, never met her. I only met her old man the once, a few weeks after the police and the newspapers had been out sniffing around, and I told him exactly the same as I told them. That she seemed like a sweet kid and who knows, maybe she had a TV career ahead of her, maybe not, but I had no idea where she had gone. That’s about all I can tell you too, me Irish rover.”

“You still remember her, though,” Keane said.

“Hey, this might be Hollywood but that don’t mean I get real life mysteries on my books every day of the damn week. Middle of the riots too, you bet I remember her. Can’t be more than a dozen girls and boys gone missing on me in all the years I been in business, and like I say, most of them probably took off with some passing schlong artist. Anna was the only one who ever made the ‘papers.’”

Keane signalled for the barman to bring another round.

“What was she working on when she went missing? I saw in the Times she had a part in LA Law.”

“If you say so. Half my damn bookings came from LA Law in those days,” said Wall, draining the last of his beer. “I’d have to check with the office.”

Keane took out two more twenties and laid them down on the bar to pay for the drinks. He made sure the agent could see his cash roll before slipping it back into his shorts pocket.

“Let me do that right now,” Wall said. He took out his cellphone and punched in a few numbers. “Celia, yeah, its me. Listen, can you check a name in the files? Velasco, Anna. Vee Eee Ell Ay Ess See Oh. That’s right. No, I’m fine.”

He stood and walked towards the back of the room, no doubt to talk about Keane in private, before returning into earshot half a minute later.

“Okay, hang on, let me get something to write this down.”

He searched his jacket for a pen and then scribbled on a napkin. Keane craned his neck to see and, as Wall snapped his phone shut, read the words 'Pacific Nights, Neal Ollyver, Carrot and Coriander Productions'.

"You might be in luck, buddy," said Wall. "Anna's last booking before she disappeared was for LA Law, like you said, but a few months later there's another note in her file. About a part in some movie called Pacific Nights. She must have auditioned before the riots but by the time they called back with the offer..." Wall shrugged. "Life sucks, huh?"

"Who's this guy, Neal Ollyver?"

"No idea. That's all that it says. I guess he was a producer or something on the movie. I never heard of him, but I do remember Carrot and Coriander Productions. Some half-assed company, one of thousands, but the name sticks out. Don't think they ever made anything decent."

"What about Pacific Nights? Did that get made?"

"Search me. With a lame title like that, I hope not. But if it did it ended up going straight to TV. I don't remember it at the Academy Awards, put it that way."

"Can I take this?" Keane said, reaching for the napkin.

"Be my guest," replied Wall.

Keane drained his beer, leaving his second whiskey untouched. "You want a lift back to the office?" he asked.

"No, I'm good," said Wall, sliding Keane's shot glass towards him without asking. "Aren't you forgetting something? I didn't do all this for two lousy rounds of drinks."

Keane smiled and fished his money out of his pocket. He had taken three hundred bucks out of a cash machine on his way over to Van Nuys, and he tucked the remaining two hundred and sixty under the edge of the drip tray on the bar.

"There's plenty there to ensure that this conversation never happened, okay?" he said.

"Okay, Roy," said Wall, beaming. "You're a regular Phillip Marlowe, are'ntcha?"

"Something like that," Keane replied, walking out of the bar.

Wall watched him go, his shoulders starting to shake as he began chuckling quietly to himself, building up into a great hoot of laughter that made the barman turn his head briefly in his direction.

“Roy Keane,” he said to himself. “He must take me for a fucking imbecile.”

He flipped open his cell phone again and called the Pizzazz News and Picture Agency.

“Hi, is Andy there?” he said. “Yeah, you tell him its Murray Wall. I got some very interesting news about his boy Zack Keane. Andy, its Murray, how you doin? Good, yeah, that’s right. Your fuckin’ priapic Irishman, I think he’s taken leave of his senses. What? Yeah, well now he’s investigatin’ a fuckin’ missin’ persons case. You heard me, he thinks he’s Columbo or somethin’. Yeah? Okay, I got a better idea. I’m at the Hampton at Van Nuys Airport. You know it? Right. Anyway, I’m here in the bar and I’m plannin’ to get a little buzz on, so why don’t you come pick me up, we’ll go get a steak and I’ll tell you all about it?”

Scotland 3

I did play against Granton Star in the end that Sunday and had a good game too, scoring once in a four-two victory. My goal was a peach; the ball broke nicely on the edge of the box and I leathered it on the half volley and watched it rocket into the top corner. The tattooed Hearts muppet who usually gives me a hard time wasn’t playing and I was able to get down the wing, breaking beyond our midfield from what used to be known, in the dark days before us wing backs were given our footballing dues, as right back (Right back in the changing rooms – ha ha).

I even put in a decent cross for Mike to score a header for our fourth as well, so even he stopped giving me grief.

For some reason the ‘kiss and tell’ story with me and Janine had not appeared in the Sunday Sport that morning. Faz had gone into a flap as soon as we realised it wasn’t there and dashed off to call some people who knew some people, but I was surprised by just how pleased and relieved I was by the story’s absence.

Mike was right; I was a daft bastard and I needed my head looked at. It was definitely time to drop the whole Zack Keane thing. Decision made, I'd gone down to the football at the Saughton Enclosure fairly walking on air, and even a bit of gentle Scottish ribbing from my team mates (it is known as "getting pelters" up here, and involves being called a 'cunt' a great deal more than is generally deemed acceptable in polite society) had failed to dent my good mood.

Of course, there was a reason for my hale and hearty demeanour, my joie de vivre (and my unusually spirited performance on the right of the flat back four). It was a particularly shapely and attractive reason, too, by the exotic name of Janine Giacomo.

I was in love.

"Give it a rest, man," Faz had said the previous day, although in my view he was simply beside himself with jealousy. "You got her drunk and abused a position of responsibility. You were both supposed to be working."

But even Faz's sudden lapse into control freakery couldn't bring me down, although to be honest I was glad to be shot of him for a bit. After the game, the lads all went for a celebratory drink in the West End and then me, Mike and a couple of the others headed on for a Sunday night curry at the Indian Cavalry Club.

In one of the pubs, at about eight or nine o'clock, I realised I had missed half a dozen calls on my mobile from Faz but I really couldn't be arsed ringing him back. He even sent a text, telling me to call him, it was URGENT, but I replied by telling him to piss off and leave me alone.

Mike chipped in with some general condemnation of Faz and everything he stood for, and even decided to take advantage of our renewed good relations by announcing he was going to leave me in charge of the shop for a couple of days while he visited his family in Geordieland.

He must have been pissed to do that, I reflected the next morning, half expecting him to come in and deny all knowledge of our arrangement. But he wasn't there, and I had opened up (only 15 minutes late) and even sold a bike (a child's BMX to a man in a suit) before I heard from Mike.

It was a fairly mysterious text message: 'Stopped for coffee and piss and seen the papers. You've been had mate. Don't get my shop burnt down.'

I groaned. Not another bloody Zack Keane thing – how much mileage were they going to get out of those pictures? And as if I was going to set fire to his precious shop. I went into the kitchen to brew up and my phone beeped again. This time it was from one of the football lads: “U sly dog. Never knew u had it in u!!!”

I returned to the counter with my tea. Maybe another newspaper had printed the story about me and Janine today; that would explain all Faz’s calls last night.

Another text arrived: “Get in there my son. Balls of steel!!”

I felt a foolish grin slide across my face. Everybody else seemed to have fallen for it, so maybe the idea that I could really get off with Janine wasn’t so crazy after all.

Then there was a rat-a-tat-tat on the shop window. It was two women who worked in the sandwich shop across the road, pointing at me and laughing uproariously. I knew them vaguely from occasionally going in their shop for my lunch and I waved sheepishly from behind the counter.

Then the bloke from the offie, the one who looked a bit like Dominik Diamond, came sprinting over the street to join in the hilarity. He spoke briefly to the sandwich hags and then did a very strange thing.

He opened the door, yelled: “Hey pal, say hello to my leetle friend” and sprayed the shop with imaginary bullets, a la Al Pacino’s character in Scarface. The door clanged shut as he creased over with laughter, so I marched around the counter and flung it open again.

“Woops, sorry mate,” said one of the sandwich shop women. “Nae offence likes.”

The women hustled off across the road, still giggling as the offie bloke – I knew him rather better, having called in after work on numerous occasions – straightened up and wiped his eyes.

“Yeah, sorry Paul, man,” he said. “But I’ve been dying to dae that all day.”

“Why?” I asked, perplexed, not least at how he knew my name.

“What? Oh fuckin’ hell, have you no seen it?”

“Seen what?”

“Oh Jeez-uz, mate,” he grinned. “Sorry to break it to ye, but yir on the front o’ The Sun today. Wait there a sec.”

Dominik Diamond dashed back across the road as my phone beeped again. As I read the text - “Hope she wuz worth it ;-)” – a passing van beeped its horn and somebody yelled: “Wahey, ya filthy bastard!” I looked up to see a bloke I vaguely recognised from football, hanging out of the window of a battered blue Transit, pumping his fist in the air.

My head was spinning. What the hell was going on? Diamond returned, holding a copy of Britain’s best selling rag. “You’d better read this,” he said, with a look of genuine sympathy.

‘LUST A LIKE’ screamed the front page headline, above a large photograph of me kissing Janine in my flat window. A smaller strapline across the top of the page read: “Zack Rat Cheats with Gangster’s Girl” and my knees began to wobble as I read the two paragraphs of text:

“A DIRTY double of disgraced pop star Zack Keane is following in his idol’s footsteps – by having an affair with ‘Scrap Iron’ Ryan McCann’s missus!

Paul Crombie, 25, has been secretly bedding gorgeous model Janine Giacomo behind the back of Scotland’s most notorious gangland kingpin. Turn to p3.”

On page 3, predictably, there was a topless picture of Janine, a smaller photo of me and a picture of a furious-looking bloke in a suit speaking on a mobile phone. The story went on...

“Crombie, who charges up to £500 a day renting himself out as a ‘hate-a-like’, has clearly got more than just his roguish good looks in common with the exiled singer.

Love rat Keane launched a string of sordid affairs behind his late wife Stacey’s back – including a one-night stand with the 24-year-old Glasgow beauty Janine in London several years ago.

A friend of the brunette stunner, who has been in a relationship with McCann for the last three years, said she was “besotted” with the Northern Irish schemer at the time.

Glamour model Tracy Beaker, 22, said: “I was in a nightclub with Janine when Keane marched over and propositioned us both. I told him where to go, but Janine couldn’t get out of there with him fast enough. She talked about him for weeks afterwards.”

English loser Crombie, who gave up a well-paid job in Edinburgh to pursue his money-spinning career as a double, is understood to have made contact with the gangster's girl after The Scottish Sun revealed his story last week.

They went out on the town in the Capital on Friday, downing cocktails in several glitzy bars on George Street, before returning to Crombie's cramped flat in Leith, where these sizzling snaps were taken.

A source close to McCann (below left), who has served time for armed robbery and drug smuggling and is suspected by police of involvement in at least four murders, predicted the gangster would be "raging".

"I wouldn't want to be in that guy's shoes when Scrap Iron finds out about this," he said. "Not for all the tea in China."

I lowered the newspaper, and looked up at the bloke from the office.

"You're screwed, mate," he said.

[California 4](#)

Zack Keane stood up from his PC and walked across the den to the fridge, removing a cold can of Anchor Steam beer.

It had been several days since his encounter with Murray Wall but he could hardly be blamed for allowing it to slip from his mind. The weekend had offered its usual welcome diversion, in the form of his rekindled love for English football, and he had spent Saturday in various sports bars in Santa Monica, drinking beer and watching eight-hours-old coverage from the Premiership. George Best, another famous and troubled exile, had once sought solace and anonymity in the same beachside boozers and after a few drinks Keane liked to compare himself to his fellow Belfast Boy.

Of course, he was no Bestie on or off the pitch but he did have a decent scoring record with women. He avoided British girls these days, as yet another kiss and tell appearing the Sunday rags was not going to help the private rehabilitation of his soul, and to his chagrin Keane had found it much harder to pull without the added attraction of fame. But, despite almost a decade of seriously hard living, he still had his looks and a

certain amount of charm, and he had managed to get chatting to a couple of tipsy French exchange students on Saturday night.

They had absolutely no idea who he was but they laughed at his pathetic French and seemed to enjoy his company, so Keane paid for their drinks and subsequent entry to a nightclub. The girls, Florence and Miriam, did not even object when he eventually suggested taking a minicab back to his place in Beverly Hills. If nothing else, it would be closer to their digs on campus at UCLA.

His house was off West Sunset, not far from the Playboy mansion, in a street lined with enormous, white stucco properties. It was set back from the road behind electronic gates and surrounded by lawns fringed with cherry trees and lush bougainvillea. The upper floor had five bedrooms, all en-suite, and a bathroom in black marble with a giant tub, a plasma TV on the wall and a 'rain room' shower area.

Keane and his wife had always slept in separate bedrooms, largely due to the fact that one or the other often had to get up to appear on British television in the middle of the night. But their bedrooms had had a connecting, internal door, and during their happier times – of which there were many – they would frequently sneak through at bedtime to make love. Keane had loved the illicitness of these nocturnal visits, as though they were young lovers forced to sleep apart while visiting parents.

Recently, however, he had taken to sleeping in the smallest of the guest bedrooms and the doors to both his and Stacey's old rooms had remained closed for many weeks.

Downstairs there was an enormous open plan lounge and dining area, leading to a kitchen fitted with gleaming chrome and more black marble. Keane loved the kitchen, with its under-floor heating, its multicoloured lighting and its ridiculously large refrigerator. There was a conservatory, with commanding views across to Bel Air and the mountains beyond, and a den kitted out with a home cinema, video games, and a sound system loud enough to terrify a woolly mammoth, which was linked up to hidden speakers every room in the house.

The house also had a basement, although as the property was built into the side of a steep canyon it was not visible from the front. It housed a gymnasium and a heated swimming pool, with rubber doors at one end through which it was possible to swim, along a short channel, into the external pool. The back garden, which sloped away

slightly to a high fence that overlooked a sheer drop of around 30 metres, also boasted a patio, a gazebo covered in trailing plants and flowers, a barbecue pit and a hot tub jacuzzi.

Florence and Miriam had shrieked and giggled and whispered in French as they explored the house, while Keane opened a bottle of red wine and put a frozen pizza in the oven. Then, as a Daft Punk track began blasting out of the stereo, he had taken three glasses and gone to search for his guests. He went down to the pool, finding it deserted but with wet footprints leading from the water's edge to the slatted wooden doors of the changing area. Smiling, he put the wine and the glasses on a table and went to the side of the pool, peering into the water and playing along with the game. There was a rush of footsteps behind him and he was pushed in with a splash.

He turned around, coughing and wiping his eyes, to find Florence and Miriam laughing hard at the edge of the pool. Miriam was tall and slim with dark, curly hair, and she had said earlier that her family were originally from Morocco. Florence was smaller, blonde with pixie-like blue eyes behind black-framed glasses. She was also soaking wet, and now she suddenly pushed Miriam who shrieked as she fell into the water beside Keane. As she came up for air, Keane ducked her under again before swimming for the edge, where Miriam pulled him back into the water.

Breathing hard, they climbed out and he went to pour the wine, as Florence took a running jump and splashed into the water.

He and Miriam toasted each other, a spark of attraction passing between their eyes, an unspoken promise as clear as the Hollywood sign on the hills above them. Florence joined them, rubbing her glasses on her wet blouse. Keane went to fetch a towel from the changing area, listening as the girls giddily praised his house, apologising for not believing his story about being a pop star.

"Play one of your songs," said Miriam, as she put her glasses back on and pushed back her blonde hair.

Reluctantly, Keane went up to the den and put on what he believed to be his best album, *Growing Pains*. When he returned the girls had taken off their wet clothes and were lying in their underwear on the padded sun loungers around the pool's edge. Miriam's dark nipples were visible through her white bra, and she wore pair of lacy

undershorts, the white material stark and clean against her honey-coloured thighs and midriff; Florence wore a red bra with a yellow trim and a yellow G-string that showed the tan lines left by her bikini briefs.

Keane swallowed hard, feeling a tension in his neck and chest as his heart began to pound. He took off his wet T-shirt, trainers and socks, before picking up his glass, spilling red wine with his shaking hands as he took a large gulp.

“Jeans too, mister,” called Florence. He peeled off his wet trousers, exposing black designer boxer shorts. Earlier, while squeezed between the girls in the back of the minicab, he had struggled to disguise his diamond-standard erection, but now his soggy underwear felt embarrassingly empty. Don’t let me down old chap, he thought.

“Come and join us,” said Miriam, patting the lounge they had left free between them. He sat down and they all drank, listening to the opening track of his album, *My Heart*, which had reached number three in the UK and, he was sure, had also done quite well in Europe.

“I like it,” said Florence, bopping her shoulders in time with the music. They drank some more, finishing the last of the wine, quiet now at this crucial junction of the night. Keane’s head was spinning. This was really going to happen, he thought. Two half-naked French birds were making eyes at one another behind his back, and the sexual tension had become so thick it was difficult to breathe.

Then at some prearranged signal, the girls had both sat forward and removed their bras.

“Hey, let’s fool around,” said Miriam, as though the idea had just occurred to her. She smiled as Keane gazed at her foolishly, seeing her lips and teeth stained by red wine, the brown, kissable points of her breasts, the skin across her chest just beginning to goose bump although it was not cold in the pool room, and then he had felt Florence’s hand on his leg and she was on the edge of his lounge and her tongue was in his mouth.

“Wait,” he said, as he shifted position and she broke off, a trail of spit stretching and snapping between them. A quizzical look flashed across her face.

“Let’s go out to the hot tub,” he said.

Florence nodded quickly and smiled, relieved now that she had not misread the signals. “Oui,” she agreed.

Keane grinned back at her and then turned to Miriam, eager not to leave her out of the equation. "I'll bring some more wine and meet you both out there," he said.

From the kitchen, after turning off the oven and removing the blackened pizza, he had watched Florence and Miriam run nude across the patio to the hot tub, their bare backsides flashing in the darkness. Realising he had left the glasses downstairs, he had simply opened three bottles and then stepped out of his boxers, glad beyond words to feel his cock hard now and slapping against his stomach, and strode out into the night.

Ménage a trois. The phrase carried a sexual jolt and just uttering the words now gave Keane a cheap kind of thrill. Zack Keane the pop star had enjoyed several such romps, of course, but the night with Miriam and Florence had been the first such adventure for the 'new' him. It had encouraged him to think that he was heading in the right direction, that karma was beginning to recognise his efforts in settling old scores and becoming a better person.

After sleeping until noon the girls had stayed around for most of the day on Sunday, sunbathing naked by his pool, drinking beer and watching movies in the den. Later, at around five o'clock, Miriam had taken his hand and led him upstairs to his room, where they had screwed again, just the two of them this time, and with much more intimacy than the previous night when, for the most part, everything had been done with a knowing, ironic smile, as though the sex were just a lark between friends.

Florence had not seemed at all put out when they returned downstairs, although she had got herself dressed and the new arrangement seemed to come with the condition that they could no longer swan around in the buff. Still, when they had left to return to UCLA, in a taxi, at around ten o'clock, both girls had given him long, lingering kisses at his front door.

He had heard nothing from either of them since then, and by Wednesday, when he remembered the story of Anna Velasco, several text messages to Miriam and a couple more to Florence had come back with surprisingly cool responses. They were busy. They had no plans for the weekend yet. They would get back to him.

Ha, fuck it. He still had his memories and had already engaged in several masturbation marathons. Now, lying in bed and listening to Rosa banging about

downstairs, hoping she hadn't heard his latest early morning wank, he vowed to make that his last one for a while. After its exotic adventures of the previous weekend and its subsequent pummelling, his cock was feeling fairly raw and it was starting to hurt when he peed.

It was time to get back to work.

Scotland 4

"What the fuck do you mean, there's no money?" I hissed.

"Keep your voice down, man," whispered Faz. He leaned forward in the back seat of the old Volvo estate and said in his politest accent: "There's a left turn coming up here, Gillian. That's it, follow the Scottish Mining Museum signs."

I yanked at the shoulder of his Fred Perry polo shirt.

"What?" he whispered. "I'm working on it, okay? They stitched me up too, you know."

"Right, but you're not the one with the fucking contract on your head."

"Paul, not now, yeah?" said Faz, gesturing with his eyes.

Seeing the BBC researcher watching us in the rear view mirror I gave an acid smile and turned to gaze out of the window at the Midlothian countryside, glorious and green in the sunshine but tainted, somehow, with the unmistakable reek of death.

"Don't you think you're being a bit over-dramatic, like?" Geordie Mike had asked on the phone the previous night. He was calling to find out what was going on with the shop, after hearing from an angry supplier that it had been closed for two entire days.

After seeing the splash in The Sun, claiming – erroneously, as it turned out – that I had slept with a gangster's fiancée, I had spent a few hours on the internet researching 'Scrap Iron' Ryan McCann, using the pitifully slow dial-up connection on Mike's ancient PC in the shop. As I waited for each page to load, my feelings of dread had increased steadily.

McCann got his nickname from the scrap yard he owned near Castlemilk, where he reputedly disposed of rivals' bodies in the car crushers. The business also provided a semi-legitimate excuse for his rapidly expanding fortune, which was more widely and accurately believed to come from wholesale drug importation. He was in his mid-30s, a seemingly ordinary looking bloke with short brown hair and a cheeky grin. Only the deep, jagged scar along his jawbone hinted at his true character.

The Scottish newspapers, especially the Sunday Mail, which was almost psychopathically obsessed with Glaswegian gangsters, had linked him to the murders of several other villains from the north and east of the city. McCann had been involved in a ferocious turf war for a number of years now, along with a cast of characters with names like Jamie 'The Iceman' Stevenson, Kevin 'The Gerbil' Carroll and Paul 'Wee Man' Ferris.

Oh, that was just great. I had called and texted Faz repeatedly throughout the day but he had dropped off the radar – probably sulking because I'd refused to answer his calls the night before.

At about 3pm I closed up the shop early and headed home. The story had sparked a media feeding frenzy – a phenomenon the Washington DC press corps refer to as a 'goat fuck' – and there had actually been reporters waiting for me outside my flat when I got home. I pushed through the scrum, muttering 'No comment' in the time-honoured fashion.

Eventually, while I was staring at Coronation Street and wistfully thinking of Lancashire, I got a text from Faz to say he was in Glasgow. He claimed he was trying put things straight with the people at The Sun and, strangely reassured, I'd gone off to bed.

Of course, my faith in Faz and his power to influence Britain's brightest tabloid was horribly misplaced and I was back in the newspapers the following morning. This time, there was a story in the Record claiming that 'Scrap Iron' McCann was so furious about Janine's treachery that he had placed a £10,000 bounty on my head.

I immediately returned home from the newsagent, packed my football bag with some spare clothes and my wash kit and relocated to the back room of the bike shop, where I had been living ever since, existing on whisky and chip suppers brought in by the bloke from the office, who was turning into a great friend in a time of need.

I had kept my mobile switched off for most of the time, but Mike had finally caught me late on Wednesday evening as I was catching up with the most recent blizzard of texts and missed calls.

“Actually, I don’t think I’m being over-dramatic at all,” I replied, a little testily. I had to admit, the life of a fugitive was beginning to zap my nerves.

“So where are you staying?” he asked. “Faz told me you haven’t been home all week.”

“Since when do you give a shit what Faz says?” I asked, deflecting his original question. Mike would have a coronary if he knew I was squatting in the shop. “Faz is the reason I’m in this mess in the first place.”

“I might not like the little turd but he’s worried about you,” said Mike. “So am I.”

“Hah!” I scoffed.

“Listen mate, don’t go off the deep end just because of some bollocks story in the papers. Nobody believes that shite anyway. Faz told me it’s all made up - as if this Scrap Iron feller would really put a contract out on you.”

“Easy for you to say, Mike.”

“Because it’s true, Paul. It’s utter bullshit. Just get your head together and get back to the shop tomorrow. We could have had burglars or anything.”

“Don’t worry, you haven’t been bloody burgled.”

“What? How do you know? You’d better not be kipping in the shop, Paul, I swear...”

I cut him off and called Faz, who answered on the third ring.

“Mate, I’ve been really worried about you,” he said.

“Don’t you start,” I replied, as my phone beeped telling me I had another call waiting. It was Mike. “Mike’s so worried about me that I think its just cost me my job,” I said.

“Forget that Geordie twat,” Faz said. “And forget Ryan McCann and his ten grand; that’s all just been cooked up by the Sun and the Record, trying to outdo each other as usual. Daz the snapper knows McCann and he says that he doesn’t give a shit, he isn’t even going out with Janine. But we need to get back on top of your Zack thing, my phone hasn’t stopped ringing mate!”

“Eh?”

“Bookings! Everybody wants to get you for their summer shows and stuff, and Fleming’s doing us proud. Honestly, we’re talking big money mate.”

“Forget it, Faz. What about the two grand from the Sunday Sport? I’ve decided. I’m just going to take the cash and go back to me mums’.”

“Yeah, well,” he replied. “We need to talk about that as well. Come round to mine tomorrow about nine.”

“There’s no money because the story never ran,” said Faz, when we finally arrived at our destination and the BBC researcher went off to find her camera crew. “Somebody on the Sport news desk decided to make himself a bit of cash, and passed the story on to a mate on The Sun.”

“But you said we were covered, that we’d get paid whatever happened.”

“We will, but not the full amount. I’m only just going to get enough to pay Janine and Daz.”

“So they get their money but muggins here gets nowt? Fucking brilliant.”

“Muggins? You northern Hobbit,” laughed Faz. “Hey, you think having Scrap Iron Ryan on your case is bad – if we didn’t pay Janine Giacomo we’d really be up shit creek.”

I shook my head, gazing around the rugby pitch in the middle of Newtongrange, a mining village a few miles south of Edinburgh. It wasn’t exactly a pretty sight and despite growing up among the crumbling red brick towns of the Lancashire coalfield, I was still taken aback by the abject crappiness you found in parts of Scotland.

Even today, in the middle of the celebrations to mark Newtongrange Gala week and with the main street draped in cheerily sectarian red, white and blue bunting, it resembled a battle-scarred Bosnian mountain hamlet somewhere around 1992.

Still, some idiot at an Edinburgh legal firm was apparently willing to pay me £1,000 to spend a few hours over the next four afternoons being ‘gunged’ outside the company’s sponsored tent. After which, presumably, the suckers of deepest Midlothian would be more willing to sign up for a ‘no win, no fee’ court action.

I was also being filmed for the BBC Reporting Scotland teatime news, which I wasn’t altogether happy about, but which Faz had insisted upon. Apparently, as well as

the threats to my life in The Sun, the Edinburgh evening paper had been claiming that I had never actually done any lookalike work. Frank Fleming had of course denied this scurrilous charge and then announced that I would be appearing at the Newtongrange Gala this very week.

Although this was probably news to the organisers, there was no doubt that Fleming was a quick operator and here I was, about to meet my gullible public. Faz reckoned that, once my bona fide credentials had been established beyond doubt by a TV appearance, the Janine/Ryan McCann stuff would simply disappear leaving me free to fill my boots this summer. I wasn't so sure but it seemed like a legitimate deal and I wasn't about to turn down a thousand quid – minus Fleming's 15 per cent.

"You must be Paul," said a voice. I turned to find a grinning man in shirtsleeves and a blue tie emblazoned with a snazzy corporate logo. "Hi," he said. "I'm Andy Flowers, from DBS Law."

"Hiya," I said, shaking Andy's hand. "Good to meet you... I think."

"Faisal Umar," said Faz, stepping in briskly. "I'm Paul's manager. So, this must be a novel experience for you?"

"I don't follow?"

"Meeting somebody more unpopular than a lawyer."

"What, you mean a journalist?" I said, shouldering Faz out of the way. "Ignore him, Andy. Come on, let's get this over with."

It was Saturday afternoon when I first saw him, during my third day of being pelted with rotten food by hate-filled strangers. It had been, all things considered, perhaps the most enjoyable job I'd ever had.

For a couple of hours each afternoon, I sneered and scoffed like a James Bond villain at a small crowd of semi-amused punters who either walked away to find something more interesting or, occasionally, threw sponge balls which had been soaked in bright blue goo at my head. I had to stand in front of an advertising board, which urged people to 'Get your own back... speak to one of DBS Law's experienced claims team'.

At the end of each stint, the affable Andy Flowers sluiced me down with cold water and drove me back to his house in the quiet commuter village of Haddington, where I was

staying in the spare room. His wife Gemma and their two little kids were equally friendly, and each night, after a slap-up tea, Andy and I had repaired to one of the village pubs for a few pints.

I hadn't seen Faz since Thursday, although he'd been on the phone several times to say how many bookings were coming in. Apparently, the BBC Scotland footage had even made it onto some of the American TV channels. I'd been buying the tabloids every day but there had been no further mention of Janine, McCann or myself, I was relieved to say, and I was starting to agree with Faz that it had probably all blown over.

The other pleasant surprise in my new line of work was how much female attention it attracted. Zack Keane had been a heartthrob to millions and, despite his current slug-like popularity, it seemed that his admirers hadn't entirely forgotten about him. My station outside the DBS tent had been attracting giggling packs of women of all ages, many of them with a flirtatious glint in their eye as they pelted me with sludge.

One had even left her phone number for me with Andy, although I suspected that he was winding me up about that.

Anyway, it was in the middle of a typical exchange when I saw him. I was attempting to mime along to one of Zack Keane's hits and being roundly booed and gunged for my pitiful efforts. There were three pretty girls in their late teens watching me, as well as a group of baying schoolboys – a social group which was rapidly becoming the bane of my new career, with their incomprehensible insults, menacing air and slingshot-accurate throwing skills.

However, I was convinced that one of the girls was giving me a bit of a 'come on' look, so I wagged my eyebrows in her direction and received, in return, what was unmistakably a lustful chewing of the lower lip. Bingo, I thought, before a bald-headed man standing over by the beer tent caught my attention by drawing his index finger slowly across his throat.

I stopped prancing around and stared, open-mouthed. He was a stocky character with bulging eyes and a beige windcheater jacket, from which his misshapen, snooker ball-smooth cranium protruded in the manner of a rogue bollock popping out of a pair of Speedos.

He mouthed, “You’re fuckin’ deid” – even when I was lip reading, his thick Glaswegian accent was unmistakable - then fired his fingers at me like a gun, blew a kiss and melted away into the gala day crowds.

I gawped after him...and then my head snapped back with the impact of a gunge-heavy sponge ball, connecting right between the eyes.

“Got ya, ya fuckin’ poof!” cried one of my young tormenters, as I dropped to my knees, clawing at my face, temporarily blinded by water, corn starch and blue food colouring.

California 5

Andy Garner lived in Hollywood Heights, fifteen minutes in light traffic from the Pizzazz news agency office down on Melrose. It was an old, rambling, wooden house, surrounded by California pines, the kind of place that could have once been home to a movie star of the silent era. In fact, Garner had traced his home’s history (hoping to find a Fairbanks or a Pickford on a title deed somewhere, thus quadrupling its value) but it seemed to have had an utterly unremarkable existence, in celebrity terms at least.

He wasn’t disappointed. He had enough of movie stars in his working life without having their ghosts haunting his precious few hours at home. Today, the famous game he hunted had all moved far to the west and the north, leaving Hollywood itself largely to the cranks. The tour buses still rumbled around the Heights, but the homes they stopped outside had long since given up their recognisable residents.

The morning after his rendezvous with Murray Wall he rose early, made coffee and took it out on to the back porch, enjoying the warmth of the sun long before it reached its sizzling zenith. Garner was not a big boozier, never had been, and in this trade he had long ago learned to tolerate, even enjoy, the company of all kinds of drunkards, so he had not objected to ferrying Murray around Ventura Boulevard and Mulholland Drive, going from bar to steak house to bar to strip joint.

Besides, Murray’s tip-off was an absolute cracker. Garner had known in his gut that there was a story behind Zack Keane’s increasingly bizarre behaviour and he was pleased

to have been proved right. After his stakeout with Tommy the previous week he had quickly traced the apartment on East Chavez Avenue to one Rosa Velasco, a 57-year-old Hispanic widow. Had Keane developed a taste for granny grabbing? It wasn't unheard of, Garner had thought, as he recalled the footballer Wayne Rooney's escapades.

But after a contact at the IRS pulled the old girl's employment records he realised with a sinking feeling that she was just his bloody housekeeper. Still, what was he doing going round to her flat? Most celebs out here treated the help like they were a race of intelligent bugs, there to be humoured and patronised and ruthlessly stepped on if they got out of line.

The gangbanging nephew was more promising. He and Tommy had witnessed the boy enter the flat with mounting excitement. A pimp? A dealer? A rent boy? Once again, the truth was somewhat less exciting. Tommy had gone back to canvass the block on East Chavez, and soon discovered the relationship between Rosa Velasco and her young visitor. But when Andre Young Hernandez – Garner smiled at the tribute to rapper Dr Dre – had turned up for work at Keane's home a few days later (Pizzazz had private neighbourhood security guards on the payroll all over Beverly Hills and Bel Air) his interest returned. Dre was apparently doing gardening work for Keane and the set-up immediately suggested drugs. Keane was supposedly clean these days, but what if he was scoring his shit off his housekeeper's gangbanger nephew? It all started to fall into place.

Now Murray's story had taken it back off the rails again. Anna Velasco was the old girl's long-lost daughter, but why was Keane looking for her? Could Rosa have some shit against Keane, he wondered? Of course she could, she was in his home three days a week, and had been for years. She had probably seen some of the blistering rows with Stacey, witnessed the morning after their numerous fucks and flings and even looked on first hand at Zack's descent into near madness after his wife's death. Hell's teeth, why had he not thought of her before?

Let's assume the nephew is his new supplier, Garner thought, what the hell would it mean to the average newspaper and magazine reader anyway? Not much. Keane was already established as a drug using scumbag, so what did it matter if was buying the stuff from some street corner Mexican kid instead of the usual Hollywood connections?

No, the real story here was deeper. Rosa obviously had something on her employer. Maybe she was blackmailing him? The home visit in East LA and the bogus gardening job for her nephew would allow Keane to hand over regular cash payments without raising suspicion. Now he was even spraying around money trying to trace her missing daughter.

Could he be searching for one dead girl to atone for another? What else could Rosa possibly have on Keane that would make him act so bizarrely? The world already knew him as a low-life drunk, a coke fiend, a philandering cheat with the morals of a sewer rat. There was only thing left to blackmail Zack Keane with, of that he was certain. Murder.

Garner shook with excitement as the implications began to hit home. Rosa clearly knew what had really happened between Zack and Stacey, and perhaps she could prove what everybody at home had suspected all along. Perhaps she was the smoking gun who could show that Keane had killed his wife!

He stood up too quickly, bumping the patio table and knocking over his coffee cup. His head was spinning as he rushed inside the house to get ready, clicking open his phone to call Tommy with instructions to meet him at the office.

Pizzazz had a roster of about a dozen employees, mostly bright-eyed young reporters from the UK desperate to make it in Hollywood. Garner generally kept them on for six months and then cut them loose. They could file copy quickly and accurately, they could sniff out a breaking story, they were persistent, intelligent and resourceful, but almost without exception they were just too damn honest. Most of the hacks these days just didn't have the necessary cojones to get under the thick skins of the big beasts that roamed the Tinseltown savannah. They didn't want to break the law, for one thing; few of them even knew how to bribe a cop, never mind how to carry out a simple break and enter. They wouldn't even consider planting a small bag of beak, although God knew they schnozzed up enough of the stuff. And since the phone hacking scandal broke, they were even refusing to listen to other people's answer phone messages!

So Garner kept most of his employees engaged in the mundane business of looking for honest, straight-up news stories, while he and his inner circle concentrated on the

altogether more profitable and exciting business of sniffing out scandal. It was this inner circle that gathered this morning behind the closed door of Garner's office.

As well as Tommy Wikowski, his trusted lieutenant and chief snapper, there was Dee Dee Sprakes, his chief crime reporter, a former National Enquirer hack who had attained semi-mythical status in American journalism by actually sleeping with a serial killer in order to get a story, and Dean Simon, his office manager, another Englishman in exile, who for many years had run an expat pub in Culver City called the King's Head. In Deano's day the pub's Sunday football team had boasted star players such as Rod Stewart and Vinnie Jones, but an unfortunate incident involving the husband of a well-known British actress had left Deano with no choice but to come out of the closet and sell the boozier. However, he was still a veritable who's who – or more accurately, who's fucking who – of the Brits in Hollywood.

"Let's get down to business," said Garner, as he finished outlining his thoughts on Zack Keane. "I don't have to tell any of you that this could be the big one, this could make Hugh Grant and Divine Brown look like an inside page lead. We have a lead here that could help us prove this bog-trotting bastard murdered his wife."

"You mean he had his wife murdered," put in Deano. "He couldn't have physically killed her because he was here in LA."

"It's all the same shit," snapped Garner. "Dee Dee, is there a legal distinction in California between ordering a hit and actually carrying it out?"

Sprakes shook her head. "Nope, they're both murder one. And that means the death penalty."

"Fuck me," said Garner. "You mean he could get the electric chair?"

"Exactly how long have you lived in California, Andy?" asked Deano, tartly. "They execute people by lethal injection. This isn't The Green Mile, you know."

"Actually, he could still choose the chair," said Sprakes. "But anyway, that's all beside the point. A rich white boy with a good lawyer is never gonna to go to the Big House. The worst he could get would be life, no parole."

Wikowski, who had been leaning back in his seat, his meaty arms behind his head as he stared at the ceiling, now allowed his heavy frame to fall forward with a thump.

"Listen up," he declared. "This here legal chit chat might be mildly interesting for about

ten seconds to Perry fuckin' Mason, but I'm not him. I'm Tommy fuckin' Wikowski and its boring the shit out of me. Way I see it, we should be out there, bracing the low life spic nephew and offering some serious greenbacks to spill everything he knows."

"Drop the spic shit, alright Tommy?" said Sprakes. "Unless you think hospital green is gonna be this season's colour."

Deano snorted with laughter. "That told you, Tommy fuckin' Wikowski," he said in his best New Jersey accent.

"The nephew, Andy," said Tommy, ignoring their taunts and appealing directly to his boss. "Am I right or am I right?"

Garner shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "Keane's got to be worth ten million, easy. If Rosa and the boy Andre," here he paused and looked meaningfully at Sprakes, "and he is a low life spic, there ain't no other succinct way of putting it, okay Dee?"

"Whatever," muttered Sprakes.

"Right," put in Tommy. "I ain't no racist, but this ain't fuckin' Amnesty International. We can speak our minds in here."

"You can shut it too, Tommy. I called this meeting for some intelligent input and all I get is bloody bickering. Like I said, Rosa and the boy could be into Keane for a million each easy, if they really have a murder on him, and there's no way we can match that. So we follow them, nice and discreet. Dee Dee, you got the nephew. Tommy, you got grandma Rosa. I'll take the Irish fuck himself and Deano, you put the feelers out, anything at all that might be relevant in light of our new information."

There were nods all around the table and Garner pushed back his chair to signal the meeting was over.

"We check back in tomorrow afternoon, okay, or sooner if anything major turns up."

As it happened, Garner, Wikowski and Sprakes were together again later that afternoon, sitting in the Garner's silver Toyota 4X4 in the corner of a parking lot of a Jewish tennis club on West Sunset. Keane was in the wind. He had been out since early that morning, according to one of Garner's neighbourhood security guard snitches. Sprakes had cruised slowly past the property and seen the Dre Hernandez dutifully

mowing the lawns, which as she pointed out was hardly the behaviour of somebody who held the power of life or death over his employer.

“Just stay on his ass, and stay out of sight in future,” said Garner. “We don’t know when we might have to brace the little shit.”

Wikowski smirked at her and Garner’s phone beeped. It was a text message from Deano, to say he had hit pay dirt in Santa Monica.

“You know grandma and the boy came up here together in grandma’s rustbucket Honda?” Sprakes asked. “If this was a shakedown, the first thing they’d done was braced him for a new ride. Dre ain’t even got a ride.”

“Makes him easier to tail then,” said Garner.

“You think?” snapped Sprakes. “Tommy’s tail is going to go straight home to put her feet up and be in bed by nine, mine will be out getting stoned with his crew all night. This division of labour ain’t fair, Andy.”

“Dee Dee, if you’ve got something to say, spit it out.”

“Okay, this is bullshit. It was a good idea, I’ll admit it, but its bullshit. They ain’t blackmailing Keane.”

Garner sighed. “Well, what the fuck is going on then?” he said.

Tommy cleared his throat: “Come Andy, it’s obvious man. The kid’s a dealer. We forget this murder shit and catch him slinging to Keane. It still makes the front page, we all get paid and move on.”

“Okay,” said Garner. “But I’m not dropping this until we hit something, so get used to the idea. See you tomorrow, yeah?”

Wikowski and Sprakes mumbled their farewells and left to return to their respective vehicles, as Garner pulled out of the lot and onto West Sunset. He cut back through Beverly Hills and turned right onto Santa Monica Boulevard, following the road as it plunged through the city’s western fringes all the way down to the ocean.

Santa Monica had always been a favourite with visiting Brits and Keane had been spending more and more time here recently. Sure, there were a few grungey celeb haunts, but as far as Garner could ascertain, the screw-up had spent most of his time getting drunk and watching football in various low-rent sports bars.

Although, now he thought about it, locking his 4X4 and setting off along Ocean Avenue against the life-affirming backdrop of yet another Pacific sunset, perhaps it didn't sound so screwed up after all. What if Dee Dee and Tommy were right and there was nothing to see here? But he had been obsessing about Keane for so long now that it would not be right to let him go without one final shake.

He saw Deano waiting for him on a bench overlooking the beach, like an island of pasty slobbishness amid a surging tide of lithe roller bladders and tanned joggers. Christ, even their dogs looked like they would live longer than Deano, Garner thought.

"Take a pew, Andy," said the former pub landlord, moving up to make room beside him on the bench.

"Deano," Garner said, tersely. He was still pissed off at the faggot for correcting him about the electric chair that morning.

"So what's Roy been up to today then?" Deano asked, chuckling. "I love that he told Murray his name was Roy Keane. Fuckin' brilliant, perhaps he has got a sense of humour after all."

"Dunno, he's been out and about all day," Garner said. "Maybe he's been walking his dog."

Deano frowned at him and then beamed. "Ah, very good. Roy Keane, walking his dog. And here was me thinking you didn't like football."

"I don't. It's been a long fuckin' day, Deano. Can we just get to the point?"

"Right you are. I've got a cab driver who took our man and two young French ladies back to his place last Saturday night, all very jolly, all very inebriated apparently. What's more, he gave them his card and Keane only went and called him to come and pick them up again. Only by then, it was Sunday night."

"No kidding? The dirty little bastard."

"Exactly, and here was us thinking he had lost his touch. There were two long goodbye kisses on the doorstep, so my guy says. He dropped them both off at UCLA."

"French exchange students," said Garner, giving a low whistle. "Some guys have all the luck."

"If you say so. I don't see how any of this helps your theory, to be honest, but I thought you would want to know tonight."

“Yeah, cheers. Good work, Deano.” Garner’s brain was whirring. By itself, this new information was fairly useless. Keane was single again now and the days when shagging a couple of French floozies behind Stacey’s back would have guaranteed a big money page one show were long gone. Still, if they could get one of the girls to talk then there should be plenty of interest from the Sundays.

But that was the easy option. It would be far better to pay one of the tarts a few quid to act as an insider, find out what was really going on with him and Rosa Velasco.

“This cabbie,” said Garner. “Would he recognise these birds again if he saw them?”

“So he reckons,” said Deano. “I’ve already asked him to keep his eyes peeled. All the UCLA students come down here to party on Saturday nights, you reckon Keane might be back for sloppy seconds?”

“If he doesn’t, Deano old son, we might as well send you in to try and cop off with him.”

Scotland 5

I stood on the pavement outside my flat and watched Andy Flowers drive away in his metallic blue Vauxhall Zafira. He was only a couple of years older than me, I thought, and yet he had a well-paid job, a big house, a wife who was a good cook and also quite nice looking, two cute kids and a sensible family car.

But was he happy, I wondered.

Then there was me. Unemployed, single, broke and notorious – depending on which newspaper you read - as either a fool, a dishonest swindler or a lothario with a price on his head. I was also smitten with an unobtainable girl, a Page 3 model who was intimately connected to a homicidal Glasgow crime lord.

Reluctantly, I decided that Flowers was probably very happy indeed.

No, there was nothing else for it. The nutter at Newtongrange may only have been a local drunk taking the mickey rather than a McCann hitman – as both Andy and Gemma had reasoned when I insisted on returning to Haddington for a shower and to collect my belongings – but I was taking no chances.

I'd had it with Scotland. I was going to dig out my emergency credit card and book a one-way ticket to Wigan Wallgate.

Then something caught my eye in the park, a blur of movement and the sudden feeling that I was being watched. A figure rose from a park bench and walked away briskly along one of the paths across Leith Links, head down. She was wearing a baseball cap and a faded leather bomber jacket with a sheepskin collar, but even at this distance her arse was unmistakable.

Janine! My troubles faded away in an instant and I set off across the park in pursuit. She reached the corner of Duke Street and crossed over towards Easter Road without a backwards glance. I followed, slowly making up ground as she stomped away up the hill towards Edinburgh. Salisbury Crags were looming against the sky up ahead, giving the canyon-like street an eerie, almost prehistoric aspect.

A Number 35 bus swooshed past me and I saw Janine look back and then stick out her hand. She was a few yards away from a bus stop but the driver screeched to a halt – of course he did, I thought, look at her – and I broke into a run.

I just made it, leaping on board as the doors were closing. The driver looked pissed off at having to pause his journey for yet another passenger, and drummed his fingers on the wheel as I fished for change, dropped it in the box and took my ticket. As I climbed up the stairs to the top deck the bus lurched away at speed.

Janine was on the back seat, looking out of the window. I walked along the aisle and collapsed into seat in front of her, sweaty and panting.

“Sorry,” I gasped, “but you didn’t manage to lose me.”

“I wasn’t trying to lose you, ya dick,” she replied, without turning around. “I was trying to lose him.”

I peered over her shoulder to see the bald-headed nutter from Newtongrange Gala, standing a few hundred yards back along Easter Road and glaring after the bus. As we rumbled away, he thrust his mobile phone to his ear and then disappeared from view as we went over the crest of the hill near the Hibs football ground.

The bus stopped again and Janine stood up quickly. “Come on,” she said. “We’ll get off here while he can’t see us.”

We dashed down the stairs and out onto the street, running straight into a pub called Utopia. Janine picked out a booth in the back that had a view through the large windows and we sat down.

“Do you want a drink?” I asked.

“Not yet,” she said tersely. “We might not finish it. Just watch.”

Traffic always backed up at the lights at the top of Easter Road and it was a few minutes before we saw the Number 35 bus we had been on roll past the pub. Then, about ten cars behind it, there was a black cab with a familiar gleaming pate in the back.

Janine stood up and cautiously approached the window, peering out for long enough for both the bus and the black cab to have cleared the traffic lights and gone on towards Abbeyhill.

She smiled as she returned to the booth, asking: “Where does that bus go?”

“The 35? All the way to the airport, I think.”

“Good, I bet that dumb shit will follow it all the way there. Now, how about that drink?”

The barman, who had been watching us with growing interest ever since we burst in from the street, gave me a look as I arrived with our order. “So you’ve decided to stay then?” he asked.

I just grinned stupidly and ordered a pint of Stella and the gin and tonic that Janine had asked for.

“Cheers,” she said as I returned to the table, and we clinked glasses and both took long, health-giving swigs. Then I took another swig, as a somewhat difficult silence descended...

...one of those really awkward silences.

It was a decidedly familiar feeling, and as we stole glances at each other across the table and studied the fixtures and fittings in the bar, I suddenly realised that we acting as though we were on a date. A second date, in fact.

And if our first date had been unusual, arranged and paid for as it had been by the Sunday Sport, then this one, beginning with a Cold War-style spy manoeuvre to lose a mysterious thug, was already threatening to beat it hands down.

“So I should...” began Janine.

“Can you just...” I said, at the same time. “You go first.”

“No, you.”

“Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath. “First, I should say that I’m really chuffed to see you again. Secondly, that I had a really nice time the other night and I’m sorry if our stupid idea got you into any trouble. But, and don’t take this the wrong way, can you please tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“It’s Ryan,” said Janine. “I’ve left him.”

“You’ve left him? I thought you had already broken up with him?”

“I lied, okay. I’m sorry but I lied. We were still engaged but now its finished, over, finito.”

“What, because of...” I didn’t finish the sentence. Had she left ‘Scrap Iron Ryan’ for me? Oh fuck.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Paul,” she snapped. “I had a good time too last Friday, but that’s not why. He’s a bastard, alright, a violent fucking bastard and I’ve been wanting to get away for ages. This just, I don’t know, seemed like the right time.”

“So why are you telling me this now?”

“Because I like you,” she said. “And I had to warn you Ryan’s really, really pissed off.”

“Oh fucking hell. So he saw the thing in The Sun and thinks you’re with me?”

“No, nothing like that. All that stuff about him putting a contract on you is just rubbish as well. I told him all about the job before I came to yours last week, he knew it was just a daft wee thing for the papers. But he’s angry with me and he’ll try anything to get me back, which might include getting at you.”

I stared into her big brown eyes. This was the worst possible outcome – Janine had left her man, but not for me, although I was still going to get beaten up and possibly murdered because of it. I really wanted to say ‘thanks a fucking lot, Janine’ but I knew it would not help matters.

“Sorry,” she said. “I feel terrible that you’re mixed up in all this.”

I couldn’t hold it in anymore.

“Thanks a fucking lot, Janine,” I said, and instantly felt a bit better.

“Hey, I said I was sorry. It’s my life that’s in danger, Paul, you’re just collateral damage. Get out of town for a few days, go down to London, spend the Sport’s money. You can always come back but Ryan’s never going to stop looking for me. Ever.”

“Okay, I’m sorry too,” I said. “It’s just a bit of a shock, that’s all. And I thought that, when you first said, that we might, you know, that you might...”

“I know,” said Janine. She put her hand on mine and squeezed it.

“So who is that guy anyway?” I said, gesturing towards the window. “The one following us?”

“That’s Marvin Boyle,” she said. “He’s Ryan’s pet psycho, a real nasty bastard. They call him Marvin the Martian ‘cos he’s such a space cadet. He’ll have been watching you in case I got in touch.”

“I saw him already today,” I said. “Marvin the Martian, what is it with these nicknames?”

Janine just shrugged and sipped her G&T.

“So what now?” I asked.

“So, now that we’ve given Marvin the slip I’m going to get the hell out of Dodge. And by Dodge, I mean Scotland. But don’t worry, I’ve got a plan to get you off the hook as well.”

She slipped her hand inside her jacket and pulled out a recordable DVD, with ‘Ryan’ written on it in black ink.

“Get that guy Faz and any other mates together and wait at your place for Marvin coming back, then give him this. It’s for Ryan and it explains everything, why I’ve gone and that you had nothing to do with it, that you have no idea where I am. Ryan’ll leave you alone after that.”

“Yeah, but only after he’s seen it. What about Marvin? He’ll beat the shit out me first.”

“No he won’t,” said Janine. She pursed her lips and looked up towards the ceiling, seemingly steeling herself for something. Then she reached into her jacket and pulled out another disc.

“Just tell him that I recorded the blow job and gave you a copy of the DVD,” said Janine. “Put this one somewhere safe and sort it out so that it gets posted to Ryan if anything bad happens. Marv will be raging but I guarantee he won’t touch you after that.”

I took both discs then looked at Janine. I opened my mouth to speak, but frowned and shook her head emphatically.

“Don’t ask,” she said. “Just don’t.”

“Okay,” I said, draining my pint. “So where are you going to go anyway?”

“I can’t tell you that, dummy,” Janine replied, regaining some of her sunny demeanour. “Or Marvin might have to kill you. Same again?”

After another round, we decided it would be best to get off the Number 35 route so we walked along Montgomery Street to Leith Walk and then went down to the Cask and Barrel at the foot of Broughton Street.

Janine said it was best to avoid the flashier bars in the buzzing gay quarter around the top of Broughton Street, as well as nearby George Street, as Scrap Iron’s security firm had the contract to run a lot of the doors. We had a couple more drinks then strolled down to the Northumberland Bar in the New Town, where we sat in the beer garden enjoying the last of the warm summer sun.

Neither of us seemed inclined to stop, and as we drank and chatted I felt the same easy friendship developing that we had first struck up in my flat the other night. It was more than that for me, though, and I hoped that Janine was feeling the same – although I knew that this was also a leaving-town drink for her, one last good old piss up.

We moved on to a few more pubs through the lower reaches of the New Town, a middle class enclave that was unlikely to attract many west of Scotland gangsters, before finally – as last orders approached – taking a taxi across town to one of the student dives of the Southside, where drinking hours were more flexible.

It was after 3am before we finally found ourselves out on the street, with no further reason to delay going our separate ways. I had resolved to go and wake up Faz at his flat

near the Scottish Parliament, while Janine – who seemed to have discovered bottomless reserves of cash as the night wore on – was going to take a taxi, double time and paid up front, down the A1 and across the border to Newcastle.

Where she was going after that, she didn't say and I didn't ask.

We strolled down the Royal Mile as Janine told me about her family's roots in rural Tuscany, in a town called Barga. Many of the residents had come to Scotland a hundred years before and today the locals all spoke English with an accent as broad as that of Ally McCoist. A Scotsman visiting Barga could expect to drink for free all night, apparently.

"Paolo Nutini's family comes from there, and there's even a red telephone box in the town square. The cathedral is beautiful, my favourite place in the world," said Janine.

"Sounds great," I replied. "What do they think about Irn Bru?"

"I dread to think what they'd think about you, ya English prick," said Janine, snorting with laughter.

"Actually, Wigan's got a town just like that," I said. "All these ancient links, where everybody sounds the same and whenever you go there on holiday it's just like being at home."

"Really, where's that then?"

"Blackpool."

Janine thumped my arm. "Now that was not funny," she said.

We were approaching Holyrood now and the Scottish Parliament building was looming up into the deep blue summer night, £430 million worth of jagged concrete slabs and bamboo poles.

"I've never actually been here before," said Janine. "Isn't that terrible?"

"Not really," I said. "It's a bit of an eyesore if you ask me."

"I like it," she replied. "Look at the roof, it's funky."

"That reminds me," I said. "A mate told me about this...come on, follow me."

We ducked down an alley between the rear of the parliament and a modern block of flats, and then walked up the path in front of the Dynamic Earth museum. The wall around the parliament building was lower here and after making sure the coast was clear, I asked Janine to give me a leg up.

"What, are you crazy?"

“Come on, it’s going to be great.”

She boosted me up and I dragged myself onto the concrete ledge, before lying on my stomach and reaching down towards Janine.

“Grab my hand,” I told her.

My mate who told me about the route onto the Parly roof said he had done it easily, but then again he had been with three stoned mountain climber buddies who were undoubtedly a lot fitter and stronger than I was. Janine was also heavier than she looked and it took a few attempts, with her feet scrabbling for a grip on the smooth concrete, before with one final arm-burning heave I managed to haul her onto the ledge beside me. After a breather we set off along the top of the wall, climbed onto a slightly higher roof ledge, before making our way carefully to the main bulk of the building.

The windows here all had helpfully-placed wooden slats, which could be used to climb like a ladder up onto the very highest roof. We scrambled up and lay on our backs, gazing over at the Palace of Holyroodhouse and Arthur’s Seat, with the lights of the city twinkling all around us.

“Do you think the Queen’s at home?” asked Janine, nodding at the royal residence.

“Dunno. If we stay here long enough, we might get to see her taking a shower in the morning.”

“I thought you were going to say taking a shit,” spluttered Janine.

“Well yeah, she’ll probably have one of them too. Have you got your camera? Now that would be a blackmail video.”

We laughed, but my joke had reminded me of the DVDs in the back pocket of my jeans. We hadn’t discussed the implications of the Marvin ‘blow job’ video at all, but it was obviously a sore point with Janine and it wasn’t hard to imagine why.

She looked away, perhaps reading my thoughts.

“Hey,” I said, putting my hand to her cheek. “What’s up?”

And then suddenly we were kissing, gently at first but soon with such passion that we were in danger of rolling off the roof. With some difficulty, I loosened the top button of her jeans and slipped my right hand down the back and inside her knickers, caressing her bum and thinking of all the times I had gazed at it that night whenever Janine had gone to the bar or leaned over the pool table to take a shot. I moved around her waistband and

then my fingers were between her legs, feeling the prickliness of her bush and her soft, slippery wetness.

Janine broke away and I hastily retrieved my wandering hand, thinking that I had gone too far.

“That video I gave you,” she said. “The one with Marvin. It’s not what you think.”

“I don’t care,” I replied.

“But I just want you to know, that’s all, so you don’t think I do this all the time.”

With that, she slid down and pulled at my jeans, allowing my cock to spring free, and then lowered her head until I felt myself slip easily into her mouth. If I hadn’t been so drunk I would have come in an instant but instead I just lay there, for what seemed like quite a long time, stroking Janine’s glossy, liquorice black hair and trying to focus my watering eyes on the stars above.

“Andy Flowers, eat your heart out,” I whispered.

It may not have been a select club, not with Scrap Iron Ryan McCann and Marvin the Martian Boyle as fellow members, but I didn’t care. If they sold T-shirts with ‘I was blown by Janine Giacomo’ printed on them, then I’d have bought one for every day of the year.

Eventually, she raised her head and said, “Take your shirt off”, in a voice so syrupy and thick with lust that I felt a pulse in my groin and knew I wasn’t going to last much longer. I did as I was told, and Janine wanked me off for a few more glorious seconds until I groaned and jizzed on my stomach.

She sat up and shook her wrist. “I’ve got to go now, stud,” she said. “I really wish things had worked out differently but, hey, at least you’ve got something to remember me by.”

Then she reached over, kissed me quickly and scuttled away across the roof.

“Janine, wait,” I called. I tried to get to my feet but my jeans were round my knees and my head was spinning so much that I could hardly have stood anyway. I took a few deep breaths, then pulled up my trousers and scrambled over to the edge. I peered over to see that Janine was already down onto the lower roof.

“Wait,” I hissed. “Let me come with you.”

“Sorry,” she called back, skipping away towards the low wall at the back of the building where she’d boosted me up. “See you around. Oh, and I put some tissues in your pocket.”

I glanced down and remembered what a dripping state I was in, stuffing my hand in my pocket to recover a bundle of napkins from the pizza shop we were in earlier. Had she been planning this all along?

I quickly cleaned myself up and when I looked again Janine was gone. Turning around carefully, I set off back to retrieve my shirt when a sudden gust of wind blew it across to the edge of the roof.

I was glaring at the crumpled bit of cotton, wondering if it was worth the risk of trying to get it back or whether I should just head for Faz’s bare-chested, when a sharp crack shattered the stillness of the night. I dropped to my haunches and then lay flat, convinced that a pane of glass had shattered somewhere beneath me. It was time to get off this bloody roof. I took a deep breath and then scuttled, crab-like, over to the edge where I quickly clambered down onto the window bars and the protruding stones that we had used as a makeshift climbing wall.

I was about halfway down and starting to breath a bit easier when another loud crack sounded and a piece of the wall just inches from my right cheek seemed to explode, spraying me with tiny chippings of stone. What the fuck? I realised with a dawning horror that somebody was shooting at me and I released my grip, tumbling about ten feet onto the lower roof where I landed with a thud.

I lay on my back, my mind whirring. It must be Marvin the Martian, but how had he found me? Had Janine led me into a trap or had he simply been following us throughout the night? If that were the case then he would have seen her leave and that meant she was in trouble as well. I crawled forward, my chest scraping painfully against the gravel, until I reached the protection of a low wall overlooking Holyrood Park.

I could see somebody moving around in the landscaped area of pools, grass and concrete slabs by the side of the parliament building. It was a man, dressed all in black and running away towards the darkness of the park itself. There was no sign of Janine, but at that moment I caught the sound of sirens, approaching fast, and soon I was bathed in the flashing blue and red lights from two police cars. I stood up and raised my hands,

complying with the angry demands to ‘get doon frae that fuckin’ roof’. I was so pleased to still be alive that I could have kissed the pissed off, sleep-deprived bobbies, but instead I was thrown against the wall and handcuffed before being bundled into the back of one of the panda cars.

California 6

After leaving Murray Wall to get steadily plastered in the hotel bar in Van Nuys, Keane had returned home for another night of Internet research. He found he was enjoying the hunt for Anna Velasco and, with his new information about Pacific Nights, Neal Ollyver and Carrot and Coriander Productions, he felt he had a bona fide lead. He had also, for the first time in days, managed to forget about his recent Gallic gallivanting. That is, until a phone call from Miriam brought the encounter rushing back to the forefront of his mind. He had agreed to pick her up at a coffee shop just off the UCLA campus and arrived at the rendezvous with a squeal of brakes before she had even finished her cappuccino.

On Friday morning, pleasantly exhausted but nevertheless still enthused by his amateur sleuthing exploits, he had woken Miriam at around 7.30am. He wanted to drive up to Santa Barbara, where the only address he could find online for Carrot and Coriander Productions was located, and suggested that she tag along for the trip.

Now, as they left the morning rush hour traffic of Santa Monica behind them and drove north and west along the Pacific Coast Highway towards Malibu, Keane was attempting to outline what he had learned about Anna Velasco, and with considerably more difficulty, why on earth he cared in the first place.

But she picked up the idea quickly enough. “Like in My Name Is Earl,” she said, shrugging as though it was no big deal. Obviously the concept of karmic retribution was no longer as abstract as it once had been. After all, if Cousin Randy could grasp it then anybody could.

“I did some checking on Carrot and Coriander Productions before you called,” said Keane. “They did a few straight to TV movies – and Pacific Nights was one of them. It

actually did get made in the end. Apparently it's about a glamorous young marine researcher who gets caught up in a drug war when a body is found at a sea lion colony, off San Diego. It could be that Anna was going to be offered the starring role by this guy Neal Ollyver. But here's the strange thing. I can't find his name anywhere on the Internet, he's not on any of the movie databases, it's like he never existed."

He paused, waiting for a response, and Miriam smiled lazily at him. She had put her bare feet up on the dashboard and was gazing out of the windscreen and out to sea. "Sorry, what did you say?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied, tetchily, before quickly taking stock of the situation. He was driving a \$70,000 sports car with an attractive, sexually adventurous French student in the passenger seat, huge Pacific breakers were crashing on the beach to his left and the storied mountains of southern California were baking in the sun to his right. What right did he have to be tetchy about anything?

"I was saying that this film company, the one that had offered Anna a job, is based up here in Santa Barbara," he went on with a grin, sliding a hand behind Miriam's back. "So I thought we could go and take a drive up, see if they can tell us any more about her."

"You told me that already, silly."

"Then I thought we could go for lunch somewhere overlooking the ocean, then take a drive up into the hills, find a shady spot, lie down on the grass..." he said, waggling his eyebrows at her suggestively.

Miriam leaned across to put her head on his shoulder. "Mmmm," she said. "Now that's more like it."

According to an old movie business directory, the offices of Carrot and Coriander Productions were located on Garden Street in Downtown Santa Barbara. Keane, after getting horribly snarled in the one-way system, parked the car at the Paseo Nuevo shopping mall and arranged to meet Miriam back there when he was done. He set off to walk the last few blocks and quickly found the correct address – a two storey, Spanish-style building in white stucco – but discovered that the premises were now occupied by an accountancy firm called Drury and Kreindler.

The receptionist was pretty and blonde, with blue eye make up and a beehive hairstyle that would not have looked out of place in an episode of Mad Men. Keane wondered whether Drury and Kreindler themselves swilled Scotch at lunchtime and gave her playful slaps on the bottom when she brought in their client files.

“Can I help you?” she asked, smiling pleasantly.

“I hope so,” said Keane, giving his best, most charming smile and turning up the Irish accent up full blast. “I was looking for the people that used to be here before you guys. A film company called Carrot and Coriander Productions?”

“A film company? Hmm, let me see,” said the blonde, tapping her Bic pen against her desk. Keane glanced at her name marker: Jenna Eagles, Customer Liaison.

“I’m Zack, by the way,” said Keane. “I should have introduced myself.”

“Not at all,” said Jenna. “I’m Jenna, but you can probably see that anyway.”

They both laughed politely, although Keane’s cheeks were starting to get sore from the constant grinning.

Jenna thought for a few more moments and then stopped, visibly relaxing as if simply thinking about something had been a physical act. “I’m sorry but I just don’t remember them,” she said, “and I’ve been with Drury and Kreindler for almost six years.”

She shrugged, her large blue eyes full of genuine compassion at her inability to successfully liaise with this customer.

“I wonder whether somebody else here might be able to recall them?” asked Keane, still beaming away.

“Oh, yeah. Good idea,” said Jenna, jumping from her chair and walking away into the main part of the building, allowing Keane to admire the rear view of her tight business suit.

When she was gone he turned away to examine the rest of the reception area. According to a leaflet advertising Drury and Kreindler’s services the company had been established in 2001; Carrot and Coriander’s last TV movie, he remembered, had been made in 2000, although according to the IMDB database there were a number of scripts still in pre-production.

“Hi, Zack,” said Jenna, jiggling back into the reception area followed by a stern looking woman in horn-rimmed spectacles who was also vaguely reminiscent of the Sixties. “This is Jan, the office manager, she’s been with the company since the start.”

“Hello sir,” said Jan, getting straight down to business. “Jenna explained your inquiry but I’m afraid that when we moved into the office it was completely empty. The previous tenants had already vacated.”

“They didn’t leave a forwarding address or anything like that”

“No. I always had the impression they had run into some kind of financial trouble. Jenna tells me they were a film company?”

“That’s right, Carrot and Coriander Productions. They must have received some mail here, at least in the early days.”

“Well actually, now you mention it,” Jan said. “There was a gentleman who came in a few times to pick up some mail.”

“A chap called Neal Ollyver?” suggested Keane.

“Oh, I really couldn’t say. It could be... I seem to remember him saying he had moved up the coast, up around the Big Sur.”

Keane felt himself flinch at the name of the coastal highway where Stacey had died two years previously, and from out of nowhere he experienced a twinge of crushing depression.

“Okay,” he said, suddenly desperate to get out of there. “Well, thanks Jan, thanks Jenna, you’ve been a real help.”

“Have a nice day,” called Jenna, sounding rather alarmed, as he turned and rushed out of the reception area and back onto the sunny street. To his relief, the sensation evaporated as quickly as it had come – perhaps it had been some kind of weird emotional echo – and he hurried back towards the mall to meet Miriam.

They ate a late lunch at a seafood restaurant on the marina called Brophy Bros, although Keane was too distracted to pay much attention to the food. He was convinced that Anna’s disappearance was somehow connected to her audition for Pacific Nights, and frustrated now that he appeared to have reached something of a dead end. He had suspected Carrot and Coriander Productions would be defunct, after all it had no

functioning website and the only phone number he could find had been disconnected. Still, it was disappointing.

“You know, women sometimes do some pretty horrible things to get a part in a movie,” he said. “I mean, God, I should know what people will do for fame right? What if Anna was sleeping with this guy, this Neal Ollyver, and that’s why he offered her the job?”

He had been mulling over the same theory ever since Wall had given him the information, but in his head it had sounded far-fetched and ridiculous. “You don’t think that sounds stupid?” he asked now, picking at his Cajun-blackened Mahi Mahi.

“No, I’ve heard the stories too. Some of the girls on campus...” Miriam said, before trailing off. She put down her knife and fork and fixed him with a look that seemed to spell trouble.

“What?”

“Perhaps it would be better if I don’t say.”

“Go on, something’s bothering you so spit it out.”

“Spit it out,” she laughed. “That is not so good an expression at lunchtime, no?”

“Miriam!”

“Its just...After last weekend, I did some research of my own. I Googled you.”

“Oh.”

Miriam shrugged, taking a sip of her white wine. Keane, with the long drive back to LA in mind, was drinking fizzy water. “I understand,” she went on. “You were in a band, you earned lots of money, you were on TV. It’s the same in France, our pop stars have lots of girls too. I mean, it’s cool, right?”

“I was a different person back then, Miriam. I was young, and I was probably a bit stupid.”

“But you were married...”

Keane opened his mouth to speak, and then stopped. There was nothing he could say to defend himself on this point.

“I’m sorry,” he said, eventually, then he realised that Miriam was not pissed off with him. In fact, she was...crying?

“It is so sad,” she said, as a single tear rolled down her cheek. “Votre pauvre femme, je ne sais comment vous pouvez le supporter.”

Keane frowned, his schoolboy French leaving him utterly at a loss. “I’m sorry? What?”

“Your poor wife,” said Miriam. “And poor you.”

“But I cheated on her,” he said. “If you went on the Internet you must have seen the stories.”

“Ah well, I also saw she cheated on you too,” said Miriam.

“Just once,” Keane said, always ready to defend Stacey’s honour – even though that one occasion (which had also been splashed all over the tabloids) had been with his so-called best mate from Easy Town.

“This happens in a marriage, at least it does in France,” said Miriam. “It is no reason to, how do you say, beat yourself up.”

“So you’re not angry then?”

Miriam shook her head, and then looked beyond him towards the ocean, the conversation apparently over. Keane chewed his fish and stared at the thicket of masts from the yachts in the marina.

Suddenly, Miriam kicked him under the table. “Now I hear you talk about what these girls will do for famous men...” she said, raising her eyebrows. “Is that why you are looking for Anna, to make amends?”

“I didn’t mean like that.”

“No, it makes me jealous,” said Miriam, biting her bottom lip. “And horny. I have never been with a famous man before you.”

Keane grinned, struggling to keep pace with the conversation but enjoying this latest twist. “And I’ve never been with a French girl before,” he said, and before he could stop himself he went on to blurt out. “Never mind two at once!”

Miriam’s face fell. “Florence did not agree,” she said, picking up her fork and returning her attention to her crabcakes. “We both looked at the news stories. She said you were a rat and that I should have nothing more to do with you.”

“Florence said that?”

“Yes, and so did some of the other girls in the house. But I do not care.”

The other girls? Oh Lord, so much for keeping a low profile. This was bound to leak out to the press now. Keane knew the sleazy hacks from Pizzazz were always sniffing around the UCLA campus for stories.

“We read all about the drugs, the fights, the man who wrote all your songs but did not get paid...” Miriam was saying. “My goodness, they really hate you in England.”

“Hey, I had no idea about the songwriter not getting his money, honestly. It was my agent.” Just then Keane’s phone began to ring, playing the Manchester United Calypso song. He glanced at the screen. “Speak of the devil, excuse me a minute.”

He strolled outside the restaurant to the marina and spoke on the phone for a few minutes, before returning to the table to see Miriam looking troubled again.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said. “Let’s suppose that Anna was sleeping this Ollyver fellow?”

Keane nodded. Back to that again are we, he thought. Man, she was hard to keep track of.

“But there’s no way to trace him,” he said. “I already tried yesterday. I guess I’ll have to start phoning round other movie producers, try to find somebody who might know where he is now.”

“Or there might be an easier way,” said Miriam. “What’s to say he didn’t also sleep with Anna’s replacement? The actress who got her part in the sea lion movie? Why don’t you ask her?”

Keane thought for a moment. “That’s brilliant,” he said, shaking his head in puzzlement. Why hadn’t he thought of that?

Miriam shrugged, as though he was just confirming something she already knew. “Who was on the phone?” she asked.

“Just my agent,” he said. “My new one, not the old arsehole. Hey, you know what? This is so nice up here, why don’t we get a room and spend the weekend? Now that you’re my groupie and everything.”

I spent what was left of the night in the cells at St Leonard's Street police station. The cops who arrested me were unaware of any gunshots being fired, having been called out by a taxi driver who saw us clambering around on the Scottish Parliament, and my drunken babbling about a gunman and a Page 3 girl had earned me nothing more than a coffee-breathed cloud of jeering cynicism. By the time I was formally interviewed, a few hours later, I had collected my wits sufficiently to realise that it was too late to do anything that would help Janine; until I heard otherwise I could only assume that she had escaped unscathed.

So I feigned a woozy bewilderment when confronted with my own wild claims from earlier on (it wasn't that hard to fake, to be honest) and was duly let go with an on-the-spot fine and a stern warning about trespassing.

It was just after nine o'clock when I arrived at Faz's flat, chronically hungover and dressed in an extra-small T-shirt given to me by the cops, as my own shirt was presumably still on the Holyrood building's roof. His reaction to my repeated pressing of his buzzer was over the top, I thought, even for him, but he eventually let me in and I collapsed on his couch. I wanted nothing more than to fall into a dreamless sleep but now Faz was up he seemed intent on making as much noise as possible.

"What are you doing?" I croaked, after a few minutes.

"Making breakfast," he snapped, ducking out of sight behind the worktop in his kitchen. "I've got work to do, and if you don't like it you can get your drunken arse off my sofa," he went on, his voice given a slight echo as he peered into one of his cupboards. I knew he was winding me up – Faz ate nothing but takeaways and he had never made a cooked breakfast in all the time I had known him. You were lucky to get a cup of tea.

"What work?" I asked, craning my neck towards the kitchen. "It's Sunday morning, Fazzie. And you don't have a job anyway."

"I've got other stuff going on, you know," he said, springing up into view. He had a tea towel draped over his shoulder and was clutching a gleaming, stainless steel pan. "My entire life does not revolve around sorting out your shit."

This was too much. I swung my legs off the sofa. "My shit? That's fucking rich. This whole thing was your idea, don't forget. An easy few grand, you said."

“And it still can be an easy few grand. All you’ve got to do is get soaked at a few funfairs and collect the cash, but no, you can’t even manage that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Frank told me you walked out on the Newtongrange Gala gig. DBS are going to withhold your cheque, he reckons.”

“You’ve no idea, have you? And since when do you and Frank talk about me behind my back?” I raged, before being overcome by a racking coughing fit.

“Listen to you,” Faz said, shaking his head. “Where the hell were you anyway? And where did you get that T-shirt, man?”

I stood up and pushed past him into the kitchen, grabbed a glass and filled it with water, swigging it down.

“Oh Jesus,” I muttered, taking a deep breath. “Where do I start?”

Half an hour later I’d filled Faz in on the events of the past 24 hours (missing out all of the X-rated details from the Parly roof). He was now holding the two DVDs that Janine had given me and was tapping them thoughtfully against his palm.

Then he held up the Marvin DVD and said: “We have to watch this.”

“No.”

“Mate, we have to. We have to know what’s on it in case that fucker comes after you again.”

“No way,” I said, snatching the DVDs back. “I’m going to take it back to Wigan and tell me mum what to do if anything happens.”

“Your mum!” Faz was incredulous. “You’re not running back to your mammy, are ya? This is just starting to get good.”

“I’ve had enough, Faz. It’s not just the Zack Keane thing. I’ve got no job, no money, no girlfriend, the whole nine yards.”

“Isla,” Faz said, nodding sagely. “That’s what this is still about. You’ve been looking for an excuse to run away ever since that stuck-up bitch dumped you.”

“That’s bollocks and you know it.”

“I never had you down as a quitter, Crombie. What you need to do is face this Ryan McCann and his monkey, let ‘em know you’re not scared. Do what Janine said, give him the DVD, let him cool off a bit...then go and get her for yourself, man!”

“Who, Janine?”

“Yeah, course! What do you think last night was all about? She’s wet for you, Cromboner! You don’t just make out with someone on the fucking Parliament roof for a laugh – that was a cool move, by the way, bro.”

“Yeah,” I answered, unable to stop a goofy grin from spreading across my face.

“Look at you,” Faz hooted. “Like a fucking lovesick puppy. So you need to show these Glaswegian bastards you’re not going anywhere.”

“You’re right. I’ve done nowt wrong. McCann knew about the job for the Sport and it’s not my fault if his bird wants to leave him. So fuck him.”

“That’s right, Braveheart,” Faz said, laughing. “Freedom! We should paint your face blue, man.”

He shook his head ruefully, then leaned over and pointed at the DVDs in my hand. “I can’t believe you were going to get your mama-ji mixed up in all this,” he said.

“Yeah, well, Marvin the Martian’s nothing compared to my mum, believe me,” I said. “So who should we give the disc to, brainiac? It’s got to be somebody they don’t know about.”

“I know just the man,” Faz said.

The greasy waft from the Greggs bakery nearly made me retch as I stepped gingerly out of the Golf. The bright morning light and Faz’s erratic driving had combined to bring my hangover blaring on full blast.

Faz had called his new best pal Frank Fleming and the agent had agreed to meet us at his office.

“Last chance,” said Faz, as we walked down the alley. “I still say we should watch it.”

“Fuck...off.”

“Your funeral, mate. It’s crazy to go into battle not knowing whether you’re carryin’ an Uzi or a water pistol.”

I ignored him, and pushed open Fleming's office door. There was no receptionist here today, just Frank himself, sitting in her chair with his feet up on the desk and flipping through the Sunday Times Culture magazine. He was dressed in a bright Hawaiian shirt with parrots on it, shorts and flip flops.

"Paul," he cried, throwing the magazine down. "My very own little man of mystery, so glad you could make it! Faisal, I hope you've explained the situation to your handsome friend."

I shot a quizzical look at Faz.

"I told him about DBS," he said. "But it's not his fault, Frank, there's been some nasty shit going on."

"Really? How intriguing. Here, take a seat," he said, ushering us into the chairs by the window and handing out takeaway coffees and Danish pastries from Greggs. "So, do tell."

"You'll have seen the stuff in the papers about Ryan McCann?" Faz said.

Fleming nodded.

"Well, obviously it's all bullshit but now the girl..."

"Ah, the fragrant Janine Giacomo," said Fleming. "I know her, she's a good pro."

"...cool, whatever, but now she's left McCann and he thinks Paul had something to do with it."

"And did you?"

"Maybe a bit, but she was going to leave him anyway," I said.

"You dog, you!" said Fleming, leaning over and grabbing my knee. "Well done that man!"

"The thing is," I said, picking up the story from Faz. "Now she's gone into hiding and McCann is coming after me thinking that I know where she is."

"Let me guess, you've already had a visit from one of his thugs?" said Fleming.

"Perhaps the delightful Marvin Boyle?"

Faz and I exchanged a look, as Fleming settled back in his seat and took a bite of Danish pastry. "Boys," he said, spraying us with crumbs. "You may think that I'm just an old queen, but you don't last as long as I have in showbusiness without being tough. Not

in Scotland, anyway. Who do you think runs all the clubs and pubs that I send my acts out to? People like Scrap Iron Ryan, that's who. He's small fry, believe me."

"So you can sort this out for us then?" asked Faz, a little sceptically.

"Not me personally, but I might know some people who can," replied Fleming.

"Wait," I said, holding up my hands. "Come off it, this isn't The Sopranos. You don't have to do anything, Frank. I'm going to straighten things out with McCann myself. All I need you to do is look after this for me."

I handed him the 'Marvin' DVD.

"If anything happens to me, or to Faz, I want you to post it... no, courier it, to Ryan McCann in Glasgow. Call it my insurance policy from Janine, okay?"

"Clever girl," said Fleming. "Paul, I'll put it in my safe right away."

"And don't fucking watch it," I said.

Fleming clutched the DVD to his chest and turned to Faz, saying: "Don't you love it when he talks tough?"

"Paul, I will follow your instructions to the letter," he went on in a more serious tone, inclining his head. "You've done the right thing coming to me. Now, on to more enjoyable matters, like making lots of lovely moolah!"

"Paul's happy to go back to Newtongrange this afternoon," said Faz and I nodded, somewhat reluctantly.

"Forget it, my dear boy, that's behind us now. You're moving on to bigger and better things."

"But what about DBS and their money?"

"They are willing to pay us in full, and another three thou besides...if they can book you for their tent at the Highland Show next weekend. They were delighted with the extra walk-in business you brought in at the gala."

"Wow," I said. "That's great."

"Paul, you have no idea, my phone has been ringing off the hook with enquiries about you. You're a star, dear boy! And I've got another great gig lined up for you tomorrow, a corporate job up in Aberdeen."

"Aberdeen?"

“Yep, one of the oil companies is having a family fun day for its staff and their loved ones. And they’re willing to put us up in a decent hotel, all expenses paid. I’ll drive us all up there this very afternoon in the Jag, so we get there in time for a nice slap up dinner. We can fill our boots, chaps – this is oil money, black gold, Texas tea!”

California 7

On Sunday morning Andy Garner was up at five to drive past Zack Keane’s place. The Corvette was still not back and he returned to his post in the corner of the tennis club lot, resigned to another long day. While he was waiting he read through all the British Sundays on his iPad, shaking his head at the paucity of celebrity waffle. As usual, the interminable love life of Katie Price dominated – if only she would move to the States, all his prayers would be answered.

The truth was, especially since Michael Jackson’s death, the focus had slipped away from LA and back onto domestic matters. Garner wasn’t fussed; he had been in the game long enough to know that such news trends came in cycles – by this time next year, all the sad sacks in Chingford and Chorley and Chichester would be clamouring for Hollywood gossip again – but if he could prove that Zack Keane had been mixed up in the death of his wife then he could turn the tide a hell of a lot quicker.

Deep down, Andy Garner was still a journalist and the thought of a breaking a genuine news story like this gave him heart palpitations. When was the last time that such a big star had been involved in a murder? OJ Simpson, probably, and look how large that had been. You’re talking global fucking domination.

Finally, at around 11 o’clock, with the Yiddische tennis mafia starting to cast some genuinely angry glances in his direction, Garner ran out of patience and called Dean Simon.

“Deano,” he bellowed. “I’m sick of fucking waiting for this bastard.”

“Good morning to you too, Andy.”

“Yeah, what’s so good about it? Listen, did your cabbie spot those French tarts last night?”

“Nope.”

“Right, well call him and say there’s three hundred bucks if he can take us back to where he dropped ‘em off at the uni, then stick around for a bit to ID the slags.”

There was a pause. “I already paid him 150...” said Deano.

“I don’t care. I’m burning up money on this damn story already, the sooner we get it moving the better. I’m going for breakfast now, get the cabbie and meet me at UCLA in an hour.”

It was almost one o’clock before Simon and the cabbie, a slight Indian man named Dave, arrived at the campus in Dave’s minicab. After a brief discussion about Garner’s tactics for the day, they transferred into the SUV and Dave directed them to an area of off-campus student accommodation around Weyburn Place.

“They went in there,” he said, pointing to a sprawling, five storey red brick housing block.

“Great, thanks Dave,” said Garner, pulling over to the kerb so they had a good view of the entrance.

“Now what?” asked Dave.

“Now we wait.”

The cabbie accepted this without comment and the three men settled down to make themselves comfortable.

“Hey,” said Dave, after a few minutes of silence. “Can we get the air conditioning on? It’s kind of hot in here.”

Garner ignored him.

“Come on Andy, Dave’s right,” said Simon. “This isn’t Essex. Gasoline is cheap over here, remember?”

“I like the heat, okay?”

“Okay! Jesus, just because you’re pissed about missing Keane last night...”

“I didn’t miss anybody,” said Garner, shaking his head. “He’s been out of town all weekend.”

“Oh, I thought he was at that launch party Downtown?”

“What launch party?”

“Romeo Beckham’s fashion label. I heard he was there, that’s all.”

Garner glared at Simon. One of the Pizzazz news grunts had covered the event and filed copy and pictures. A couple of the other ex-Spice Girls had pitched up with their own brats. He had seen the copy on the wires this morning and there had been no mention of Keane. Then again, the sneaky Irish fucker did share an agent in London with Mel B...

“Hey!” Dave exclaimed.

“Oh for Pete’s sake, I’ll turn on the damn air con!” snapped Garner.

“There she is, man!” he was leaning forward between the two front seats, gesturing at a blonde girl dodging traffic as she dashed across the road and walked down the street.

“Blondie?” asked Garner. “That’s one of ‘em?”

“Sure,” said Dave. “I’ll take my 300 clams now, thanks. That was the easiest stakeout ever.”

Garner ground his teeth but handed over the cash, eager not to lose the girl, and Dave was gone in a flash. The SUV rumbled up the street behind her as she went into a coffee shop.

“Over to you Deano,” said Garner. “Remember what we discussed.”

Florence settled back into a leather armchair on the second storey of the Coffee Bean, relieved to have found a space on a Sunday afternoon, and opened her book. She and Miriam were on a single semester exchange studying US business management, and they had an important videoconference later in the week with their tutor back in Nice.

Not that Miriam seemed to care, Florence thought bitterly.

No sooner had she started reading however, than she noticed somebody hovering above her. It was a smartly dressed man in his 50s, holding a coffee and a newspaper. He gestured apologetically around the room, where almost all the seats were taken, and then without waiting for approval settled himself down into the adjacent chair.

Miriam gritted her teeth. These Americans were so ignorant! She attempted to return to her book but she realised the man was sitting there looking at her, as though about to engage her in conversation. She coughed and turned her back slightly in her chair.

“Excuse me, miss?” said the man.

Florence gave him her most withering stare.

“Yes?” she asked.

“My name is Detective Sergeant Dean Simon, from New Scotland Yard in London,” he said, flashing a Met Police warrant card at her.

Florence shook her head. “I don’t understand,” she said. “Have I done something wrong?”

Simon laughed. “Je sui desole. I didn’t mean to alarm you,” he said.

“Ces n’est pa. Parlez-vous Francais?”

Simon shook his head. “Un peu, pour mes vacances en Provence,” he said. “I’d prefer it if we spoke in English.”

Florence gracefully inclined her head, already rather taken with this charming policeman from London.

“I hope I can speak freely,” he said. “I’m here to investigate an acquaintance of yours. A young man named Zack Keane.”

Florence gasped and put her hand to her mouth. She had known he was a rotten apple, as soon as she read about all those things he had done, all those lies he had told.

“My friend is with him this weekend,” she said. “Is he dangerous?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” said Simon, thinking Garner was right, the toerag was out of town. “Let’s just say that we want to keep an eye on him.”

“But why? Surely you must have a reason? And what do you want from me? I...I hardly know him, I mean we only met last weekend,” Florence coloured slightly here, but Simon was into his role now and he resisted the temptation to smirk without difficulty.

“I was hoping you might agree to watch him for me, that’s all,” he said. “Erm, vous etre un espion?”

“A spy?”

“Yes, sort of. Do you know the phrase, ‘keep an eye on him’?”

Florence nodded.

“Good. After all, it might be in your friend’s interest too.”

“Of course.”

“Maybe you could meet for a drink, try to find out what Keane is up to at the moment, that kind of thing?”

“Okay. Yes, okay. That sounds fine.”

“You can contact me anytime on this number.” Simon scribbled his name and phone number on a pad from the Hollywood Hilton and tore out the page. “And I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name earlier?”

“Florence. Florence Mounier.”

“If you can just write your own cell phone number on here for me... That’s it. And your friend’s name?”

“Miriam Fae. Wait, Detective, can you at least tell me a little bit of what this is all about. I’m worried for her. Is it drugs?”

Simon looked around him, as though the very walls could have ears. “Seeing as you are willing to help me, I suppose I can bend the rules a little,” he said. “Certain allegations have been made, back in London, by the family of Mr Keane’s late wife. Allegations that he may not have been an altogether innocent party in the events that led up to her death.”

Florence gasped again. “Miriam!” she exclaimed.

Simon reached out and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Perhaps he was overdoing it a bit here. “Calm down, love,” he said. “There’s nothing to back up these claims, and between you and me, I think Mrs Keane’s family are probably mistaken. Grief can do strange things to people. But my boss sent me over to look into it, just to show we are doing everything by the book, you know?”

“Okay,” said Florence. “I understand.”

“Good girl,” said Simon, reverting further and further back to his standard King’s Head blokey banter by the second. It was time to get out of here. “I wouldn’t ask you to do this if there was any danger, would I? I’d be risking my career. Get Zack to open up a little about his wife, that’s all I need. I know he had nothing to do with it, but I just need somebody to confirm it for me from the boy himself.”

Florence was starting to look doubtful.

“Obviously, there would be the possibility of a financial reward if you did feel able to help. New Scotland Yard can be quite generous in these matters.”

That swung it, as he had known it would.

“Okay,” said Florence, sniffing as she tucked Simon’s phone number into her jeans pocket. “I’ll see what I can do.”

At around the same time, on the other side of town, another employee of Pizzazz News and Pictures was also carrying out some clandestine work regarding the surveillance of Zack Keane.

Dee Dee Sprakes had quickly tired of her bullshit detail following Dre Hernandez around his crappy little hood off East Chavez Avenue. She had never bought into Garner's blackmail theory – this clown wouldn't have the brains to successfully hijack first graders' lunch money, never mind pull off a clever, nuanced felony. She wasn't ruling out the possibility that Keane had paid somebody to nix his wife, oh no, that card was still very much part of the hand, but there was no question in her mind that if he had, Rosa and Dre knew nothing about it.

So around lunchtime, when Dre had finally emerged from his mother's house – his mother, Rosa's youngest sister, Estella, a night shift cleaner at Huntington Memorial Hospital in Pasadena, was catching up on her sleep while his younger siblings watched cartoons – she had rolled up alongside him on the street.

“You work for that British dude, Zack Keane, right?”

“What's it to you?”

“You know he's some kind of pop star, don't you?” Sprakes had asked, holding up a \$50 bill.

Hernandez turned slowly to face her. “Yeah, I heard his tunes,” he said. “Sounds like a faggot, man.”

“Well, I work for a news agency over in Hollywood and we pay large for any stories about this particular faggot. How about we go for a ride, talk about this?”

So now here they were, sitting at a picnic bench outside a Krispy Kreme donut shop way over in Montebello, as Dre had been worried that somebody might see them together in East LA and mistake Dee Dee Sprakes for a cop. Honestly. If it wasn't such a waste of her time she could have laughed at loud this pathetic moron. She had bought a mixed half-dozen, a black coffee and a Mountain Dew Big Gulp, and as Hernandez got stuck into his first donut she decided to get straight to the point.

“Did Keane have his wife killed?”

“Say what?” replied Dre, his bewildered comment coming with added crumbs.

“Are you and your great aunt blackmailing him because you have evidence that he murdered his wife?”

This time, Dre just laughed hard, before taking a long slurp of soda. Then he laughed again, spraying bubbles out of his nose.

“You crazy, Dee Dee,” he said, eventually bringing himself under control.

“Glad we got that sorted,” Sprakes replied. This kid was no Banderas, she thought, there was no way he was putting on the amused act. Strike one for Garner. Now it was time to put a plan of her own into action.

“I’m serious, Dre,” she said. “We really think he did it.”

“No way, he had her greased? Man, Gran’moms will be pissed. She said his wife was real nice, too.”

Sprakes said nothing and lit a cigarette, blowing the smoke away from Hernandez as he tucked into his second donut.

“So what you want me to do,” he asked. “Keep an eye on him and shit, see what I can find out.”

“Not right now. Has Keane ever asked you to get him drugs?”

“Me? Man, he ain’t spoke to me since I saw him at Gran’moms’ place. He’s never at home. I just go up to his place on Fridays after school, cut the grass, rake up a few leaves, that’s it. Bang, forty bucks a week gets paid into my account.”

Strike two, this time for Sprakes’s own preferred theory.

“He lives in Beverly Hills, man,” Hernandez went on. “He probably got more dealers on his street than in the whole of East LA. Dee Dee, you crack me up. For a top reporter, you don’t know shit.”

Sprakes dropped her cigarette and ground it out firmly beneath her right Jimmy Choo.

“Would you be willing to plant some drugs at his home?” she asked, coming right out with it because she was so annoyed.

Hernandez visibly jumped, as though he had touched a wire fence. “Are you wearing a wire, Dee Dee? What sorta question is that?”

“Come off it, Andre. Do I really look like a cop to you?”

“You could be. How do I know what undercover five-oh look like?”

“Okay, let me rephrase this. Would it be possible, theoretically, for you to plant some shit at Mr Keane’s home? You said he’s never there when you visit. Do you have access to the property?”

“I guess so. Hell, theoretically, it would be easy. That don’t mean I plan to do it though.”

Sprakes decided it was time to play her trump card.

“You know he’s looking into what happened to Anna, don’t you?”

“What? Anna who?”

“Your cousin Anna. Anna Velasco. He’s been asking questions about her all over the Valley. Does Rosa know about that?”

“No way, Gran’moms is real private like that. She hardly ever even spoke to me ‘bout cousin Anna. What’s he doin’ that for?”

Sprakes shrugged. “My guess is its some kind of redemption. He aced his wife, now he wants to make amends by sticking his nose into some other family’s tragedy. Anna was what, 20, 21, when she disappeared? ‘Bout the same as Stacey Keane.”

Hernandez looked perplexed and angry, so Sprakes applied the final turn of the screw. “I just can’t see how any good can come out of this for your great aunt,” she added, shaking her head sadly.

“Motherfucker,” said Hernandez. “If he hurts my Gran’moms I’ll kill his Irish ass.”

“Wouldn’t be any less than he deserves.”

“When do I plant that shit? I can do it Friday, creep in the kitchen, drop the stuff in a box of Golden Grahams, no sweat.”

“Whoa, easy there cowboy.”

“I’ll do it. I wanna do it. Just make sure there’s enough coke to put him away for a long time, Dee Dee man.”

“Andre, calm down, okay? The best thing you can do right now is to stay alert, and if you or your great aunt see Keane doing anything peculiar, give me a call,” she dropped a Pizzazz business card on the table. “And let’s keep the drug thing between ourselves for now?”

Hernandez nodded and Sprakes stood up, grabbing the last donut from the box. “Listen, I’m gonna go now,” she said. “You should take the bus back to East Chavez. You don’t want any of your crew to see me drop you off, right?”

Scotland 7

Aberdeen was great. Fleming was as good as his word – we stayed in the Hilton Treetops and the family fun day was a breeze compared to Newtongrange Gala, with most of the kids impeccably polite and well-behaved. Perhaps it was because many of them were French or American.

The Highland Show, however, was more of a challenge. Every summer, tens of thousands of thirsty farmers from all over Scotland descend on Edinburgh’s Ingliston showground with their prize beasts, ready to do battle over who has the most impressive capacity for alcohol consumption.

Once again, the DBS guys were delighted with the enthusiastic response to their village idiot – i.e. me - and at times the baying mob around the gunge buckets bordered on the hysterical. The assembled bumpkins – some of whom were, I swear, breaking off from showering me in rancid goo to point at fucking aeroplanes – had clearly never conceived of anything remotely as entertaining as the ‘throw shite at the Englishman’ game.

Luckily for my sanity, Andy Flowers was there, ever-smiling and mellow and always ready with a Solero or a plastic pint pot full of lukewarm Fosters just when the heat and the abuse were starting to get too much.

Also, there were no further sightings of the Glasgow heavy mob and by Saturday I was starting to wonder whether McCann and Marvin were really that bothered after all. After all, Scrap Iron was a wealthy gangster with a brooding Begbie-style aura, a big knife scar on his face and a cool-sounding nickname – surely he had birds queuing up to replace Janine?

I was sitting on the grass outside the DBS tent, enjoying a brief respite from the fun and flicking through a Daily Express that somebody had left behind, when my next problem appeared.

Isla.

Oh fuck.

You may have been wondering what on earth I was doing living in Edinburgh anyway, seeing as I only have two real friends up here – Faz and Mike, one of whom is English – and no other connection to Scotland.

Well, my connection was Isla Sinclair, a blonde, rather filthy and incredibly posh lass from Merchiston. Think Chelsy Davy but with less brains and you would be in the right neighbourhood. Although if you ever actually set foot in Isla's neighbourhood without a specific invitation, her parents would probably call the police.

She was at St Andrews while I was studying at the rather more downmarket Napier University in Edinburgh and our paths would most likely never have crossed if it weren't for one bizarre evening in, of all places, Cowdenbeath.

It was in the second year and I was already good pals with Faz, who, as I've mentioned previously, comes from that corner of Fife. The working class bit, that is, full of depressed miners, knife-wielding teenagers and deep-fried suppers, rather than the lah-di-dah bit on the east coast. His parents ran Indian restaurants in Cowdenbeath, Ballingry and Lochore, and he grew up embedded with a strong and somewhat bizarre accent and a deep-rooted attitude of 'Fuck the lot of yiz'

He still insists that as a child his family had been the only Asians in the whole of central Fife. "It was sound," he says. "As long as you got used to the vitriolic, spittle-flecked racism, it was a great place to be a kid from a rich, Pakistani family."

Anyway, me and a few other student pals had taken to watching Cowdenbeath FC home games, laughing at how shit everything was in that kind of smug, superior 'aren't we hilarious' way that makes students so popular with the wider British public.

Afterwards, we would go and meet up with Faz (who refused to join us at Central Park but came over to Fife with us anyway every other weekend to say hello to his folks) and repair to his dad's restaurant for a few Tiger beers and a free curry.

One rainy night in February, we were just getting ready to leave when three girls charged in from the street outside, red-cheeked and dripping wet. Despite their confident, well-spoken tones, they looked a bit nervous and huddled together tightly as they made their way across the restaurant to a table in the corner.

Posh, female and apparently English, they seemed as out of place as it was possible to be on a cold, wet Saturday night in November in Cowden, and I felt sorry for them. I also thought that if I could help them out in some way, I stood a half-decent chance of getting a shag.

“Alright girls?” I asked, after striding cockily across the room. “On your way back to St Andrews?”

The three of them exchanged quizzical looks and giggled, slightly hysterically, before the blonde said: “Oh God, is it that obvious?”

Then I followed her gaze around the half-empty restaurant, seeing several heavily-tattooed couples enjoying an early evening ruby and my scruffy, greasy-haired mates, who were totally removed from any student context and as a consequence looked more like a travelling band of drug dealers.

“It’s hopeless,” she went on. “They’re going to rape us and then kill us, aren’t they?”

“Don’t be silly,” I replied. “They’ll probably do it the other way around.”

And that was how I met Isla. The girls had pulled off the A92 to get fags and Isla’s car – a clapped out Fiat Cinquecento – had broken down outside the McColl’s newsagent on Cowden high street.

Luckily I was driving that night, in an almost equally knackered Ford Fiesta that by the the time of this story had long since bit the dust, and I abandoned my mates without a second thought to offer the three damsels in distress a lift home.

And yes, as it happens, I did get a shag, so that just shows what you get for being nice.

We had gone along steadily after that for almost three years, through the rest of university and into the big bad world beyond. I got my job at Multiplex and bought my place down by Leith Links, and Isla came back from St Andrews and her parents got her a palatial flat in Merchiston, which must have cost a fortune. She even got a job herself, working for Diageo in ‘brand awareness’ and travelling all over the world flogging

whisky and beer at conferences. I tagged along whenever I could, and we had fucked ourselves silly in hotels in Frankfurt, Geneva, Amsterdam and even New York.

Then, just as I was starting to entertain thoughts of us moving in together or even going travelling, the cracks started to appear. First I was banned from going on her work jollies and then she started hanging around with a new crowd of ex-St Andrews chums, often missing my calls and going off every second or third weekend to spas or fancy hotels with her mum.

Finally, one sunny Sunday afternoon when Isla and her mum were supposedly out of town with her mother, I was sitting drinking in the Cameo bar in Leith with Faz when I saw the self-same Mrs Sinclair across the road, carrying a couple of bags from a nearby furniture shop.

The penny dropped and I realised, no doubt long after everyone else had, that Isla was cheating on me. It all got a bit messy after that and I won't go into all the gory details here. Suffice to say I still had a strange, queasy reaction whenever I thought Isla or her new bloke, a total wanker called Conor McConnell. He was a trainee barrister who, just because he played in the fucking back row for Watsonians, felt it necessary to wear a fucking rugby jersey in every conceivable social situation...

“Well, look who it isn't!”

It was them.

“I heard you got yourself a new job, Crombie!”

It was Isla and McConnell, with a few of his rugby cronies in tow.

“Do you know this dipshit, Conor?” asked one of these slack-jawed companions.

“Nah, not really. I don't know anybody that famous,” replied McConnell.

“It's Isla's old flame, isn't it? Fuck me, it is! I thought I recognised him when I saw him in the paper,” chimed in another one of the egg-chasers.

McConnell, wearing a Scotland rugby shirt tucked into pale blue jeans, seemed pretty pissed, as did his three pals. It made sense that they would come drinking here – the Highland Show was a bit like T in the Park for posh folk and bumpkins. Isla, to her credit, looked a bit embarrassed – although that could have been because she was being publicly associated with me.

The last time I'd seen her it had all got quite emotional (I'd drunk a bottle of whisky and climbed a tree outside her flat, refusing to leave until she called the police) and my knees were shaking as I stood up.

"Fuck off," I spat, glad that my voice wasn't cracking. "I'm on a break. Go and shag a sheep or something."

I began walking back towards the entrance to the tent.

"How about Conor just shags your ex instead?" somebody said, to great guffaws of laughter.

"James!" said Isla, outraged.

"Well, he started it..."

"How about you shag this!"

I turned to see what was going on and caught a gungebomb full in the face. It hurt – a lot – and I realised that somebody had thrown a stone along with the sponge. I looked around for evidence but there were loads of stones lying around, many of them splattered with blue gunk, and it was impossible to know which one had hit me. Another sponge flew in and caught me on the side of the face – no stone this time – and I completely lost the rag.

"You fuckin' asshole," I raged, flying towards McConnell, my progress slowed by a barrage of sponges from his mates and then a full bucket of gunge, which one of them picked up and threw in my face.

But there was no stopping me and even though I was almost blinded I thudded into him with a satisfying crunch. McConnell slipped and went down with me landing on top of him, before immediately sliding off and rolling onto my back. I still couldn't see properly and I felt a kick in the ribs, a couple of punches to the head and then somebody hauling me on to my feet by pulling on my gunge-drenched T shirt.

I swung wildly and felt my fist crunch into somebody's nose. There was a girlish scream and then another fierce blow to my own conk, which sent me stumbling backwards, before a hefty push in the chest knocked me over onto my arse.

"What the bloody hell is going on here?" somebody yelled. It sounded like Andy Flowers, but he would never get so angry. "Paul? What on earth are you doing?"

I wiped the last of the gunge from my eyes and surveyed the sorry scene before me. Andy Flowers and another man were restraining McConnell, who was liberally smeared in blue goo but otherwise unharmed, while a sympathetic huddle had gathered around Isla, who had blood streaming from her nose. She was flapping her hands and jogging on the spot, going: “Ow, ow, ow!”

“He punched my fucking fiancée!” McConnell yelled.

“I couldn’t see,” I said, somewhat desperately trying to explain myself to the growing crowd. “I was trying to punch him.”

“Why, for God’s sake?” asked Andy.

“Because Conor’s getting married to his ex-girlfriend, the sad cunt,” said one of the rugby yahoos.

“Paul, is this right?”

“No,” I said. “Well, yes, she is my ex-girlfriend but that’s not why...he threw a fucking stone at me,” I said, arriving at the core of my argument a little bit too late.

“No I didn’t,” said McConnell, brushing Flowers aside. “Get off me, I’m not going to touch the sad little shit.”

He turned to Isla and gently tipped her head back to stop the blood flow, asking: “Are you alright, babes?”

“Look,” I said, putting my hand to my cheek where the stone hit and – thank Christ – pulling my fingers away smeared with some fresh claret of my own. The mood of the growing crowd was starting to turn nasty and I realised that I needed to win them over quickly.

“He punched a lassie,” someone yelled.

“Isla, I’m sorry,” I said. “I couldn’t see for all the gunge...”

Isla simply lowered her head and glared at me, wet tears glistening on her cheeks. Her nose didn’t look broken, but there was a hell of a lot of blood.

“Oh, and thad makes id okay, does id?” she hissed.

“He threw a fucking stone at me!”

“One of those kids threw it, you moron,” said McConnell, pointing over at a group of tracksuited teens.

“Whoever it was, it was a fuckin’ good shot,” somebody shouted.

“You wanker,” said Isla. “I dumped you, why can’t you just ged over id?”

Exasperated, I turned to Andy Flowers for support but found only a grim, tight-lipped look of disdain. Working for Edinburgh’s leading ‘no win, no fee’ compensation claim winners, he knew exactly what kind of a can of worms I had just opened.

“That Zack Keane lookey-likey hit a lassie,” somebody in the crowd said. “Let’s get him.”

The first sponge missed altogether and the second hit my arm, but the third caught me square in the face. Blinded again, I backed away towards the target board, gunge raining down on me as I bumped up against the plywood. DBS had supplied around 40 sponges, as well as buckets of gunge and water, and I knew they would be running out of ammo soon...

CLACK!

An empty bucket clanged off the board behind me, and I ducked instinctively, just as somebody emptied a pail of ice cold water over my head. The gunge washed from my eyes, I found myself cowering before a hate-filled mob in a way that was terrifyingly reminiscent of the stoning scene in *The Life of Brian*.

THUD! Something hard and metallic crunched into the backboard – I was willing to bet it was a pound coin but I didn’t have time to react, as I was then hit in the testicles by a large clod of turf. I hit the deck, as more turf and mud rained down on me.

“Hey, enough! Okay, enough!” I heard Andy Flowers yelling, perhaps a little bit late, I thought. “Laura, call the police, okay?”

THUD! There was another heavy strike against the wood, just inches above my head, and I crawled as fast as I could around the corner and into the lee of the backboard, to a tremendous roar of victory from the crowd. There was a sudden barrage of coins and stones, probably thrown in the knowledge that I was now out of danger.

“And don’t come back, ya bastard!” somebody hollered.

Tears of pain and embarrassment were stinging my eyes, and I realised furiously that I was crying. My laughing and whooping tormentors sounded like a Jeremy Kyle audience on acid, and I felt even worse than the day I had pooped myself in primary six.

“Crombie.”

I looked up, with snot running from my nose, to see McConnell's gloating face peering around the backboard.

"Don't worry, I'm still going to kick your fucking head in," he said.

Unlike that terrible day at St Kentigern's RC Primary School, I was able to pull myself together fairly quickly and was soon stumbling away around the back of the DBS tent, in search of alcohol. Many, many units of alcohol.

Faz and Fleming were here at the show somewhere, although I hadn't seen either of them for hours, the fair-weather pair of bastards. First up, I headed for the toilet block, washed myself down a bit in a washbasin and examined my injuries in the mirror – a large bruise was coming up on my cheek where the stone had hit me, I noted with a modest amount of satisfaction.

Physically, I would survive; mentally, I was not so sure.

Faz replied to my text to say that they were in the Pimms Enclosure, which was the VIP section by the main parade ring. However, when I got there the door staff – not surprisingly – wouldn't let me in. I felt a bit self-conscious standing there, right in the middle of the showground, and started to wonder just how many people had witnessed my earlier humiliation.

Without waiting for Faz to come out and vouch for me, I turned on my heel and headed for a small Hoegaarden stall I had noticed away over by the main doors, nice and quiet and far removed from all the action.

I bought two pints of the Belgian white beer and drank them both down in quick succession. Then I bought another two and went outside, sitting on the grass at the back of the stall. My phone was ringing – it was Faz – and I ignored it. He then texted to say that DBS had fired me and were considering legal action.

Idly, I wondered whether Isla was going to press charges and decided that yes, she probably would.

Those Hoegaardens continued to slip down, so I bought a fifth and cadged a cigarette off the barman – I had given up smoking several years before but now seemed like a good time to start again.

Finally, with the late afternoon shadows starting to lengthen, I stood up, staggered to a cash machine and withdrew £20 for a taxi back to town before leaving the showground.

McConnell and his mates were waiting for me outside – they must have been there for hours – but there was now a steady flow of people heading for home and they couldn't jump me in public. I flicked them the Vs as I strolled away with the crowd heading for the A8.

I sobered up quickly enough when I saw Isla waiting for me up ahead, though. Her nose was puffed and swollen and she was sitting on the bonnet of a Range Rover, her green Hunter wellies kicking against the personalised plate - 1SL4.

"Ged in," she said, hopping down to the ground.

"No way." I looked around and saw McConnell and the others coming up behind us.

"Paul, unless you ged in this car I'm going straight to the police to report this," she said, pointing at her nose.

"Why?" I said, "It's not illegal to have a face like a slapped arse, is it?"

She turned to go and I quickly weighed up my options. Which were – a) get a doing from some angry Edinburgh yahs, or b) face an assault charge, a court appearance and probably a stiff community sentence – as well as more embarrassment in the newspapers – and probably still get a doing from some angry Edinburgh yahs.

"Wait, wait," I said. "I'm coming."

I climbed into the passenger seat and Isla quickly reversed out of her parking space. I looked around to see McConnell set off after us in a yellow Audi A5, leaving the others behind.

So, it was to be mano a mano, I thought unhappily. I was rubbish at fighting and he was obviously going to batter me, which was a lot more embarrassing than being beaten up by a gang.

"Whad the hell were you doing?" Isla asked.

"He threw a stone at me," I said, for what seemed like the umpteenth time. "Look at my cheek!"

Then I glanced at Isla's swollen nose and felt a belated surge of shame. "But I know it's no excuse, I shouldn't have lost my temper," I said. "And I'm sorry for punching you."

“I don’t mean thad, Paul,” Isla snapped. “Whad were you doing with this Zack Keane thing? Have you gone bloody crackers?”

“No of course not – well, maybe. Jesus Isla, it’s just a way to get some money, it’s not a career.”

“No, you had a career and you jacked id in.”

“What exactly is this to do with you anyway?”

“Id’s got everything to do with me! I don’t want you on my conscience, ending up in some ruddy hostel in the Grassmarket, drinking yourself to death over your ex-girlfriend.”

“Hey, don’t fucking flatter yourself, love.”

“Come on Paul, look at the stade of you, you need help.”

“I’m doing fine, thank you very much. I’ve got an agent and everything, I could make thousands from this lookalike thing.”

“Yeah? How much have you made so far?”

It was an excellent question, so I didn’t answer it.

“Exactly. This is all Faisal’s idea isn’d id? I knew he was involved as soon as I saw you in the news.”

“Oh, piss off will you?”

“Good argument, Paul. Excellent. I’m so glad I’m rid of you, you know thad?”

“Yeah? Well, me too.”

“That’s nod what you were saying when you were up thad tree.”

Isla was getting angry, steadily increasing her speed until we were now bouncing across the vast, muddy car park. The showground was next to Edinburgh Airport and the runway was away to our right on the other side of a tall wire fence.

“Where are we going anyway?” I asked.

“Somewhere quied so Conor can punch you in the face,” replied Isla, matter-of-factly. “It’s the least thad you deserve, although if you keep this up I might get the tyre iron out of the boot and join in myself.”

I shrugged. “Seems reasonable,” I said. “I really am sorry about your nose, you know. It looks sore.”

“Id is bloody sore.”

“Do you think it’s broken?”

Isla shrugged and pulled over into a deserted side road, squelching to a halt in the mud. I got out and stood for a few seconds, waiting for McConnell’s Audi to arrive. I wrinkled my nose, feeling the undamaged cartilage move and shift, then sucked in air and wondered if I would ever breathe again so freely.

I had been feeling a certain eye-for-an-eye resignation about being punched, once, in the nose, but now I was starting to get a bit jellylegged at the thought of it. McConnell was a big lad, after all. Maybe I should hit him first, I thought.

He had thrown that stone at me, I was sure, or if not him it was one of his idiot mates. And hadn’t I gone through enough back at the gunge range? Besides, this was the cunt who had been shagging my girlfriend behind my back for months. That was settled then, I would play along with it – and then kick him in the balls and run.

The Audi appeared, pulled up behind Isla’s Range Rover and McConnell climbed out. He strode over to Isla, gave her a kiss and whispered something in her ear. She got back in behind the wheel and he walked around to my side, cracking his knuckles. “I’m gonna enjoy this,” he said. “And don’t believe that rubbish about one punch either.”

However, I had no time to respond, as all of a sudden a gleaming black Porsche Cayenne screeched around the corner and pranged into the back of the Audi, stainless steel bull bars sending it skipping forward as if it was a Dinky car.

“Jesus!” said McConnell, diving out of the way.

Three men climbed out of the big Porsche and one of them nonchalantly hoisted a sawn-off shotgun over his shoulder.

“Hello girls,” said Marvin the Martian. “Not interrupting anything are we?”

“I...I...I was just going to teach him a lesson,” stammered McConnell. “He punched my fiancée.”

Marvin turned towards him and said, “I...don’t...give...a...fuck,” tapping the shotgun barrel into his chest between each word for extra emphasis.

McConnell turned horribly pale and I caught a slight but unmistakable tang of eau du toilet which took me straight back to primary six at St Kentigern’s.

Marvin returned his attention to me, levelling the gun at my midriff. “Get in the car, fucknuts,” he said. “Mr McCann wants a word with you.”

“Marv,” said one of the sidekicks. “There’s a burd in the Range Rover.”

“Fuck sake,” Marvin snapped, and stalked around to the driver’s door. “Out,” he ordered, then grabbed Isla by the elbow and marched her around to where we were standing.

“She had nothing to do with it,” I said. “Just let her go and I’ll come with you.”

“You’re coming whatever happens, fucknuts,” said Marvin, “so that’s not really what you’d call a bargaining chip. What the fuck was going on here anyway? A threesome?”

“Paul and Conor were going to have a fight,” sighed Isla, and I recognised the same weary tone that she used to address any workmen who came to do odd jobs at her flat. “We were just trying to sort things out.”

“They were swedgin’ over a fuckin’ burd!” exclaimed the talkative sidekick.

“Priceless!”

Marvin laughed. “You’re a regular Casanova, fucknuts,” he said. “Right, the burd comes with us too.”

The two sidekicks stepped forward, one grabbed me and the other got hold of Isla.

“Unless you got anything to say about that?” Marvin asked, glancing over at McConnell who shook his head rapidly. I looked at Isla, who was giving her husband-to-be an imploring stare.

“Or maybe you want to come along for the ride?” asked Marvin.

“No,” said McConnell hoarsely, refusing to look in our direction.

“Good job too, Marv,” chuckled Talkative Sidekick, as we were bundled into the back seat of the Porsche. “I think he might have shat hissel and Ross only just steam cleaned the seats last week!”

As we sped away towards the M8, I thought I had probably just witnessed the very thing I had dreamed of, schemed over, prayed for, for many months - the end of Isla’s new relationship.

So why did I feel so shite?

The role of Melissa St Clair, the smoking hot marine biologist in Pacific Nights, had eventually gone to an actress called Shelley Summers. Keane checked out her CV on the Internet and soon realised that Neal Ollyver's story of murder among the sea lions had not exactly been her big career break. Summers had not worked again for more than 18 months before eventually getting a part in an episode of Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman, followed shortly afterwards by a run out in Due South and then another lengthy hiatus before she appeared in Dawson's Creek. That role, playing the mother of an actor who was in fact pretty much the same age as she was, had lasted for three whole episodes.

Then in 2002 Summers turned up in a movie entitled WWE Divas. It was a film about female wrestlers and it appeared that she had finally found her niche, which just happened to be slamming other women into the canvas before a crowd of baying rednecks.

Keane found plenty of photos and video footage of her new career as a wrestler. She was a svelte yet muscular figure with platinum blonde hair, terrifyingly sharp cheekbones and a series of brightly coloured bikinis that were clearly no match for her breast implants, which seemed to have a licence to roam wherever they damn well liked. Whatever qualities had enabled her to play Evelyn StClair, the helpless innocent, had clearly long ago been consigned to Shelley's personality dustbin.

The next five years saw her appear in dozens of televised wrestling shows, including showpiece events like the Royal Rumble, No Mercy and Judgement Day. She had even performed at Wembley Arena.

Keane found a couple of wrestling websites with pages dedicated to Shelley Summers, which gave him the following trivia about her career:

- She debuted as one of The Godfather's 'hos' but their relationship came to an end when she was powerbombed through a table by The Goodfather (now a reformed character who was clearly merciless towards his former entourage).
- She lost a championship match to The Kat at Summerslam 2004 when The Kat gave her a 'stinkface'.
- Her trademark moves were the School Girl Roll-up, the Atomic Drop, the Bitch Clamp and the Summers Daze Sit Down Facebuster

- She gave birth to a son, Matthew, in August 2007 and her WWE contract was terminated in September 2007

- She resided in San Diego, California

These days, according to a ‘where are they now?’ thread on a chat forum that Keane found after several hours of Googling, Shelley was now a personal trainer at a gym in La Jolla, so he called ahead and booked an appointment for the following afternoon.

Keane arrived at BodyPulse ten minutes before the start of his session and was asked to fill out a membership form, including his bank details. The first three months were free but after that he was obliged to fork out \$70 a month for a gym that was approximately four hours’ drive from his house. He also had to pay \$50 cash, up front, for his personal trainer session with Summers, although even his prompt payment failed to satisfy the knucklehead on the front counter.

Said knucklehead was wearing a vest that showed off his physique – including a pair of odd, grapefruit-sized muscles over his shoulders – and sporting a sizeable flat top, a hairstyle that Keane presumed to be de rigueur in Top Gun’s home city. He eyed Keane as though he were a rat turd he had just discovered in his barrel of creatine powder.

“You ‘spifically asked for Shelley, right?” said Flat Top.

“Yep, one of my pals recommended her,” replied Keane.

“Who’s that then?”

“Jim.”

“Don’t know him,” said Flat Top, as though this proved Keane were lying.

Keane (who was, of course, lying through his teeth) smiled politely and shrugged.

“Do I get changed through here?” he asked.

“You know Shelley used to be in WWE, right?” Flat Top asked, cutting to the chase.

“No, I didn’t,” replied Keane, before leaning across the counter and glancing around fearfully. “Is that, like, some kind of gang? Maybe I should go somewhere else.”

“WWE wrestling. She was a wrestler, on TV.”

“Oh, right, like Hulk Hogan. They actually let women do that?”

Flat Top nodded, his suspicions apparently allayed, and he continued in a more relaxed tone. “Yeah, Shelley was one of the top stars,” he said. “Fact, she still gets

stalkers come by sometimes, wanting to meet her, get a personal training session and all. Only she don't like to talk about it no more."

"And you thought I was a stalker?"

"Hey, I'm just watching out for her, that's all," said Flat Top, grinning. "She was a real big name, if you were into wrestling."

Keane shook his head. "It always seemed a bit... gay," he said, sparking off an avalanche of involuntary muscle twitches across Flat Top's upper body.

"It did, huh?" he snorted.

"Yeah, you know, all those blokes in latex trousers sitting on each other's faces. A bit homoerotic, if you ask me. So, do I get changed through here then?"

Flat Top gave an almost imperceptible nod of his head. He looked as though he was considering climbing up onto the counter and smashing Keane to the floor there and then with a flying clothesline.

Keane changed into his United shirt, a pair of Bermuda shorts decorated with blue and white flowers and Nike trainers, and then went out into the gym to meet Shelley Summers. She was standing over by the window and talking to Flat Top, and it seemed that she had barely changed from her wrestling days. Keane remembered that he wasn't supposed to recognise her and began warming up until she came over to greet him.

"You must be Zack, right, the wrestling fan?" she asked, smiling and shaking his hand with a surprisingly light grip. "I'm Shelley."

"Pleased to meet you. I don't actually have anything against wrestling but that guy pretty much accused me of being a stalker," he said.

Shelley smiled. "Yeah, Tony can get a bit over-protective at times. Hey, that's what husbands are for, right?"

"Right," smiled Keane, thinking 'Hell, how am I going to talk to her privately now I've upset the psycho hubby?'

"So, you were a lady wrestler?" he continued brightly. "That's interesting."

"I'd rather we didn't talk about it, okay?" said Shelley, not unpleasantly. "Now, how about we get started with some stretches?"

An hour and a half later Keane was dripping sweat onto the console of the running machine as he completed his warm down jog. Shelley had been by his side for pretty much the whole time, matching him effortlessly on the rowing machine, the cross trainer, the exercise bike and then a full medley of free weights and lifting equipment, but every time he had tried to broach the subject of her acting career she had stonewalled him. Now, with Flat Top in the gym bench-pressing what appeared to be two spare wheels from Fred Flintstone's car, he realised he did not have the energy to attempt it again. When Shelley's back was turned, he switched off the running machine and stumbled to a halt.

"Done already?" she asked, turning back towards him.

"Yeah, it just died on me," Keane said, shrugging lamely.

Shelley narrowed her eyes but allowed him to finish the workout and go for a shower. Keane was too exhausted to argue, and soon found himself walking out to the Corvette on jelly legs without having asked her anything about Pacific Nights or Neal Ollyver.

He drove to a nearby restaurant and ordered a steak, which he washed down with a pint of Guinness and then a couple of Cokes. As he started to feel an energising, post-exercise buzz he decided to go back and speak to Summers again. It would no doubt create a bit of a scene with Flat Top, but surely he could have no objections once Keane explained his motives.

However, when he arrived back at BodyPulse he saw the blonde personal trainer pulling out of the car park in an electric blue Mazda sports car. She didn't even glance at him as she accelerated away in the opposite direction.

"Shit," said Keane, and he turned the car around quickly with a spray of gravel and set off in pursuit. Summers was not exactly a slow driver however and he had to gun the Corvette at double the speed limit, weaving in and out of traffic, before he finally caught site of the blue Mazda. She was heading for the Freeway and he tailed her for a couple of miles before she turned off again, into a residential area. Before long, and before Keane had a chance to really reflect on what he was doing, she was pulling into a private driveway outside an apartment block.

Only then did the thought flash through his mind that perhaps he should not disturb her at home, but he really didn't want to have to spend the night down here before trying again at the gym tomorrow. And besides, he was already turning into the driveway and parking right behind her.

Summers was lifting a sports bag out of the trunk and she barely glanced around at the Corvette. It was only when Keane got out of the driver's side and called, "Ms Summers, do you mind if I have a word?" that she reacted.

Without a word, she whipped around and flung the heavy kit bag at his head. Keane put up his hands to absorb the blow and was caught off guard when Summers then ran and launched herself at him in a drop kick, both of her feet thudding powerfully into his stomach. He sprawled backwards on the ground as she landed nimbly on her hands and knees, then flipped herself upright and advanced on him again, her teeth bared.

"I knew you were creepy when Tony warned me about you at the gym," she hissed. "I'm gonna do you some serious damage, pal."

"Wait," said Keane, scrambling away from her, as Summers broke into another short run and threw herself into the air once more, this time coming down with her elbow into his shoulder, flattening him to the ground under her weight. Keane, who had an idea that the elbow drop had been meant for his windpipe, found the strength and fury to push her away and stand up. For a split second, Summers was on the ground before him and he considered kicking her in the ribs, but thought better of it, turning away with a shout of frustration.

Then suddenly her hand shot up between his legs and grabbed the waistband of his trousers. Keane just had time to realise that she had scurried up behind him and was now pulling him backwards over the top of her, before he slammed into the concrete with alarming force, banging the back of his head and sending white sparks fizzing across his field of vision.

Then Summers was on him again, grabbing his hair and yanking him agonisingly to his feet.

"Please," he said, "I just want to talk."

"Talk to this," she hissed, and then grabbed hold of his ears, pulled his head forward and then leapt backwards into a sitting position, yanking him down with her so that he

landed face-first between her legs, the top of his head buried in her crotch. She then slid around to the side, shoved one foot underneath him and began squeezing his neck between her legs like a pair of scissors, cutting off the air to his brain until he was conscious of little more than the all-consuming warmth of her thighs. It occurred to him that he was about to fulfil a tabloid news editor's wet dream: "Zack Keane squeezed to death between lady wrestler's legs."

And then the pressure went away, leaving Keane lying on the concrete and unable to move. He heard a car engine revving and then a squeal of brakes, before a foot planted itself in his ribs and rolled him over onto his back. He blinked, which hurt his eyes, and felt some of the gravel that was embedded in his face work itself free under the influence of gravity.

"You were awesome, babe," said a voice that he recognised. Keane blinked again and registered Flat Top standing over him, holding what appeared to be a gun.

"Huh," snorted Summers, modestly. "I missed with the elbow drop but the facebuster was sweet."

"I told you he was a stalker," said Flat Top. He jammed his shoe into Keane's ribs and raised his voice, as though he were a hundred yards away. "Not so homoerotic now are ya, smartass? Why don't you try that line with your new buddies in the city jail tonight?"

Keane coughed, spitting more gravel out of his mouth. He could feel wetness trickling down from his forehead and nose, which he took to be blood, and a blindingly painful thud resonating from the back of his head. He tried to sit up but Flat Top put his foot on his forehead and pushed him down again.

"Tony," said Summers, with a slight tone of admonishment. She pulled him away by the arm and then crouched down on her haunches in front of Keane. "Listen, buddy," she said. "I think you got the message, huh? So why don't you just beat it before we call the cops?"

"You alright there, Tony?"

Keane and Summers turned towards the voice, which apparently belonged to a middle aged man in a grey suit. One of the neighbours, presumably.

"Fine, Chet," Flat Top called. "Just dealing with some asshole stalker."

“Okay,” said the neighbour, sounding unconvinced. “Well, I just thought... you know... is the pistol really necessary? There might be kids around.”

“This?” replied Flat Top, waving the gun thoughtlessly. “It’s a flare gun from the boat. Just wanted to scare the guy.”

“Right.... great. Well, I’ll be seein’ ya.”

“See you around.”

The neighbour, after one final concerned stare, got into his car and drove away, but the exchange had given Keane time to sit up and collect his wits a little.

“A flare gun,” he asked. “I’ll be sure to tell my lawyer that. It might just save you a couple of hundred thousand.”

“What you say?” demanded Flat Top.

“I said it might knock a couple of hundred thousand dollars off the personal injury lawsuit, but I reckon he’ll still take you to the fucking cleaners.”

“Oh, you think?”

“I know it, mate. I’m a stalker, am I? I only drove down here from LA this morning, you steroid-addled freak. And unless I have brain damage, which is not unlikely considering the circumstances, all I said was ‘hello’ before your wife started kicking my head in,” Keane said, turning to glare at Summers. “For all you knew I could have been here to read the gas meter, you mental cow.”

Flat Top and Summers shared a worried glance and Keane knew he had them rattled.

“You’re not here to read the gas meter,” said Summers. “Who are you and what do you really want?”

“My name is Zack Keane and I’m a bloody millionaire,” he said. “And unless you want my incredibly expensive lawyer on your arse first thing tomorrow morning, I suggest you point me in the direction of a strong drink, pronto.”

The apartment was decorated with more wrestling memorabilia than the average teenage boy’s bedroom. Some of it was probably quite valuable, including a scattering of enormous gold and silver trophies and a championship belt from something called Cage Rage 2006, mounted in a glass case along with photographs of Summers in action. There were also signed items from many other wrestlers, both male and female, including

several pairs of sweat-stained and probably unwashed jockey shorts, similarly – and thankfully – placed behind glass along with a photograph of their former owner, who was invariably a bemulleted muscleman in tight breeches. Keane decided that, if necessary, he could smash one of the cases and make good his escape as the stench of stale balls flooded the room.

“Here you go,” said Summers, slapping a shot glass and a bottle of Wild Turkey bourbon down on the breakfast bar.

Flat Top was over by the window, watching Keane’s every move with undisguised malice.

Summers turned to her husband. “You go on back to work,” she said. “I told you I’ll be fine.”

Apparently Flat Top had seen Keane perform a hasty U-turn in the car park of BodyPulse and set off in pursuit of his wife, rushing out in the middle of his shift to intervene. He was now due back at the gym.

“If you cause any more trouble...” he said, leaving the threat unspoken as he crossed the room to give Summers a dainty peck on the cheek.

“I think your wife proved she can look after herself, don’t you?” Keane asked, unscrewing the whiskey and filling the shot glass to the brim. He left it sitting on the bar until Flat Top had stalked out of the room, shooting him one last lingering glare, and then downed it with a satisfied shudder.

“You not joining me?” he asked, as he filled the glass a second time.

“Just tell me what this is about then get the hell out of here,” said Summers. “You don’t scare me with your lawsuit baloney. I know the law; you were trespassing on private property and I had a legitimate fear for my personal safety.”

Keane shrugged and took a sip of his drink, already feeling the first shot going to work on his numerous cuts and bruises.

“I’m investigating the disappearance of a woman called Anna Velasco,” he said. “She’s my housekeeper’s daughter and I think – we both think – that something bad may have happened to her. The police didn’t investigate properly so I want to do something about it.”

“Good for you but what does that have to do with me? I never heard of this kid.”

“Just before she disappeared she had been offered a part in a movie called Pacific Nights. The same part that eventually went to you.”

Keane saw a shadow cross Summers’ face and pressed on.

“I can’t find any trace of the guy who made the movie, Neal Ollyver,” he said. “His film company was called Carrot and Coriander Productions and it’s dropped off the map as well. I can’t even find any copies of the movie and I’ve tried half the DVD rental stores in Hollywood.”

Summers snorted. “Yeah, good luck with that. It’s not exactly a classic. I got a copy here on VHS, I think, but believe me, it’s not worth watching.”

Keane tossed back the rest of his whiskey. “So, you do remember it then? That’s something at least. What about this guy Ollyver? What was he like?”

“I don’t know, it was a long time ago,” said Summers, and once again Keane saw that brief flash of concern. “What was it, 1992?”

“Yep. Anna was offered the part in the July but she was already gone by then. Presumably Ollyver then gave the part to you and the movie was made and then released, straight to TV, in November.”

“You look a mess,” said Summers, suddenly changing the subject. “Why don’t you go and get cleaned up? The bathroom is just through there.”

“I’d rather just get this done and get out of here,” said Keane, but he could see that Summers needed time to think about something. He walked into the bathroom and stared at his gruesome visage in the mirror. His hair was standing on end, there were bloody scrapes on his forehead, chin and cheek, and his face was studded with stones and smeared with mud, but considering the beating he had received he didn’t look too bad. He splashed himself with cold water and then returned to the living room. Summers was standing by the window, staring out into the sunshine.

“Hey,” she said, turning around. “That looks better. Listen, I probably owe you an apology.”

“Not really,” said Keane. “I startled you, it was foolish, I realise how it must have looked.” He thought back to dreamlike trance he had gone into as his head was crushed between Summers’ thighs. “Honestly,” he went on. “No need to apologise.”

“Okay, thanks...” she said, still apparently unsure of her next step. Keane got the feeling that she was about to tell him something that could make or break his ‘case’.

“You want another drink?” she asked.

“I’d better not. I’ve got a long drive back to LA.”

“Yeah, I guess. You mind if I have one?”

Summers got another shot glass and poured the whiskey, killing it with one easy flick of the wrist. She returned to her place by the window and Keane saw her shoulders rising and falling as she took a series of deep breaths.

“Neal Ollyver raped me when I was 19 years old,” she said, staring into the distance. “He’s a scumbag and he deserves to die. I auditioned for Pacific Nights but I heard nothing back from them for months. Nothing new there, I been turned down for movie roles my whole life. But back then I was still young, thought I was destined to be the next Sharon Stone, and it knocked my confidence. So eventually, when I got a call that Ollyver, the executive producer, wanted to see me I was real high. I went to meet him up in Santa Barbara and he told me the lead actress had ‘got flakey’ on him - those were his exact words – then he suggested we go for a drink to discuss the movie.”

Summers turned away from the window and looked at Keane for the first time since beginning her story. He had expected to see tears in her eyes but there was nothing there but dripping hatred.

“I won’t go into details,” she said. “I had too much to drink, we went back to his place and he forced himself on me. Said the last girl had turned him down and I remember thinking, ‘Right, so that’s what he meant by flakey’. I let him do it too, because I thought it was going to be my big break. It wasn’t just that night either. I guess he thought I was his girlfriend or something, and maybe I did too because I never went to the cops. But as soon as filming was done I never saw him again.”

“Christ,” said Keane. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well don’t be. It was my own stupid fault. I lived with it for years and of course I never got my break. Anyway, I had a lot of free time in those days and I spent most of in the gym and that’s how I eventually got into wrestling. Hell, you might think it’s dumb, but it saved my life. I sure had a lot of aggression to work out, anyway. If I

ever needed to psych myself up for a bout, I just thought about Neal Ollyver and that did the trick.”

“Wow,” said Keane, shaking his head. “That’s quite something. Maybe I will have that drink after all.”

He poured them both a bourbon and they sat on the stools at the breakfast bar, sipping quietly, both lost in their own thoughts.

“So, this poor girl,” said Summers eventually. “She must have been the one Ollyver said was ‘flakey’. I always admired her for turning him down, although it made me feel kind of shitty.”

“I think he probably raped her too. Maybe she got pregnant, maybe she threatened to go to the cops. Either way, she’s never been seen since.”

“You think he killed her?” asked Summers.

Keane nodded. “Now that I’ve heard your story, I’m certain.”

Summers finished her drink. “I think so too,” she said. “God, I need a cigarette. And I haven’t smoked for three years.”

“Do you have any idea where Ollyver is now? I heard in Santa Barbara that he had moved up the coast, somewhere around the Big Sur.”

“You’re right,” she stood and walked over to the case holding the Cage Rage championship belt. “This was kind of big news,” she said, nodding to the golden trophy. “It was my first national championship and I was walking on air for a few weeks afterwards. Then I got this through the post.”

Summers pulled the case away from the wall and retrieved a business card that was tucked in the back of the frame. She handed it over to Keane. “I always had in the back of my mind that I might pay the worm a visit some day, so I kept it.”

He read the back of the card first, a brief message written in blue ink. “Saw you on TV, well done! If you ever feel like reliving old times...”

Then he turned it over. Neal Ollyver, Prop. Shelter Cove Cottages, Gorda Springs, CA.

Nobody spoke much on the journey from Edinburgh to Glasgow. Isla and I sat in the middle row of the Porsche's seven seats, staring morosely out of opposite windows, with a sidekick behind us dozing in the back, another sidekick driving and Marvin in the front passenger seat pissing about on Facebook on his iPhone. The only distraction was the football phone-in on Real Radio.

We took the M8, the M73 and then the M74 into the southern suburbs of Glasgow, before pulling into a scrap metal yard surrounded by abandoned factories and condemned tenements. There were tower blocks close by, and beyond them a low line of hills topped with dozens of wind turbines.

Isla and I climbed out of the Porsche and were bundled into a Portakabin with wire mesh over the windows. It had a desk and a few plastic chairs, three metal filing cabinets, a 2004 Loaded magazine calendar on the wall and a load of cardboard boxes, marked Hitachi, stacked up at the far end.

"Wait here," Marvin instructed, locking the door behind him. But before I could get too worked up about my imminent torture and death, Isla was demanding to know, in her irritating, self-centred way, just what the hell I had got her into.

I explained quickly about Faz's fake date, the discovery that Janine was going out with Scrap Iron Ryan McCann and her subsequent break for freedom.

"So this gangster thinks you stole his girlfriend from him?" Isla asked, a touch incredulously. Her nose was already a lot less swollen, and her voice had lost most of its "Decond class dicked to Doddingham," twang.

"Yeah, well maybe I did," I replied huffily.

"You just told me that she left him to start a new life."

"I know, but we had a ...a bit of a thing going as well."

"Ha! You and a Page 3 girl? Get real, Paul."

"Hey, I know you think I've been moping around after you all this time, but you know what, I've been living the life. Fact is I've never had it so good."

"That is total bollocks."

"How do you know? Been keeping tabs on me, have you?" I asked.

"Only because my mum thought you might kill yourself," Janine snapped.

Ouch, that was below the belt. “Over you? That’ll be fucking right.” I said. “I’ve been doing loads of shagging, don’t worry about me.”

“Classy.”

“I’m not gonna lie to you just to save your precious pride.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot. You’re some kind of swordsman now because some idiot journalists say you look like Zack Keane.”

“I do!” I said, sounding a bit – no, make that a lot – too proud of the fact. Isla shook her head sadly. “It’s better than looking like Chelsy Davy,” I muttered.

“Oh, do fuck off Paul,” she said.

We spent the next ten minutes in silence and I looked out at the scrap yard. Some of the wrecked cars, which were piled in stacks ten or twelve vehicles high, had head-shaped shatter marks in their windscreens. I eventually figured out they must have been recovered from motorway pile-ups and shivered, the thought of all that death and destruction doing little to improve my spirits.

I was so engrossed that I didn’t even notice the gangsters returning until the door swung open and a weaselly-looking guy stepped into the Portakabin. It was Scrap Iron Ryan McCann, I realised after a second or two; he was much smaller than I had imagined from his photos but in the flesh he carried with him a tangible air of murderous violence.

He was wearing a smart grey suit and a pressed white shirt open at the collar. A gold and diamond-encrusted Rolex winked at me from beneath his cuffs as he made a bee line for Isla, dropping down onto one knee on the dusty wooden floor before her.

“I’m really sorry you got dragged into this, darlin’,” he said. “My lads had no business bringing you here, they just got carried away. Come on, let me buy ye a coffee to make up. There’s a Caffè Nero just down the road.”

He bounced to his feet and led Isla to the door. I craned my neck and saw Marvin, the two goons and – somewhat incongruously – a friendly-looking middle-aged glamourpuss waiting outside.

McCann threw a set of car keys to the smiling blonde. “Brenda, take this young lady for a coffee. And a nice piece of carrot cake or somethin’ eh.”

Isla climbed down the steps and then turned to face him. “No,” she said. “I’m not leaving Paul,” - my heart soared, but only briefly – “I want to be here if you’re going to kneecap him because he slept with your girlfriend. Several times.”

Isla looked over McCann’s shoulder and made a ‘so there’ face at me. The gangster burst out laughing.

“I like your style, love,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“Isla Sinclair,” I said from the doorway.

“Isla,” said McCann, without missing a beat. “Naebody’s getting kneecapped here today. I just want a quick chat with Mr Crombie here to clear the air, then I guarantee I’ll get you both back to Edinburgh in one piece. Alright?”

He grinned and called over to Marvin. “Won’t be more than a First Crow, eh Marv?”

“I suppose so,” said Isla. “Although I honestly don’t mind if you slap him around a bit.”

“Well, I’ll see what we can do,” said McCann. “Brenda, take the Ferrari love, just don’t fucking scrape the alloys this time, and I’ll see you back here by half past yeah?”

He waved cheerily as Brenda and Isla walked away, and a few seconds later an engine roared and a sleek red supercar jerked across the yard. I turned to the window and watched the Ferrari drive out of sight, suddenly feeling very alone.

McCann shut the Portakabin door.

He shook his head and chuckled ruefully as he turned to face me for the first time. His green eyes were as cold as the lifeless car wrecks outside.

“I can see what you saw in her,” he said. “But one of these days, pal, your thing for dangerous burds is going to get you killed.”

“She was lying,” I said. “I never slept with Janine, it was just a stitch-up job for the Sunday Sport.”

“I don’t give a fuck if you took her up the arse, pal,” he said. “And frankly, I’d be amazed if you didn’t. Janine’s a fuckin’ hoor, always has been, always will be.”

McCann pulled over a chair and sat down, straddling it backwards so his face was inches from mine. I gulped, audibly.

“Is that what you think this is aw about?” he hissed. “Me being pissed off cos ma burd’s done a runner? Ah don’t give a shite what Janine does or who she does it wi’, alright?”

I nodded.

“In fact, I’d still be partyin’ at being shot of the hoor if she hadn’t taken thirty grand of ma money wi her. You startin’ to get the picture, arsehole?”

I nodded.

“Good. So, where did she go after she left you in Edinburgh?”

“Er, Newcastle I think. Yeah, she got a taxi to Newcastle,” I said, reasoning that Janine would have already moved on from Geordieland.

“A taxi to fuckin’ Newcastle? She always was generous wi ma cash,” said McCann. “Where was she goin’ after that?”

“I don’t know, she wouldn’t say.”

“Tell me where she went!” screeched McCann, slapping me backhanded across the cheek.

“I don’t know!”

He slapped me again, harder this time, knocking me off my chair and on to the floor.

“Right, you English prick,” he stood up and marched over to a filing cabinet, pulled open a drawer and rooted around inside, before lifting out a large pair of gleaming steel pliers. “These’ll fuckin’ dae,” he said.

“Honestly,” I moaned. “I don’t know where she is.”

“Well, we’ll soon see about that, won’t we?” McCann stalked over and grabbed my right hand, just as I remembered about the DVDs.

“Wait!” I shrieked. “I forgot. Janine gave me a DVD for you. She said it would explain everything, you know, like where she was going.”

McCann dropped my hand and straightened up. “You’d better not be bullshitting me,” he said. “So where is it?”

Almost having my fingers crushed had sparked some kind of survival instinct, and I felt a burst of adrenaline-fuelled bravado kick in. If I was going to get out of this in one piece, I was going to have to show some balls.

“In a safe place,” I said. “And if anything happens to me, it gets sent to the police.”

McCann glared at me but made no further move to continue the beating. “You’re lying,” he said. “You’d never think of a set-up like that.”

“Janine told me to do it,” I said. “She talks about all sorts of other things on it, as well. You know, incriminating stuff.”

“Arrgghhh!” yelled McCann and swung his foot at my head, narrowly missing and kicking a hole in the plywood wall. “Typical fuckin’ Janine,” he said.

I brushed woodchips off my shoulder. “I’ll get you the DVD, but then you’ve got to leave me alone, okay? And Isla too. I made copies and if anything happens, they’ll be going to all the papers as well.”

“That sneaky bitch,” said McCann, smiling now. I could almost see his brain clicking into gear, working through the options. “I want that DVD tomorrow, I’ll meet you at Harthill services.”

“I don’t have a car,” I said. “And I want to meet in Edinburgh, somewhere busy.”

McCann glared at me, his chest heaving, then reached down and pulled me up by my T-shirt, pushing me up against the Portakabin wall. He thrust the pliers into my right nostril and clamped them together, gripping dozens of nose hairs and making tears spring to my eyes.

“Under the clock at Waverley Station then, at high noon,” he said. “You might think you’re a smart cunt, but if I don’t get that thirty grand back, I’m holding you responsible, fuckin’ DVD or no.”

At that moment, I heard a familiar growling roar outside the window and out of the corner of my eye I saw a flash of red as the Ferrari returned.

“Let’s see ye report this to the police, ya fuckin’ bam,” said McCann and yanked the pliers, pulling out the nose hairs by their roots and causing me to emit a banshee wail.

He marched out of the Portakabin and after a second or two I followed, holding my nose. The Ferrari was parked in the middle of the yard and Isla was staring at us, having no doubt just heard my howl of agony.

“Don’t worry love,” McCann was saying. “He’s fine, I just pulled out a few of his nose hairs and he screamed like a girl. What a mess, looked like a badger’s arsehole up there.”

“Pardon?” said Isla.

“Male grooming, it’s all the rage in Glasgow,” he said. “Come on Brenda, hop out. I feel like a spin so I’ll take the lovely Ms Sinclair home.”

He leaned down and leered in her window. “If that’s okay with you, of course?”

Isla looked at me and I gave a slight shake of my head.

“Can I drive?” she asked, giving McCann a devilish grin.

“Be my guest,” he laughed, opening the door and helping Isla out of the bucket leather seat. “I like this one, Marvin,” he said, as she walked around to the driver’s side and he climbed into the passenger seat. “I’ll be back later on. And show this asshole how to get to the bus stop.”

The doors slammed shut and Isla gunned the engine, stalled once and then screeched around and out of the yard, chewing gravel and throwing up a cloud of dust.

I turned around to find Marvin, the two sidekicks and Brenda all staring at me, as a clotted, tangled silence settled quickly among the stacks of mangled cars.

“Boo!” said Brenda, and I ran out of the scrapyard without looking back.

California 9

The Pacific Ocean sparkled through the cypress trees that fringed the cliff edges as Keane and Miriam pulled in at the Amerigo gas station in Gorda. A man in a cowboy hat ambled over to the pump.

“Premium or reg’lar?” he asked.

“Regular,” said Keane, climbing out of the car to stretch his legs. He had hired a car for the drive up to Big Sur, thinking that the Corvette would only draw attention in such a small place. The plan was to spend the weekend at Shelter Cove Cottages and do some discreet research into Neal Ollyver.

“Fill ‘er up?” asked the pump attendant. “Only, a lot of folk just take a top up to get them to the next gas station.”

“Er, yeah. Just fill ‘er up.”

“We got the most expensive gas in America, you see,” said the man, as he inserted the nozzle in the tank. “You maybe seen us on ABC?”

Miriam was out of the car now and walking across Highway One to the railings above the cliffs, the wide expanse of ocean spreading out before her. Keane was going to follow but he sensed the garage man wanted to talk and besides, Miriam was being a bit moody and he had just about had enough of her on the journey up.

“No, I didn’t see it,” said Keane, smiling. “Is it so expensive because of the view?” he asked.

The man frowned and Keane realised he stolen his line.

“Hey, what I always say, you gotta buy it anyway, right?” he went on, undeterred. “I get folks saying, ‘Where’s your mask?’ or ‘Do I get a free gift with this gas?’ I say you get the local paper with a tank of premium, but it’s free anyway!”

Keane chuckled along with the man. “No, really,” he said, after what seemed like a polite interval. “Why is it so expensive?”

“No electricity,” he replied. “A dollar from every gallon goes to run the town generator. Plus, we’re in the ass-end of nowhere. You folks just passin’ through?”

“No, we’re staying up at the Shelter Cove Cottages,” replied Keane. How could he ask the guy about Ollyver without arousing suspicion? A little place like this, a stranger asking questions would be certain to get back to the campsite owner.

The man clicked off the pump and hung it back in the holster. Keane followed him inside to pay, remarking that the most expensive gas in America was still a good bit cheaper than back home in the UK.

“Funny, that’s what all you Brits say,” replied the man, waving him off.

Five minutes later they arrived at the cottages, which were wooden huts set back off the road in a stand of tall cypress trees, each one with its own garden and barbecue area. There was a gravel parking lot and a small reception hut, which featured maps of the local walking trails and bear and fire hazard warning signs.

Keane and Miriam went into reception, which was deserted. There was a waiting area with two cushioned benches and a pot of lukewarm coffee, a rest room and a small office area behind the counter. After ringing the bell and getting no response, Keane noticed a thick, leather-bound customer ledger among the clutter on the office table. He was about to sneak around the desk to look at it when the door opened behind him.

“Hi, can I help you? I’m the proprietor.” The accent was pure nasal East Coast; New York or New Jersey or somewhere like that, which to Keane’s ears all sounded alike, although a native New Yorker would have told him in a second that Neal Ollyver was a native of Albany.

“Yeah, we’ve booked a cottage for the weekend,” said Keane. “Name of Jones.” He smiled at Miriam, who grinned back, enjoying the fact that they were using a false name.

“Jones,” said Ollyver. “Don’t tell me. That’ll be Mr and Mrs Indiana Jones, right?”

He laughed and shook his head as he stepped past Keane into the office area.

“Hey, Indy,” he went on. “I can call you Indy, right? My name’s Neal.”

Keane shook his head, grinning despite himself. “I’m Zack,” he said. “This is Miriam.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Ollyver, nodding at Keane and then allowing his gaze to settle on Miriam for a second longer than it should. He was younger than Keane had expected, still only in his mid to late 40s perhaps, with wavy ginger hair and a tanned, freckled complexion, and even though he wasn’t wearing glasses, Keane was put in mind of an outdoorsy Woody Allen.

“Here you go, Mr Jones,” he said, reaching under the counter and coming up a key with a heavy wooden fob. He accepted Keane’s cash deposit and quickly ran through the rules and facilities of the site before pointing them in the direction of their cottage.

“And there’s usually a band on in the bar up behind the gas station on a Friday night,” he said, looking again at Miriam. “It’d be a pleasure to have a real lady up there for once.”

“We will maybe see you there then,” she replied.

“You’re French!” said Ollyver beaming with delight.

He turned to Keane. “Stunning, AND European,” he said. “Indy, you lucky dog.”

Keane and Miriam said goodbye and set off towards their cottage.

“He’s not how I expected at all,” said Keane, once they were out of earshot. “Maybe it’s the wrong guy.”

“Urgh,” said Miriam. “He gave me the creeps.”

“Come on, he was just being friendly,” said Keane. “You’re just in a bad mood, that’s all.”

“I’m tired, okay? That stupid road made me feel sick.”

They reached the cottage and Keane let them in. It was a nice enough place, although not exactly Hollywood celebrity standards – he had once ‘won’ a raffle prize of a complimentary stay at a six-star wooden hunting lodge in Kenya, one of the secret sweeteners that ensured famous people turned up to charity events for which they could not be paid, and the entire cottage would have fitted into that place’s second bathroom.

Miriam flopped down on the couch and put her hand over her eyes, as Keane realised that they would not after all be indulging in a welcome-to-the-holiday shag.

“Can I get you a drink of water?” he asked. “Or how about a beer? I’ll go and get the cool box from the car.”

He went back out into the cool, late afternoon sunshine and walked to the parking lot, just in time to see Ollyver emerge from the reception hut and drive away in a mustard coloured pick-up truck. Keane watched him go and then wandered over to the office window, peering in to see the ledger still on the table. Somehow, although he knew that Anna’s name would hardly be in it – Ollyver didn’t even own this place in 1992 – the book seemed to be a bona fide clue. It was the kind of thing a good private eye would want to look at.

After all, now that he was here and had actually met the guy, the likelihood of proving that Ollyver had committed a murder almost 20 years ago seemed more remote than ever. He didn’t know what he had expected, to be honest; perhaps for him to just give off some kind of ‘murderly’ vibe. Or maybe he thought Ollyver would be wearing a black cloak and sporting a Dick Dastardly moustache, cackling and rubbing his hands together as he dispatched another victim.

Keane shook his head and resolved to simply try and enjoy the weekend, which should be easy enough if Miriam could stop being such a mardy French cow.

“Stop being such a mardy French cow!”

“Fuck you, I’ll do what I like!”

“Listen, if you don’t want to try the burgers, just say so. You don’t have to toss them in the bushes.”

“They are burnt to a crisp. I can’t eat this.”

“Ah, whatever.”

Keane turned back to the barbecue, blinking in the billowing clouds of smoke, and reached for his glass of red wine, taking a long slurp. Miriam, sitting at the picnic table behind him, took an even longer one.

After he had unloaded the car – without any help, mind you – they had started to enjoy themselves, taking a walk along the cliffs, chatting about life back in Nice and in Belfast, before returning to the cabin for something to eat. But no sooner had they begun drinking, Keane polishing off a couple of bottles of Anchor Steam before joining Miriam on the vino, than the tension that had been simmering away beneath the surface all day began to bubble up.

Keane flipped the two Cajun chicken breasts and the remaining burgers and sausages, before moving out of the smoke to drink more wine and chew his cheeseburger. It was great – smokey, charred and just a tiny bit pink in the middle. And she had just chucked hers in the bushes! He thought back to the bear warning notice they had seen outside reception.

“You can’t just leave it there, you know,” he said, gesturing towards the offending piece of blackened meat. “There’s bears around here. We’ll end up with a fuckin’ grizzly outside the window.”

“So pick it up then,” said Miriam, toying with her salad of rocket, cherry tomatoes, cucumber and Paul Newman’s dressing and a buttered hamburger bun.

“Er, no way. I didn’t put it there.”

“Okay,” said Miriam. “I like bears anyway.”

She almost smiled, and Keane almost laughed. “Listen,” he said. “I’m sorry I burnt your burger. I forgot you like raw meat in France.”

“It’s not that...”

“What is it then? The cabin? I know its not exactly top end but...”

“It’s not the cabin, okay? It’s you!”

“Me? What have I done?”

“Nothing,” said Miriam, knocking her food to the ground to join her previous plateful. The bears were going to have a feast tonight, thought Keane. “That’s exactly

what you always do. You never give anything away, you never show your true emotions. All the time, it is like you are playing a game.”

“I don’t let things get to me, that’s all.”

“Nothing gets to you. For God’s sake, look where we are! The Big Sur! Your wife died here, not two years ago, and you are cooking burgers and drinking beer. There is no emotion. And when you talk about your life, it is like you are reading from a book. Like a robot.”

Keane shook his head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, stepping back into the smoke billowing from the charcoal. He picked up the tongs and removed the chicken and burgers, piling it onto a plate with the rest of the meat.

“Why are we really here, Zack?” asked Miriam, pouring herself another red wine. “Your stupid case, you don’t even know what you are really looking for.”

“We’re here because of Anna,” he said, without turning around. “This has nothing to do with Stacey. You’ve no right to start making assumptions about me, no fucking right at all.”

“Come out of the smoke,” said Miriam. “You are planning to show me your eyes full of tears but I can hear it in your voice. You’re not crying, there is no emotion.”

Keane threw his tongs at the barbecue, sending up a shower of sparks, and then marched over to the table, leaning into Miriam’s face. He pointed at his red-rimmed eyes, which were stinging from the smoke but otherwise clear and dry.

“There,” he said. “No fucking tears. Satisfied?”

Miriam looked back at him sadly. “I’m going for a walk,” she said.

Keane watched her disappear into the dusk of the campsite, which was illuminated only by the glow of a few lights and a faint blue sky on the western horizon that was all that left of the evening’s sunset.

He ate a Cajun chicken breast, which ironically seemed a little undercooked, and another sausage, the bland taste making him homesick for British bangers, and rapidly polished off the rest of the bottle of wine.

Then, when Miriam had not returned after 15 minutes, and with the silence from the rest of the campsite making him wonder just how many fellow guests had heard their screaming match, he had an idea.

He picked up a tea towel and retrieved the barbecue tongs from where they had fallen on the floor, before setting off towards the reception hut. It was darker here, away from the other cottages, and after quickly checking around he started to try and force the lock using the tongs.

However Keane was hardly a crack burglar before drinking all that beer and red wine. The booze might have given him some extra bravado about committing such a brazen raid in a state that rather frowns on night-time burglaries, but it was hardly helping his motor skills. Eventually, with the tongs bent and the door scratched and smeared with grease and ashes, he threw them to one side, stepped back and kicked the wood in frustration.

To his surprise, he felt the lock buckle and shift. He looked around once more and then kicked the door again, and again, before it sprang inwards with a splintering crack. Keane, certain that he had been heard, dashed away into the darkness at the back of the parking lot to see if anybody came to investigate.

After a while it was clear that nobody had heard him, or if they had they had put the noise down to a random hungry bear. He ran back over to reception and went inside, trying not to look at the shattered door frame. This, he suddenly realised, was probably quite a serious criminal offence and he must remember to wipe away any fingerprints.

He pulled down the sleeves of his jacket and moved quickly through to the office area, opening the ledger with his fingers inside the leather. It appeared to go right back to when Ollyver must have bought the place, back in 1999 – there were only six cabins and they didn't seem to be exactly booked solid outside the summer season. Keane flicked through, looking for a name – Velasco – or anything that would keep him going, offer some encouragement in his hunt. Miriam was right, he realised, with each passing day he felt that the case was the only thing between him and the void. He was terrified of arriving at a dead stop, as he surely must sooner or later.

Then he saw it. The name was near the front of the ledger, from almost two years before. Any police or reporters that had been up here at the time would almost certainly have missed it, but the name jumped out from the page at him like a wild dog snapping at the end of its chain.

On November 15, the day before Stacey drove her car off the cliffs a few miles north of here, a single woman had checked in to the Shelter Cove Cottages and paid in cash for number three. She gave her name as Amy Pound, which would mean little to most Yanks but would be familiar to millions of Brits, whether they watched EastEnders or not. It was the name of his wife's character in the soap.

Keane felt goose bumps rise on his skin as he realised that Stacey had been here, alone, with Neal Ollyver, just a few hours before she died.

Scotland 9

It was after ten o'clock in the evening by the time I got back to Edinburgh. Faz met me at the station and we went for a drink in the Halfway House, a little pub up one of the steep closes that cut into the Old Town above Waverley railway station. I explained my predicament and, over several refreshing jars of Stella Artois, we came up with a plan. Another one...

We met Fleming at his office in Gorgie early on Sunday morning. Despite the obscene hour and the loss of our lucrative deal with DBS, he seemed remarkably supportive and immediately grasped the bigger picture, i.e. that me not getting maimed was more important than making a few quid.

Faz had brought his portable DVD player so we slid in the first disc and settled down to watch Janine's brief message to McCann. She looked gorgeous as she laid it on the line for the poor sap, but gave not the remotest hint about where she was going. Her closing line was, 'Forget the thirty grand, it's gone. Consider it a bargain compared to what a divorce would have cost you, you cheapskate.'

"Aww, he loves her," said Faz, nodding at me after the DVD had finished. "Look at his face, Frank. Shall we go out of the room so you can have a wank, Crom-boner?"

"Fuck off."

Then, despite my misgivings, we watched the 'Marvin Blow Job' DVD. "Don't worry," said Fleming, with a mysterious smirk on his face as the disc began to play. "It's not going to be what you think."

And, oh boy, it wasn't what I thought at all. The setting was a grotty-looking living room and the camera had apparently been hidden in a potted plant, judging by the foliage that obscured part of the shot. The protagonists were Marvin 'the Martian' Boyle and a handsome young strip of a lad. The plot – well, the title gave away the gist of the story, but needless it was starting to get a good deal raunchier by the time Faz switched it off.

"Holy crap," I said, glancing at Faz, who looked as though he had just stuck his head into a fish shop's wheelie bin and inhaled deeply. Only Fleming seemed unshaken by the recording.

"Let's just say that I've seen Mr Boyle in action before," he said. "He's a well kent face in certain circles, although I believe his employer is most definitely not in the loop. I'm told that Scrap Iron Ryan's attitude towards a person's sexual preferences is rather more traditional."

Fleming hit eject and held up the DVD, which glinted in the light. "What we have here, boys," he said with a leer, "is pure extortion gold."

We made copies of both discs before I met McCann under the clock at Waverley, as arranged, and handed one of them over. "This better be good," he hissed. "I know all about you, remember."

I had a pint in the station bar, the Wester Loch, to settle my nerves and to make sure that none of McCann's goons were watching. Then I walked around to the car park, climbed into Faz's waiting Golf and we drove out of Edinburgh and over the Forth road bridge to Fife.

Okay, so as far as plans go it wasn't exactly Paul Newman and Robert Redford in *The Sting*, but at least it had got me out of the city alive. No doubt Scrap Iron had watched the DVD by now and was already on the warpath but it would be a while before he traced me to Faz's parents in Cowdenbeath.

In the meantime, I just had to figure out how to best play our trump card – somehow, I was sure, we could use Marvin the Martian's secret lust for meaty choppers to get me off the hook with his boss. It was, as I never tired of saying, our ace in the hole.

However, we hit a spell of nice summer weather and the days rolled on quite pleasantly so that, before I knew it, it was the following Friday afternoon and we were in

the alehouse again, enjoying a leisurely pub crawl around Dunfermline (the centre of Cowden being just too shit, even for fugitives from the Mob).

I was at the bar getting a round in when some bloke recognised me.

“You’re that Zack Keane bloke, ken?” he said.

“No mate, not me,” I replied, feigning a bewildered ignorance.

The bloke looked at me for a few seconds. “Look mate, I’m no’ getting wide or anything,” he went on. “You must get pretty pissed off with people like me, eh?”

“Not really,” I said. “Honestly, I don’t know what you’re on about.”

“Fair enough,” he replied. He seemed like a friendly sort, I had to admit.

“It’s a shame though, likes,” he said. “Because if it was you I was going tae offer ye a job paying two hundred quid cash in hand.”

I stared at the array of whiskies and spirits behind the bar. My overdraft was nearly at its £1,000 limit, despite weeks – almost a month, in fact – of humiliating and dangerous impersonation work.

“Doing what, exactly?” I asked.

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea, man,” Faz slurred, six pints later.

But by then the taxi was already driving away into the night, leaving us standing outside the Oakley Miner’s Welfare Club. I could hear a raucous disco going on inside, with loud dance music and coloured lights flashing in the windows.

“This was your idea, don’t forget,” I replied.

“Yeah, to do galas and shit,” he said. “Not fucking hen parties. And not in fucking Oakley.”

We both looked around warily at the mean-looking houses and eerily deserted streets of the mining village, which was tucked away in the hills above Dunfermline. The setting reminded me of a scene from Lord of the Rings and judging by what we had seen of the locals so far, the comparison was pretty accurate.

“This is the Wild West, man,” Faz whispered. “They’re mental up here.”

“But these are all birds,” I said.

“That’s who I’m talking about,” said Faz.

“Come on, don’t be soft. And that guy Billy’s here, remember. How much worse can it be than the stuff I’ve already done?”

Billy was the bloke from the pub earlier on. He was a DJ who was running the hen party, and after I had admitted that I was the Zack Keane lookalike from the ‘papers, he had ponied up £100 in cash (a decent chunk of which had already gone on beer, kebabs and taxi fares) and said we would get the rest at the gig.

I pushed open the doors and we went inside. The entrance hall was lined with football team photos and sporting trophies, there was a glass-fronted reception booth and some padded, imitation-leather seating, upon which a young woman was slumped, apparently unconscious. Her hair was over her face, she had puked up a yellowy puddle of sick onto the floor beside her and her denim skirt had ridden up around her waist. To make matters worse, she was not wearing any knickers and, lying as she was with her legs akimbo, her fanny was on display to the world.

“Fuck me,” said Faz, “I didn’t know there was going to be a buffet.”

“Shuddup,” I said, giggling. “We should cover her up, man. What if someone comes in?”

“They’re goin’ to get a bloody big shock, that’s what,” he replied. “The meat raffle is usually on Tuesdays.”

I went into the reception booth and found a jacket – a classic pensioner’s tan windcheater – draped over the back of a chair. I carried it out and placed it over the girl’s midriff to protect her modesty, or what was left of it at any rate, and then we wandered into the main room to meet our fate.

The disco was in full swing, with about two dozen women gyrating sweatily in the strobe lights to Snap’s ‘Rhythm is a Dancer’. There were many more ladies, young and old, sitting at tables around the room and it was immediately clear from looking at them all that the central themes of the evening were drunkenness, debauchery and cocks.

Lots and lots of cocks.

Most of the women wore deelly boppers on their heads with plastic cocks on them; cock-shaped balloons floated from the back of every chair; drinks were sipped through cock-tipped straws; and there were at least five blow up sex dolls with their cocks out.

Several dancers were even waving realistic rubber cocks above their heads, like Amazons showing off their gore-smeared trophies after a raid on some unfortunate village.

“Marvin the Martian would love it in here,” I said, but Faz didn’t seem to hear me above the din.

The bar staff were rushing around like mad trying to deliver drinks and collect empty glasses, and we managed to get across the room to Billy’s DJ table in the corner without being spotted by the hordes.

“Thank fuck you’re here,” he bellowed. “I booked some firemen strippers as well, but they hav’nae turned up.”

I shrugged. “Bad luck mate, but like I said in the pub, I don’t really do stripping. I’m more a sort of novelty act.”

But Billy had already stopped listening. He cut the music and every woman in the place, from the minority of quite cute, attractive ones to the majority of scary, mad-haired biffers, turned to look at us.

“Ladies,” Billy called over the microphone, “Hands up if you like Zack Keane!”

A forest of hands shot up and I began to see more clearly just what was going to be expected of me. Billy had a pint of lager by his decks and I picked it up and took a long swig.

“Well, he cannae be here tonight unfortunately. Apparently he thinks we’re all tossers in Scotland!” said Billy, paraphrasing Keane’s unfortunate comments to the undercover tabloid reporter.

“Boooo!” chorused the women.

“But I’ve got ye the next best thing – the Zack Keane shag-alike frae the ‘papers! Clear a space, ladies.”

The women on the dance floor took a step backwards and, towards the back of the room, a football chant began: “Get your cock out, get your cock out, get your cock out for the girls!”

Billy whooped. “That’s it,” he hollered, keying up the opening bars of ‘You can leave your hat on’. “He might be able tae get off wi’ Page 3 girls but let’s see if he’s got what it takes tae satisfy an Oakley lassie!”

Faz pushed me in the back and I staggered out into the centre of the dance floor to a rousing cheer.

“But not only that,” yelled Billy. “I’ve also got his pal, Stripping Abu frae The Simpsons!”

Faz suddenly stumbled up beside me, glaring back over his shoulder at Billy.

The women began stamping their feet and banging glasses on the table, chanting: “Off, off, off, off.”

Billy cut the music. “Come on guys,” he said. “We haven’t got all night.”

I looked at Faz and we both shrugged, and as Billy restarted The Full Monty theme tune we started to strip off.

Now, I quite enjoyed The Full Monty but it’s hardly one of my most-watched films, not like Goodfellas, Trainspotting or The Goonies. But somehow, as the music played, both Faz and I somehow managed to remember one or two of the dance steps to the movie’s big finale.

Maybe it was the booze, or maybe we had just tapped into an exhibitionist streak, but I think we did a bloody good striptease. We were reasonably in synch, worked the audience well and slowly built up for a decent finish.

I don’t even remember any real hesitation at the crucial Full Monty stage. We had turned our backs on the crowd, me in my tatty blue cotton boxer shorts and Faz in a rather more trendy pair of black Calvin Kleins.

Billy stopped the music again. “Ladies,” he said. “If you want tae see it all, you’ve got tae make a bit mair noise. Give it up for the dicks, girls!”

More roaring, more stamping feet – the club sounded like a riot in Prisoner Cell Block H – then Billy gave us a thumbs up and blasted up the last few bars of the song. We both dropped our keks and turned around to face the crowd, standing with our legs apart and our arms up in the air, a la Robert Carlyle and his mates, our meat and two veg swinging free as Mother Nature intended.

I was enjoying it so much I even think I had a bit of a semi on.

And that was when the problems started. Instantly, several members of the hen party rushed forward en masse and before I know what was going on I was being swamped by drunken women.

A hard-faced blonde started snogging me and I felt her callused fingers wrap around my old chap, which was still semi-hard despite the fairly terrifying situation its owner found himself in.

“You horny little bastard,” she said, pulling away from me and turning to her pals, her hand still clamped on my willy. “Look, he’s getting’ a stonner,” she called.

I turned to Faz, who was also being mobbed – which I thought reflected well on the open-mindedness of West Fife women.

“What the fuck do we do?” I yelled.

“Suck him off, Sheila,” somebody yelled at the back of the room, and a tubby brunette in a silver dress ducked down on her knees in front of Faz and disappeared out of sight.

Faz looked at me and shrugged. “Let’s get some drinks in,” he replied.

Then the bride-to-be was pushed into the middle of my group of well-wishers. She was wearing L plates, a white veil and a sad expression on her little drunk face. Under less trying circumstances, I thought she would have seemed quite pretty.

“Which one do you fancy?” somebody asked her.

“Och,” she said. “I don’t really know if want to...”

“You have to at least gie the stripper a wank,” said one of her friends. “It’s your hen night.”

“How about this ‘un?” said the Hard-Faced Blonde, as she let go of my cock and viciously grabbed my balls. She fixed me with a glassy-eyed stare and added, “But make sure you save plenty for me.”

“Okay then,” said the bride-to-be, stepping forward. “I’ll have a go with him.”

“Hey love,” I said. “You don’t have to do this you know. We should probably be going anyway.”

“You’re going naewhere ‘til we’ve all had a go,” one of her friends shouted, with a horrifying cackle. “In’t that right, Billy?”

“What?” I asked, turning to find Billy gone from behind his decks.

The bride stepped closer and made an embarrassed face. “They paid Billy two grand,” she said. “It’s my treat.”

“Two grand for a stripper?” I asked incredulously.

“No, twa grand for twa fuckin’ shagging machines, ken,” replied the Hard-Faced Blonde.

Suddenly there was a commotion away to my left and I saw the brunette who had apparently been wetting Faz’s whistle sprawl backwards on the floor. Another woman jumped on top of her, pulling hair and scratching.

“I said it wis my fuckin’ go, right,” she hissed.

As the melee spread across the dance floor I turned and ran, grabbing Faz and pulling him away towards the door. We had enough of a head start to get out into the corridor before the banshees noticed we had gone and gave chase.

“In here,” I said, ducking into the reception booth and slamming the door shut behind us. It locked on the snib and almost immediately began rattling on its hinges, as several of the panting harridans appeared before us at the booth window.

“Come out, you pair a’ queers,” yelled the Hard-Faced Blonde. “We paid good money for youse.”

“No’ likely,” said Faz. “You’re fuckin’ mental.”

“Ha,” shouted somebody else. “Look at your wee peckers now!”

Faz and I both glanced down. I felt no more than a twinge of embarrassment at my dwindling member – after all, attempted gang rape tends to have that effect on a bloke. And to be honest, as the women began grasping at us through the gap between the window and the reception desk, I was glad that little Crombie was shrinking well out of harm’s way.

“It’s like Dawn of the Dead,” said Faz, backing away from a groping female hand.

I realised that I was still clutching my boxer shorts and pulled them on, to a huge chorus of boos from the corridor outside.

“Faggot!” somebody yelled. It was the bride-to-be, who had gone from demure to demented in the space of 30 seconds. She hammered on the glass before pushing her friends out of the way, taking a run up and throwing herself into the window.

“Fuckin’ hell love, calm down,” said Faz, who was still naked.

“Shut it, you Paki bastard,” screamed the bride-to-be, showering spittle on the glass.

“Yeah?” said Faz, grabbing his cock. “Well, you better step back or I’m gonna spunk right through that gap and all over your dress. Explain that to your fucking fiancé.”

The bride to be froze and then stepped back, as Faz raked his knob back and forth like a lone soldier backing down a baying mob.

“That goes for all you bitches,” he said. “How’d you like to go home covered in Pakistan’s finest man jam?”

I raised my eyes to the ceiling, reflecting on how utterly, utterly ludicrous my life had become. It was then that I saw the fire alarm. I picked up a heavy stapler and smashed the glass in the little red case and almost immediately the high-pitched wailing of the alarm seemed to have a strange, soothing effect on the women. They immediately began to lose interest in us, except for the Hard-Faced Blonde, who pushed her face up to the gap.

“You can spunk on me if you like, darlin’” she said, with a horrific wink. “You’re no’ like your puffy pal, here.”

“Urggh,” said Faz, stepping away

I bashed the stapler on the desk in front of her. “Get back, you ropey old bag or I’ll staple your fuckin’ nose,” I warned.

Then, mercifully, flashing blue lights appeared in the car park outside and the hen party disappeared en masse to ogle the firemen.

“Come on,” said Faz. We unlocked the office and hurried into the bar, where several shell-shocked bar staff and a dozen or more sensible, mortified partygoers helped us find our clothes and ushered us out of the fire exit into the cold darkness.

“That’s it,” I said, as I pulled on my jeans. “As of now, I’m officially retired from show business.”

“Are you kidding?” said Faz. “I’m getting a job as a stripper. That was ace!”

But, as it turned out, it wasn’t quite the end of the strangeness that night. Fully dressed, we walked around to the front of the club to find the car park deserted apart from a single fire engine. When the music started up again from inside the club I realised that Blue Watch was about to get a shift they would always remember.

I looked at Faz. He was grinning, obviously thinking along the same lines, when all of a sudden a volley of three loud bangs shattered the night. The windscreen of the fire engine cobwebbed and the glass fell to the ground with a sound like breaking ice.

“Fuck me,” yelled Faz, throwing himself flat. I followed a split second later but not before I saw a silver car speed past us with all of its lights off, a dark figure at the wheel.

California 10

A band started to play as Keane approached the bar, a burst of grunge rock drowning out the crisp, regular sound of the breakers as they smashed into the cliffs below Gorda. He didn't recognise the song – it was Pearl Jam maybe, or Smashing Pumpkins – but it was hardly the country and western he had been expecting at such a backwoods sort of place.

His brain had been fizzing on the long walk into town, which had also served to sober him up. Stacey's car, a white VW Beetle, had plunged off the cliffs near the southern limit of Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, around 20 miles north of Gorda. There were no witnesses and the police believed the crash had probably happened in the early hours of the morning. Park rangers spotted the wreckage shortly after two in the afternoon and her body was recovered by helicopter.

The post mortem examination found alcohol in her blood (although it was impossible to say for certain whether or not she had been over the limit at the time of the accident) and traces of beer and pretzels in her stomach. The cops canvassed the whole area, presumably including Gorda, but nobody could remember Stacey at all. The last person to see her alive had been a motel owner way down in Morro Bay, a 40-something divorcee named Suzanne.

Stacey had stayed at her place in Morro Bay and over a few drinks in the motel bar she had confessed to Suzanne that she needed time away from her asshole husband to “get her head together”. Suzanne had advised her to keep on driving all the way to San Francisco, book herself into the Fairmont using hubby's credit card, and then hit the bars, get wasted and get laid.

“She seemed to think that was a pretty good idea,” Suzanne had told the newspapers a few days later, “and when I saw her at breakfast the next morning she was a whole lot more chipper. She was such a sweet kid. If you ask me that no good rock singer, who I never even heard of by the way, killed her as sure as if he chased her over that cliff himself.”

Keane recalled her words with stinging clarity, not least because most of the population of the UK had been inclined to agree with her, but now they took on an ominous new meaning. He hadn't chased her over the cliff but what if somebody else had? What if Neal Ollyver had tried it on Stacey after she had arrived at the campsite? Keane could easily imagine her breaking free of his clutches and jumping in her car, zooming north towards 'Frisco and the Fairmont, thinking that she should have taken Suzanne's advice from the start.

Perhaps she had been a little drunk and rushing with adrenaline, the encounter with the sleazy campsite owner leaving her shaken enough to take a dark and slippery cliff top road at high speed. Or maybe Ollyver had actually followed her and ran her off the road, angry at being rejected or possibly trying to stop her going to the police? Whatever had actually happened that night, Keane was now certain that Ollyver had been in some way involved in his wife's death. All he had to do was prove it.

He saw the mustard coloured pick-up parked around the side of the bar, along with a handful of other jalopies, and walked over to examine the front bumper and wings. The old heap was so battered and scratched it was impossible to tell if it had been used to crash into the back of Stacey's Audi, but there was a smudge of white paint on the left hand wheel arch. Keane took his mobile from his pocket (there was no signal up here but he had been carrying it around all day anyway, purely out of habit) and removed the battery cover. He picked up a stone and chipped away at the paint mark, bringing away a few flakes, each one several layers thick. He put them in the back of the phone behind the battery cover, reassembled the mobile, stuffed it in his pocket and went inside.

It looked like most other American bars – all beer and bourbon-branded mirrors, baseball memorabilia and varnished wooden walls – but this being the Big Sur, the crowd was more Thin White Duke than Dukes of Hazzard. There were even two guys in lumberjack shirts holding hands across a table by the door.

The band, which had now launched into another loud, grungey number (Sonic Youth?), was set up on a small stage in the corner and Miriam and Ollyver were sitting at the bar, watching them play. Keane put on his best smile and walked over to join them.

"Indy, you made it! Great!" said Ollyver, although his narrowed eyes suggested he was anything but pleased to see him. "Miriam here said you weren't feeling so hot."

“I said you had a disease of the brain,” said Miriam, although Keane could see a playful smirk dancing around the edge of her mouth.

“You’re right, I must be crazy to fall out with you,” said Keane, with a puppy dog expression. He turned to Ollyver, “No seriously,” he said, “I think I gave myself food poisoning from badly-cooked burgers.” He winked at Miriam, who snorted.

“Well, you’re here now,” said Ollyver. “Let me buy you a beer.”

Over the next hour or so, Keane managed to work his way back into Miriam’s affections so successfully that after a few more drinks she practically dragged him away from the bar and back to the cabin. Ollyver had soon realised that he was doomed to play gooseberry and begun chatting with the barman, who in turn found he had some glasses that urgently needed polishing.

As the band returned from another break they said good night before rushing back down the hill and to the campsite. In their indecent haste to get to bed and make up properly, Keane, in what he would later realise could be viewed as a damning indictment on his character, allowed himself to put the new evidence about the death and possible murder of his wife entirely to the back of his mind.

He woke late the next morning as Miriam returned from a stroll in the sunshine to report that there was a police cruiser at the campsite office. Apparently, somebody had broken into it in the night and trashed the place.

Keane feigned surprise. “We must have walked right past and never even noticed,” he said.

Miriam frowned at him. “We were back here by ten o’clock,” she said. “How do you know it happened before then?”

“I don’t,” said Keane with a shrug. “What I mean is, it must have been after that or we would have noticed it. Although, to be fair, we did have other stuff on our minds.”

He lunged at Miriam who shrieked with laughter and slapped him away. Phew, that had been a close one. He decided not to mention the disturbing new evidence he had stumbled upon last night – from now on he would keep Miriam out of the case altogether.

After breakfast they went for a long walk along the forest trails behind Gorda, before Miriam went for a nap and Keane said he was going for a drive. He took Highway One north to place where Stacey had crashed off the road; he had never been here before but

he recognised the spot immediately from newspaper photos and TV footage. There was nowhere to stop, so he drove slowly by and continued on to the next viewpoint. He sat for a long time, staring out to sea. As far as Keane knew, Stacey's Bug had never been recovered and it could still down there somewhere, probably smashed into a thousand rusty pieces by the ocean.

Then he returned to Gorda, to America's most expensive gas station, and bought a box of mint Tic Tacs. On his way back to Shelter Cove Cottages he emptied the mints out of the car window and then, in the car park, flipped the back off his phone and tipped the flakes of white and mustard paint into the empty box, which he then stashed in the boot in the spare wheel well, along with the bookings ledger he had taken the night before.

The police were long gone and the reception office door had been boarded shut. Keane rushed back to their cabin, suddenly worried that the cops could have been around to interview Miriam during his absence. A deckchair had been placed in the sunshine outside the front door, with a paperback novel resting open over one arm and a glass of wine on the ground beside it. The remainder of their food was sitting on a tray by the charred, ash-filled grill.

Keane smiled and went indoors. "Miriam," he called, but to no reply. The bed, where he had left her, hunched under the duvet, was neatly made and there were traces of condensation on the bathroom mirror. Keane reached out to touch a towel hanging over the door; it was damp.

He returned outside, frowning a little now. Why settle down with a book and a drink then suddenly decide to go for a walk? Maybe she had gone to speak to somebody in one of the neighbouring cabins, he thought. A friendly neighbour who had popped over for a chat and then invited her over for a drink? Somehow, standing in the middle of the woods in the country that invented serial killers, the thought did little to reassure him.

He walked further into the site but there was nobody around, and most of the other cabins seemed empty or at the very least locked up for the day. As he went on however he began to pick up the unmistakable smell of a barbecue and his spirits lifted a little. He came across a family outside the final cabin; mom and a brood of kids drinking sodas, while pop flipped steaks in the smoke. Keane watched them briefly, but it was clear that Miriam was not there.

He rushed back to the car, reversed it rapidly up to the office and swung around in the gravel parking lot. He drove into Gorda and went straight to the bar, where the barman from the previous night was wiping down the tables with polish and a duster. The guy remembered him well enough, and if he was taken aback by the rising panic that had crept into Keane's voice then he did not show it.

"Sure," he said, standing amid a fine mist of furniture polish, floating in the afternoon sunlight that was streaming through the window. "I seen the French chick 'bout an hour ago, with Neil Ollyver in his truck. They were heading out of town down Highway One, in a real hurry too. Hey, is everything alright buddy?"

Scotland 10

"It must have been McCann," I said. "He's found us."

It was the morning after the hen party and we were sitting in the conservatory at Faz's mum and dad's place, having a late breakfast of tea and samosas.

"You don't know that," said Faz, spraying pastry crumbs onto the glass-topped coffee table.

"We can't stay here," I insisted. "At least, I can't stay. I don't want your family getting dragged into this."

"You're exaggerating," Faz replied. "Everything's cool, man."

"Somebody shot at us!" I said, my voice rising. "We could have been bloody well killed. How is that cool?"

Faz motioned for me to keep it down, and I looked over my shoulder to see his mother regarding us suspiciously from the kitchen.

"You don't know they were shooting at us," he went on. "It was probably just kids taking pot shots at the fire engine with an air rifle. It's a regular thing in Oakley. No respect for the emergency services, some of 'em."

"Rubbish," I said, in an urgent whisper. "This was one guy in a car, shooting at us with a proper gun. We have to go to the cops."

“And say what? They can hardly give you round-the-clock protection because somebody pulled out a few of your nose hairs.”

“It was abduction!”

“He gave Isla a lift home, man. Hardly your typical kidnapper, was it? No, what we do is fight fire with fire. We make Marvin give us £50,000 or we spill the beans that he’s a homo, then give McCann his thirty Gs and keep the rest.”

“Marvin won’t let us get away with it,” I sighed. “We’d be dead men walking.”

“So, we don’t stick around to find out. We take the money and move down to London. I’ve had it with Scotland anyway, I feel like a fresh start.”

I reached forward and picked up a samosa, biting through the greasy pastry into the light filling of lamb, potatoes and peas.

“These are good,” I said. “Better than a fry up.”

Faz just nodded, staring out at the garden with an unusually grim expression on his face.

“Okay,” I said, warming to Faz’s idea – with my own added twist of tracking down Janine and telling her that I had put us both in the clear with Scrap Iron Ryan. “Let’s do it. We can get in touch with Marvin through Facebook. He was on it in the car the other day.”

“Okay,” said Faz.

We went upstairs and fired up Faz’s laptop. I set up a fake Facebook account in the name of ZackKeane25 (meaning there were already at least 24 other ZackKeanes registered) and began searching for Marvin Boyles in Glasgow, Marvin the Martians or any other possible combination of names that we could think of.

“I bet he uses Facebook for his secret gay shit,” said Faz. “Do a search for Glasgow gay networks and stuff like that.”

After half an hour we were still getting nowhere, although on the plus side I had dozens of new friend requests from across the west of Scotland.

“Maybe Fleming would know how to get in touch with him,” I said. “We should go over and see him anyway, warn him that McCann is getting serious.”

Fleming told us to come to his home in Juniper Green, a leafy village on the edge of the Edinburgh ring road.

“Don’t you boys ever call during working hours?” he complained, as he ushered us into his surprisingly trendy flat on the second floor of a modern apartment complex. There was a large patio window and a balcony overlooking a wooded valley with a river twinkling far below.

“Nice place,” I said, looking around. “Is that the Water of Leith?”

“It is indeed, Paul,” said Fleming. “But I’m sure you didn’t come up here for a geography lesson. What is it you want? I’m really very busy today.”

Faz and I exchanged a glance. Fleming seemed unusually irritable, and I wondered whether he had felt a bit abandoned while we had been hiding out in Cowdenbeath.

“We want to get in touch with Marvin,” said Faz. “Make him give us some money for his dirty DVD.”

“How much money?”

“Thirty grand,” said Faz, without batting an eyelid. “Enough to pay off Paul’s debt to McCann.”

“Hmm, so what’s in it for me?” asked Fleming. “I feel like I’ve taken more than enough risks over this already.”

His change in attitude was starting to rile me, but we still needed him on our side.

“Frank, if this is about us taking off to Fife and leaving you behind then we’re sorry, okay,” I said. “But you offered to help us, remember? And you called the DVD ‘extortion gold’.”

“Yes, but the entire point of extortion is to make some money for oneself,” he said. “Not to risk one’s life for thirty big ones that you immediately hand over to somebody else.”

“Jeez Frank, you get more like Tony Soprano every time I see you,” said Faz, sounding appalled. “Are you suggesting we skim more off on top of the thirty grand?”

“Don’t take me for an idiot, Faizal,” Fleming said. “How much were you really going for?”

“Thirty grand,” insisted Faz, holding Fleming’s stare for ten long seconds, before giving in with a sigh. “But I suppose we could make it fifty and split the difference three ways.”

“Now you’re talking,” cried Fleming. “And Paul, of course I missed you hugely while you were away in the Kingdom, but please don’t fret about me dear heart. I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself.”

The old buzzard had been putting us on the whole time and now he’d just cost us £3333.33 each. I shook my head and explained that we were trying to contact Marvin through Facebook, but thought he must be using some kind of alias.

“As it happens,” said Fleming. “I think I might be able to help. I was studying my copy of Ms Giacomo’s rather delightful DVD the other evening, and on several occasions Marvin’s dishy young friend refers to him as Lucian.”

“Lucian? What a faggy name,” said Faz.

“Indeed. Now, let’s run it through the Internet and see what shakes loose, shall we?”

Fleming had a PC at a workstation in the corner of the dining room. He sat down and grabbed the mouse, causing the screensaver to disappear to reveal an open email already on the screen. He hurriedly closed the page but not before I’d clocked the subject line: Zack Keane.

“I’m still getting lots of enquiries about you, Paul,” Fleming said, glancing over his shoulder. “But I think that we should make this piece of business our last, don’t you agree?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

Within a few minutes, we had found our man. ‘Lucian’ Boyle’s Facebook account was private but the basic screen told us that he was 33, lived in Glasgow, had 247 Facebook friends and that he liked ‘Ugly Betty’, ‘amyl nitrate’ and ‘clubbing’. His profile picture was Bugs Bunny in a space helmet, which rang a faint bell from my childhood – it was from the Warner Bros feature length cartoon where Marvin the Martian chases Bugs around a space station.

I logged in as ZackKeane25 and we composed our blackmail message. It was short, simple and to the point: “Janine gave us a secret home movie of you and a friend getting jiggy on the couch, Lucian. Does Ryan know what a naughty boy you are? We want 50k

or the vid goes on YouTube and your Martian tough guy days are over. Message back for more instructions.”

Hitting the send button felt like a life-changing moment. Or possibly life-ending.

Knowing that Marvin was a regular social networking fiend on his iPhone, we decided that to wait around as it probably wouldn't be long before he sent a reply. Fleming announced he was going to the newsagent and Faz wandered off to watch television, so I decided to check my emails.

There were hundreds, as I hadn't been online since my last day at the bike shop, but as always 99 per cent of them were spam or other commercial rubbish. There were two emails from Mike, the first asking where the hell I was and the second, which struck an altogether more conciliatory tone, asking if I was alright and did I want my old job back. I replied saying that I was fine and would be in touch soon to try and explain everything.

There was also a message from the manager of my Sunday league team, stating that as I had now missed three matches and six training sessions I owed them £48 in fines. He signed off with the memorable line, 'You think you're a ringer for Zack Keane – but I ALWAYS thought you looked like an arsehole. Haddington FC, Monday, 7pm, be there – or else'.

And then, amidst the gravel, a diamond. An email from JanineG@hotmail.co.uk, received on Thursday, July 23 – nine days ago! I clicked it open with trembling fingers.

Hi Paul, I've been thinking about you a lot since I went away and I feel bad for what I've got you into. I should have told you I took some of Ryan's money and I now I can't sleep thinking that I put you in danger for a few £££s. If Ryan is being a dick then just tell me and I'll come home and sort him out. Or, if you like – maybe this is just me going stir-crazy – why don't you come and stay with me for a while? Remember I told you about my favourite place? Well, I go to mass there every Sunday now. I'd love to see you and finish what we started on the roof ;)

J xx

“Fuck,” I said. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.”

I opened a new tab and logged into Facebook, desperately looking for a ‘retrieve message’ option. Why hadn’t I been checking my emails more often? Faz was always on his laptop, and yet I’d spent a week crashing at his house and never gone online once. What a fucking Luddite. I’d just sat there moping and watching daytime TV, and all the while salvation was sitting there in my inbox.

Think, think, think. What was her favourite place? I racked my brains, going back to our special night in Edinburgh (‘finish what we started on the roof’, holy Mary!). It was somewhere in that town her family was from in Italy. The cathedral, that was it! But what was the town called?

Another link clicked in my head and I googled Paolo Nutini, who came from Paisley but whose family were from... Barga!

“You beauty,” I whispered, googling onwards. Barga was in Tuscany, near Pisa, and Ryanair flew to Pisa from both Edinburgh and Glasgow. I could fly there on Monday for £49.99 plus £26.93 in taxes. This was getting better and better...

Then I clicked back onto my Facebook tab and saw there was a message waiting in my inbox. I opened it with a heavy heart.

“You won’t get a penny from me, maggot. Do what you like with your DVD but you’d better do it quick, cos I’m coming for you.”

“Faz,” I shouted, my dreams falling around me like ash. “You better come and see this reply.” I shut down the Ryanair page and signed out of my email account. It was too late to think about running away with Janine now – we had to clear up this mess first.

Fleming returned from the shops a short while later and soon he and Faz had a heated online discussion going with Marvin, exchanging threats and counter-threats with a psychotic murderer – and all of it on my behalf. I reflected on how lucky I was to have such good pals.

I left them to it and went for a walk down by the river instead. Maybe I should just go to Italy anyway, I thought, leave it all behind; if Faz and Fleming could collect the fifty grand then good luck to them. Just then my phone beeped – it was a text from Isla, saying she was worried about me and asking if I wanted to come around to her flat so we could ‘sort things out x’.

What is wrong with us blokes? Despite the fact that literally seconds earlier I'd been fantasising about running away to be with Janine, I couldn't help thinking – just for a millisecond – that maybe I could get a goodbye shag from Isla before I went. I pushed the notion aside, but stubbornly it refused to disappear. She had invited me round to her place on a Saturday night and signed off with a kiss? What else could she be planning? Surely it could only be a sympathy fuck for leaving me stranded at the scrapyard? Perhaps she'd even broken it off with McConnell after his craven behaviour at the Highland Show and decided that she wanted me back?

I cackled and rubbed my hands together with glee as I set off back to Fleming's place. This would be great, one last night in the sack with Isla then off to a new life in the sun.

I pressed the buzzer and jogged up the stairs. Faz and Fleming were still sitting by the computer and barely looked around when I asked if I could borrow Faz's car for a while.

"Why, where you goin?" Faz asked. "You should stay and see this, Marvin the Martian is doing his nut."

"I just want to go for a drive, clear my head," I said. "Don't forget that it's me whose neck is on the line here."

"Bollocks, if this goes wrong we're all dead," said Faz, throwing me his keys and turning back to the screen. "Put some diesel in as well, man," he said.

I drove down into town, through Slateford and past the Caley brewery before cutting up through Bruntsfield to the millionaire's ghetto of Merchiston. As usual, there was nowhere to park and I circled around the block looking for a space.

Edinburgh has a kind of social apartheid when it comes to convenience stores – there is a chain called Margiotta that exists solely in the posh parts of town, while the rest of us plebs make do with Scotmid, Spar or Tesco Extra. Obviously, Isla had a Margiotta at the foot of her street and it was there, parked right outside the shop, that I saw McCann's sexy red Ferrari.

I slowed down for a closer look. I wasn't sure on the specifics – was it an F40? – but I was almost certain that it was the same car I'd seen at the scrapyard. I remembered that McCann had a personalised plate, but I couldn't quite place what it was – something snappy, I was sure.

I drove on, thinking rapidly. I knew that McCann had given Isla a lift home and she had seemed quite taken with his gangster patter. In her post-St Andrews phase – just before she dumped me – she was clearly developing a taste for the finer things in life, and I knew she would be impressed by blokes with flash cars and fancy suits. I thought back to McCann’s diamond-studded Rolex and the penny dropped.

Oh hell, they were shagging. It all made sense, it was too perfect – I’d got off with Scrap Iron’s girlfriend and in return he’d got off with my ex-girlfriend; my devious, good-for-nothing ex-girlfriend, who was now trying to lure me into a trap with a homicidal toerag. Cheating on me with McConnell was bad enough, but this? This was going too far.

I drove around the block again and clocked the Ferrari’s plate. M4GIC. That was it, I was sure. Pure magic, man. But what the hell should I do. A thought popped into my head, inspired by long-buried memories of the Eddie Murphy movie, Beverly Hills Cop, and suddenly I could hear Axel Foley saying: “Look, man, I ain’t fallin’ for no banana in my tailpipe!”

In difficult times in my life, I often find inspiration from the movies of Eddie Murphy. Like the time I decided to become a tramp to hoodwink two crabbit millionaire brothers...no, not really, I’m just making that up. But somehow I knew instinctively that this was a good idea.

Now as it happens I didn’t have a banana but Faz’s Golf was full of old newspapers. I stopped beside the Ferrari and slipped out of the car, rolling up a Sunday Mirror as I did so. The street was deserted and none of the customers in the Margiotta store or the coffee shop next door were looking my way, so I surreptitiously leaned over and slipped the rolled-up newspaper right up inside the Ferrari’s exhaust.

I returned to the Golf and drove along to Isla’s flat, stopped in the middle of the road and leant on the horn. Net curtains twitched up and down the street, and I treated them to a beeped version of ‘Shave and a haircut, two bits’.

Isla’s window flew open and the jumped-up Judas Escariot herself appeared at the sash, glaring down at me. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she hissed. “Just ring the buzzer.”

“I can’t find a parking space,” I yelled. “Come down, I feel like going for a drive.”

“Paul, just park down at the Meadows and walk up. I’ll wait for you.”

“No, you come with me. Let’s go for a spin.”

More and more windows were being opened, and I tooted the horn again for good measure.

“Look, I’m not coming up okay,” I yelled. “This is your last chance.”

Isla slammed shut her window and I checked around the street for any sign of Scrap Iron or Marvin sneaking up for an ambush. Nothing. McCann was no doubt waiting upstairs, slurping a glass of Buckfast and tapping his bloodstained baseball bat against his palm.

The Golf was still idling as Isla came out of her close and slammed the door. She was alone but I was still keyed up, and as soon as she climbed into the car I dropped it into first and accelerated down the street.

“Paul, what the hell are you doing?” she said.

“You double-crossing bitch,” I said, as the car screeched around the corner.

“I beg your... don’t you dare speak to me like that,” Isla snapped. “Stop this car right now.”

“I know what you’re up to,” I said, turning down the street parallel to Isla’s and slowing down a little. “Planning a surprise for me, were you? A little welcoming committee in your flat?”

“But what... how did you know?” stammered Isla, the wind instantly knocked out of her sails. “I don’t understand.”

“There!” I said, triumphantly, skidding to a halt outside the Margiotta. “For a criminal mastermind, he’s not very bloody clever is he?”

“What do you mean?”

“You new fuck buddy, Scrap Iron Ryan McCann.”

“My new fuck buddy? What are you on?”

“The Ferrari,” I said. “He only left it parked right on your bloody street.”

I craned my neck to look for McCann, but the road was still deserted. I had thought he would have been charging down to get his car by now, flummoxed by my sudden curveball, only for his Ferrari to break down in a cloud of supercharged Italian steam.

“That’s not McCann’s car,” said Isla. “And he’s not my fuck buddy, you idiot. He’s totally loathsome.”

“He’s not?”

“No, I haven’t seen the creep since he tried to grope me last weekend, just minutes after I left you. I drove us into Giffnock, karate chopped him in the solar plexus, dumped his car at the Cross and got my Aunt Caroline to pick me up.”

“Oh fuck,” I said. It sounded exactly like something Isla would do.

“Why, what have you done?” she asked, staring at me suspiciously. “Have you done something to that Ferrari?”

“Whose is it anyway? It looks just like McCann’s.”

“Can’t you read?” she asked. “Look at the plate – magic, you idiot. It’s JK bloody Rowling’s. I often see her in there for coffee.”

As she spoke, a smartly-dressed, attractive blonde woman emerged from the coffee shop clutching a handful of notebooks and papers, walked over towards the Ferrari and beeped her car keys. I watched in horror as Britain’s richest woman – richer than the Queen, for Christ’s sake – climbed into her booby-trapped supercar, gunned the engine and pulled out into the roadway....

....before breaking down in a cloud of supercharged Italian steam.

JK Rowling fairly bounced out of the driver’s door, just as there was a loud, muffled explosion from the Ferrari’s back end, buckling the engine cover and sending out wisps of thick, black smoke. The exhaust pipe fell off and clattered to the street with a clank.

“Oh, fucking Hogwarts!” yelled Rowling, kicking the cherry red paintwork.

I burned rubber and didn’t stop until we were many miles away from the scene of the crime, down at the waterfront in Leith. Isla hadn’t stopped laughing the whole way, and I was beginning to see the funny side too.

“So you really didn’t have McCann waiting for me at the flat?” I asked.

“No, I really didn’t.”

“Christ, I’m losing my marbles,” I said. “Do you fancy a drink? I think I could do with one.”

“Yes, but not here,” said Isla. “Let’s go back to mine. As long as you park a long, long way away.”

I nodded and retraced our route through town, thinking after all that I was probably going to be on for an arriverdici ride after all. I parked on the Meadows and we walked up to Isla's street, where JK's Ferrari was still being hoisted onto a flatbed pick-up truck.

Isla opened the close door and I followed her up the immaculately clean stone steps, admiring her arse inside her tight jeans all the way, until we got to her front door.

"Come in," said Isla, with a cheeky smile and I stepped inside. Funny how things work out, isn't it?

CRACK!

Conor McConnell was waiting in the hall and he swung his fist into my face, crunching my nose. I felt cartilage and bone shatter and I fell backwards onto the landing, whacking my head on the flags.

"Conor!" yelled Isla. "You were supposed to wait in the lounge. Here, grab his feet and help me drag him inside."

"No hard feelings, eh?" said McConnell, popping a can of Kronenbourg 1664 and handing it over to me on the couch. "All's fair in love and war, eh?"

"Huh," I grunted, and removed the handkerchief from my nose so I could take a swig. Oh God, it tasted good. My nose was stinging like a thousand paper cuts dipped in salt and vinegar crisps and I had bled out all over my last clean shirt.

"You did agree to it," said Isla. "After all, you punched me first."

"Because he...oh, whadever," I said. "I've got more on my plate than you fucking idiots, you know."

"Joanne's Ferrari," said McConnell with a guffaw. "Isla just told me what you did. She's going to hit the roof."

"Nod thad," I said.

"The gangsters, Conor. Remember?"

"Oh yeah," he said, colour rising to his cheeks. I thought back to him papping himself in front of Marvin and smiled.

"Conor and I have been talking, Paul," said Isla. "And we think we might be able to help you. I hate to think of you in trouble just because some floozy stole McCann's money."

“He told you?” I asked. “That Janine stole his money?”

“Yes, just before he tried to grab my tits.”

“Isla!” said McConnell.

“Never mind that, just tell Paul what you told me.”

McConnell took a long swig of his beer.

“Ryan McCann’s QC works at my legal chambers,” he said. “I’ve seen him there from time to time.”

I shot a quizzical look at Isla, but she was watching McConnell closely.

“Now, this QC’s a real old drunk and a lech, but he’s a first rate lawyer and he works for some of the bigger villains in Glasgow. Oh sure, they get one of the star names to defend them in the really big cases, Donald Findlay or somebody like that, but for the day to day stuff, McCann and his boys go to this guy. He’s a nice chap but he’s bent as a nine bob note, you see.”

“So what’s this got to do with me?” I asked.

“Just wait, Paul,” said Isla.

“There’s a rumour going around, and it’s a rumour I happen to know is true, that McCann keeps an emergency stash of readies in a safe in this QC’s office. A large amount of money, apparently.”

“How much?”

“A large amount.”

“Imagine a big old iron safe,” said Isla, her eyes gleaming. “The size of a microwave oven. And it’s full of £100 notes in nice big bundles.”

“I still don’t see what this has to do with me.”

“Christ, do I have to spell it out?” asked McConnell.

“Yes, please do.”

“You owe McCann a lot of money which you don’t have, right?”

“Right.”

“Okay, so you’ve got to leave town anyway – so why not make it really worth your while and take the money from the safe as well?”

“And you’re saying you want to help me pull this off? Is that what you’re getting at?”

I looked at Isla, who looked at McConnell, who stood up and went to look out of the window. “Joanne’s back,” he said. “Oh bloody hell, there she goes. She’s going wild at some poor copper!”

“Conor!” snapped Isla.

“Right,” he turned around, drained his beer and walked out of the room, saying: “Get you another, Paul?”

“What the hell’s he on about, Isla?” I asked, after McConnell had gone. “How am I supposed to break into a safe in some QC’s office? And what’s it got to do with you anyway?”

Isla sighed. “Conor and I are planning to get married and go and live in South Africa,” she said.

“Married? For fuck’s sake Isla!”

“Oh, do chill out,” she said. “We haven’t got much money, and we...well, we’ve got a few debts. And Conor’s been trying to pay them off by taking some money here and there from work.”

“Aha, so he’s not Mr Fucking Squeaky Clean after all,” I cried, then felt a fresh stab of pain from my nose. “Ouch.”

“Oh, do grow up Paul,” said Isla, standing up and bringing me the box of tissues. I took one gratefully and pressed it to my nose. “It’s exciting. You know, if you’d shown a bit more of this new wild streak when we were going out then things might have been different,” she said.

McConnell stalked back into the room and thrust another Kronie at me.

“So, now you know,” he said. “We need the money just like you do. And yes, in answer to your question, I can help you – us – pull this off.”

“The QC, he’s called James Ramsdale, and he regards Conor as something of a protégé,” said Isla.

“Right, a protégé drunk and a lech,” I said.

“Don’t forget who put you on your backside with one punch, Crombie,” said McConnell. “I’ve spent a good deal of time with Ramsdale over the past year or so, and I think I know the combination to his safe. In fact, I’m sure I do – he uses the same damn digits for everything and he’s sent me to the cash machine with his card dozens of times.”

“So what’s the plan, I just walk in there and open this safe up then stroll out with a bagful of loot?”

“Pretty much, but there’s a secondary lock on the safe,” said McConnell. “And for that you need a key. Now, here’s the good bit. Ramsdale goes to a swingers club in the New Town, it’s a monthly thing on a weekday afternoon, very exclusive.

“How do you know...?” I began, then saw McConnell’s smirk and turned to Isla, who didn’t even have the decency to look embarrassed. “A swingers club!” I said. “I thought you were getting married.”

“Don’t be such a prude, Paul,” said Isla.

“It’s a great place to network,” said McConnell.

“Is that what you’re calling it now?” I asked.

“Oh, grow some balls,” snapped McConnell. “Swinging’s all the rage in London.”

“Conor, please,” said Isla. “You make it sound like a team-bonding exercise. Paul, it’s great – we get to shag loads of other gorgeous and fantastically wealthy young people, while old perverts like Ramsdale watch. That’s all. It’s not Sodom and Gomorrah.”

“No, I think I was there last night,” I muttered, popping the ring pull on the lager. “Okay, sounds great. Why didn’t you just say that in the first place, Conor?”

“Can we get on with this please?” he pleaded. “It just so happens that the club’s on again this Wednesday. So we can vouch for you and get you inside, then all you have to do is lift Johnson’s keys from his locker, hightail it out of there and raid the safe.”

“What about security at your office?”

“It’s in part of the High Court complex, there are lots of criminals hanging around there every day. You have to go through a metal detector and maybe a search on the way in but when you leave you can just walk straight out on the street.”

“What about CCTV?”

“I can draw you a route to avoid most of the cameras, but you’ll just have to wing it if you meet a security guard.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I can easily fuck off to New Zealand or somewhere, you two go to South Africa, but what about this old guy Ramsdale? McCann’ll kill him.”

“No, here’s the beauty of it,” said McConnell. “Ramsdale hates McCann, and he’s got much so dirt on him that he’s practically untouchable. I take it Isla told you about our plans, yeah?”

“Yeah, and your own little financial problems.”

“Well, Ramsdale knows all about that stuff and he hasn’t reported me. In fact, I think he’s been leading me on to do something like this for months, I’m sure of it. He even told Isla about the stash one day at the club.”

I looked at Isla, who blushed. “He was trying to cop off with me,” she said. “Which he didn’t manage, I hasten to add. He also said he’d love stick two fingers up at some of his clients before he retires. Paul, I honestly think we’d be doing him a favour by raiding the stash.”

I wasn’t so sure, but as I sat there and drank my lager everything suddenly began to click into place. Blackmailing Marvin the Martian and putting my life on the line for six measly thou was an utterly ridiculous thing to do – the guy was a fucking minion anyway, there was no way he was going to cobble together fifty grand. So, if I was going to have to go into hiding for the rest of my life anyway, why not go the whole hog and rip off his boss for his secret stash?

“I’ve got two questions,” I said. “First, how many £100 notes could you fit into a microwave oven?”

McConnell shrugged, then said: “I dunno, half a mill?”

“Good answer,” I said, pulling out my mobile to text Faz about the change of plan. “Second question, can I sleep on your couch, Isla? I’ve got a splitting headache.”

[California 11](#)

Dre Hernandez drew the back of his podgy hand across his brow, before wiping it on the seat of his low-slung jeans. It came away black, a mixture of perspiration and stinking mud smeared halfway up his arm. Goddam, he forgot he had just been sitting down around the back of the gardener’s hut for a last few hits on the joint he had sparked before coming over here.

He exhaled heavily. This job sucked. If it hadn't been for his Gran'moms there was no way he would still be here, toiling his ass off in the sun, but Dre felt like he owed Rosa. And for some reason, she obviously thought that making him work like a slave for some cracker-ass Irish faggot would keep him off the streets.

Huh! The only good thing about the job was the money. Zack Keane was rich as hell and he paid 100 bucks a week for Dre to come up here and look busy. He obviously didn't know shit about gardening either, because Dre had done nothing other than mow the lawn a couple times and pick up leaves and shit. Somebody had already laid the garden out real nice, so really there was nothing else to do.

Course, the first thing he did with his money was go round the way and spend it all on chronic, so his Gran'moms plan wasn't exactly working out.

Then there was this thing about Cousin Anna. Ever since his meeting with Dee Dee Sprakes at Krispy Kreme in Montebello, Dre had been puzzling over her allegations about Keane. At first, he had been ready to round up the troops and roll up here to beat the shit out of the Irish gayboy. But the more he thought about it, the more it didn't make sense. Why would this guy, some fuckin' big shot pop star, give a shit about this missing Mexican chick anyway? Cousin Anna had disappeared before Dre had even been born, and his Gran'moms hardly ever spoke about her. She had always been like this ghostly presence hanging over his family, this smart, good looking kid who had a chance to make it in the movies but who probably went and got herself killed instead. The story was like a warning, like there was a curse on the family or some shit.

Dre had taken Dee Dee's card and done some research online. Turns out that Pizzazz News and Pictures basically chased these lame-ass stars around Hollywood all the time, looking for bullshit to print in the supermarket tabloids. Now, Dre liked the movies and he loved the babes you saw in these magazines – especially the old, freaky ones, like Britney and Lindsay; they would ring your bell all night long – but otherwise he didn't really give a crap about celebrities.

Still, it was easy enough to figure out what Dee Dee Sprakes really wanted from Zack Keane, and that was a big story to bring her in a nice fat paycheck.

He had told her that too, when she called him up a few nights ago, asking him to go ahead and plant some coke in Keane's house. It was so fucking obvious. Setting the

stupid bastard up for a police raid that would be splashed all over the newspapers the next day, pictures and all. But Dee Dee certainly had a way with words, and she kept on and on about Cousin Anna, and how Keane was snooping around asking questions about her, until Dre was halfway believing her again.

It helped too that she had offered him a cut of the money she would make from the story – a grand in his hand, five hundred now and the rest as soon as the Keane drug bust made the papers.

And so, here he was, nicely high, standing in the hot sun in a lush garden in Beverly Hills, caked in dirt, with half a key of grade A Colombian stashed in the deep front pocket of his baggy jeans. The idea of stealing the dope for himself had crossed his mind, but Dee Dee had warned him about that when she dropped it off the other night. She could be a scary motherfucker when she wanted to be.

Dre had seen Keane earlier on, mooching about on the sun deck with his shirt off, all skinny and white in the sun, drinking a beer and talking on the phone, but he had disappeared inside while Dre was behind the shed killing the roach.

He walked up towards the house, clipping away at the edge of the lawn with these long-handled grass scissors, which he liked using as he didn't have to bend down or anything. He peered in the back windows, seeing his Gran'moms pushing the vacuum cleaner in the lounge. She worked like crazy keeping this house clean, and this Irish asshole didn't deserve someone like her. That was another good reason for taking him out. He went over to the poolhouse and looked inside, half expecting to see Keane splashing around in the water.

It was empty, however.

He put down the grass scissors and walked quickly inside, sticking to the plan he had been toying with all afternoon. There was a wooden bench with a storage space underneath where Keane kept some chlorine salt and hoses and other shit like that for the pool. Only he never went in it, at least not since Dre had been working here, which he knew because he often came in for a net to fish out leaves from the hot tub.

Dre lifted the bench and peered underneath – good, everything was still in its place. He fished out the package, which was wrapped in brown paper and fastened with electrical tape, and placed it behind one of the big plastic bags of salt. He lowered the

wooden seat and strolled out as nonchalantly as he could into the sunshine... and then he froze.

Keane was back outside, sitting on the deck with some white chick. He was looking right in Dre's direction too, although he was wearing shades and it was impossible to make out anything about his face. Dre just put his head down and picked up his scissors, starting to clip along the edge of the lawn away from the poolhouse. His back was now towards the deck and he had to fight the urge to look around over his shoulder. He did not want to appear guilty at all, had to make it seem like he just popped in there as a routine part of his work, to drop off a piece of hose or some shit.

Dre wondered if Keane had even seen him through the window, putting the package under the bench, but he thought it was probably too far to make out anything like that. Besides, the glass was tinted from the outside to keep out the glare. So he just carried on working, praying for it to be time for his Gran'moms to come out and fetch him for the ride home.

Keane watched Rosa's nephew furtively edging away from the pool. What had the little turd been up to in there, he wondered? Probably smoking another spliff. He had already had at least one today, lurking down there behind the shed, apparently unaware that the pungent reek of homegrown marijuana would carry across the garden in the hot, sheltered air. Under any other circumstances he would just tell Rosa that the boy had to go. It wasn't like he did any actual work anyway, aside from half-heartedly pushing around the petrol-engine mower – and that was the one gardening job Keane had always enjoyed doing himself.

But as things stood, employing a teenage stoner who could not be trusted as far as he could be thrown was way down on Keane's list of priorities. He turned his attention back to Florence, who was busy giving him the third degree over Miriam's whereabouts. Unfortunately, Keane did not have the first idea where she was – apart from the fact that she was probably in the clutches of the murdering, rapist bastard Neal Ollyver.

As soon as he had found out they were together his first instinct had been to go to the police. But what could he have said? Miriam could easily have gone off with Ollyver of her own free will, and indeed the undisturbed state of the cabin suggested she had done

just that. To supply the police with a motive for abduction would mean admitting to his own little breaking and entering job at the campsite and then laying out his theory about Ollyver and his role in the deaths of Rosa and Stacey, for which he had precious little evidence.

Ollyver had lied about Stacey booking into his campsite, but then again maybe the cops had simply missed him out when they were canvassing for witnesses. What did the stolen guest book actually prove? Very little, Keane surmised. Besides that he had a couple of flakes of paint, which may or may not have been from Stacey's car, and some hugely unreliable, massively circumstantial testimony from a drunk Valley private eye and a washed-up female pro-wrestler.

That was the entire basis for Keane's allegation of rape, kidnap and murder, and you didn't have to be Rumpole of the Bailey to realise that none of it would stand up for very long in court.

However, although he couldn't prove it, he knew he was right about Ollyver. And he suspected that Ollyver knew he knew it too. Somehow he had guessed who had taken his guest book. Could be that he had recognised Keane as Stacey's British pop star husband right from the start – after all, there were some people in the States who had heard of him, and Ollyver had spent a long time in the biz.

Keane suspected he had taken Miriam in order to offer some kind of trade-off rather than to harm her, but it was now almost two days since she had disappeared and Ollyver had still not been in touch. He had called Miriam's phone and texted her dozens of times but so far there had been no reply...

"I just don't understand why she would go off like that," Florence was saying, for the umpteenth time. "Zack! Zack, are you listening to me?"

"What? Oh, yeah, course. I... um, I don't get it either."

"Tell me again, who was this guy?"

"It was just some dude we met on the campsite. I assumed he was giving her a lift back to LA. This is the first time I heard that she hadn't come back. I was going to leave it a few more days and then call her, you know, to let things settle down after we fell out."

"You mean after you fought with her? Did you lose your temper, Zack?"

“No, not especially. It was just a daft row. Come on Florence, what are you trying to say?”

Florence glared at him but said nothing, and then she pulled her extra-large sunglasses down to cover her eyes and looked away into the garden. Keane stood up and announced that he was going to get a beer. It was only a matter of time before Florence went to the police and then this whole crazy adventure would be blown wide open. He would be front page news all over the world again. He just had to buy a little more time.

Keane returned to his chair and sat down with a sigh. “Listen,” he said gently, “I haven’t been entirely truthful with you.”

“No shit,” said Florence, still refusing to look at him. She did seem to be unduly wound up about this – after all, Miriam had only been gone a couple of days and from what he could gather that was hardly unusual. The pair of them seemed to have spent their entire time in California getting steaming drunk and off their tits, then shacking up with one random bloke after another.

“This guy she went off with? I think he and Miriam had kind of hit it off together, if you know what I mean,” said Keane. He cringed inwardly at such a rotten lie, but it was the only way he could think off to buy a bit more time. “I didn’t want to say anything because, well, because I didn’t want it to be true. I still don’t. But after we had the argument, Miriam spent the entire night up at the bar with him and I stayed in the cabin getting pissed.”

Florence turned to look at him again and he knew she had taken the bait.

“You said he was giving her a lift back to the city?” she asked.

“He was. But I think they were probably planning to stop off a few places on the way, if you catch my drift. Don’t make me spell it out, Florence, it’s not exactly something I want to think about too much.”

Florence pushed her glasses back up on her head, and Keane was surprised to see that she had been crying.

“What was his name?”

“Oliver. His name was Oliver, and he claimed to have been some big-shot movie producer.” Keane felt pleased that he had been able to at least get a kernel of truth in the

story. “You know what Miriam’s like. She can be so... impulsive. I’m sure they’ll be back soon.”

He allowed himself to fall back into the cushions on the chair. His performance as the jilted loser must have looked convincing enough, probably because his nerves were completely fried and he had hardly slept for two nights. Anyway, Florence seemed to buy it and that was all that mattered. For now.

“Okay then,” she said, standing up. “But if she isn’t back by the weekend I’m going to the police. And if you’ve hurt one single hair on her head, I’ll make sure you rot in hell, you bastard!”

Keane frowned, puzzled, as Florence flounced back into the house, heading for the stupid little moped she had left on the drive. She seemed so certain in her assumption that Keane himself would have hurt Miriam, as if that was the only other explanation for her disappearance. In fact, as he thought back over her visit, she had clearly believed that to be the case right from the start; she had come up here not to ask about her missing friend, he realised, but to confront a potential murderer.

“Bloody Frogs,” he muttered. “Talk about melodramatic.”

But the disturbing encounter had made his mind up on his next course of action. He went inside and told Rosa she could finish early today, and then drank a beer while she collected her no-good great-nephew from the garden and headed home. After a while, when he had drained the suds from the bottom of his Grolsch, he took out his mobile and called a number he had been told only ever to ring in the direst of emergencies.

Somebody picked up on the sixteenth ring but said nothing.

“It’s me,” said Keane. “Listen, I’ve... Hang on, that is you isn’t it?”

A grunt, then a gruff voice said: “Course it fuckin’ is. Who were you expectin’, Cilla Black?”

“Yeah, Surprise Surprise, very good.”

Another grunt.

“Right, well, I think I’ve got myself into a bit of a sticky situation. It, erm, it involves Stacey and another girl too. In fact, two other girls but only one of them is still alive. At least, I think she’s alive.”

There was a pause, which stretched out into a silence, which was just starting to become an uncomfortable silence when the voice spoke again.

“You idiot. Sounds like you’d better come up and see me.”

Scotland 11

“Frank, this Isla Sinclair and Conor McConnell. Isla, McConnell, this is my agent Frank Fleming. Like I said, he’s a good guy, this is his place.”

“A pleasure,” said Fleming, elegantly taking Isla’s hand and kissing it. “Faisal told me all about you, but I’m afraid he didn’t mention what a gorgeous creature you are!”

“I bet he didn’t,” said Isla, narrowing her eyes at Faz, who was slumped on the Fleming’s couch watching MTV Base. Fleming moved on to McConnell, pumping his hand and briefly groping his bicep.

Faz muttered something inaudible, involving the word ‘bullshit’, and I said:

“McConnell, this is Faz. Faz, McConnell.”

Neither looked inclined to shake hands or even acknowledge the other’s presence.

“What’s up, Faz?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you what’s up. I don’t see why you’ve cut these two dicks in, that’s what.”

“I think it’s us cutting you in, actually,” said McConnell, stepping forward. “I thought you said these two guys were professionals, Crombie.”

“Ha! Professional screw-ups, more like,” exclaimed Isla. “Sorry, Mr Fleming, I meant Faz not you.”

“Quite alright, my dear,” Fleming said. “No offence taken. But I would rather like to hear Paul’s explanation for our little Sunday brunch meeting.”

My plan had come to me in a flash the previous evening at Isla’s flat and I’d finessed it while lying in the spare bed, listening to the enthusiastic banging of the headboard and the ‘louder than they used to be’ moans coming from her bedroom. I’d no doubt the impressive display of sexual stamina performance was for my benefit, so I’d felt justified knocking one out and wiping up on her clean sheets. And to be honest, my plan was so good that it deserved celebration.

“Okay,” I said, rubbing my hands together. “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

The first step was to contact Marvin. Despite all their enthusiastic social networking, Faz and Fleming had not yet got the Martian to agree to our extortion demands, although Faz said he was sure they had him softened up with their threats.

“He’s taken the sardine, we just need to reel the brute in,” agreed Fleming.

And so it proved – after a couple of hits of Fleming’s best malt, I called Marvin on his mobile at around 6pm on the Sunday evening. He was calm and surprisingly willing to negotiate, although I thought it was debatable as to whether he had been “softened up” or was just biding his time to horribly murder us all.

Either way, he agreed quite readily to my new demands, which now did not involve him paying a penny but would still be crucial to our chances of success.

He also dropped a nice little boost for me, when he signed off by saying: “I know you’re not doing this on your own, fucknuts. Tell your pal Faisal that I said hello.”

“Okay, Marv, I will,” I said. “See you Wednesday...” Marvin put down the phone and I finished the sentence speaking to myself... “and not before, yeah?”

“What did he say?” asked Faz.

“He said he sends his regards.”

“But is he going to do it?” asked Fleming. Isla and McConnell had gone home, leaving the original blackmail gang together, all nice and cosy.

“Yep,” I said, examining my hand as I held it up flat. I was chuffed to see it wasn’t trembling at all.

“What do you mean, he sends his regards?” asked Faz.

Ha, I thought, if you can’t take the heat, get out of the kitchen.

Obviously, I didn’t say that, as it would be cruel to mock a friend who has just found out that his life was in danger, and also a particularly poor choice of metaphor for somebody who had told me many times how much he hated spending his teenage years working in a kitchen.

The next step was to get ready to flee the country. I was feeling like things were finally going my way, and after a night on Fleming's sofa I set off to pick up a few essentials from my flat.

Faz gave me a lift down into Leith. He had recovered from the shock of learning that Marvin would be after him too and was back to his ebullient self. However, he was also going to clear out a few things from his place and then head over to Fife to pick up his passport and kiss his mother, "just in case".

Standing on the pavement outside my place on Leith Links I watched him drive away with a strange sense of déjà vu, and then turned to go inside. Happily, there was nobody hiding in the wardrobe and no horse's head waiting in the bed (although I didn't look in the back of the fridge – some of the stuff I've found in there would make Vito Corleone himself feel uncomfortable).

I packed a large rucksack and filled three cardboard boxes with things like my university diploma, a few more clothes, some favourite CDs and books. Then I wrote my mum's address on the boxes and called her to say I was sending some stuff home and going off travelling in Europe for a few months with Faz. She sounded relieved, to be honest, after my "dark period" following the split with Isla, and I was secretly looking forward to a happy reunion when I would one day be able to bring Janine back to meet her in Wigan.

I lugged the boxes down to the post office at the foot of Constitution Street, near the Robert Burns statue. Rabbie had been given a clean and polish by the council since I had last been down here, and the old rascal looked to have a new spring in his step.

I knew how he felt, although the price of posting three heavy cardboard boxes soon blunted my bounce, as did the silver car that was idling across the road outside the post office. It was the same silver car, I was sure; the one from Oakley, with the same single figure in the driver's seat.

I turned on my heel and walked away towards the warehouse conversions and new flats that crowded along the edge of the docks, cutting down a quiet cobbled street towards the river. I heard engine noise behind me and glanced back to see the car following me – what the hell was it? An American make, perhaps, a Mustang or something. Hell, why had I chosen such a perfect place for an ambush?

Then a young couple emerged from one of the blocks, giving me just enough time to dash past them and grab the door before it closed. I slammed it behind me and rushed into the entrance hall, peering out of the window just in time to see the couple looking back at me suspiciously.

The silver car was gone.

Something tweaked my peripheral vision and I turned around to see a narrow window at the end of the hallway. There was nobody there, just a view of the next building, and I stared at it dumbly for a few seconds. Why had my subconscious alerted me to such a useless vantage point?

Aha! I called the lift and the doors opened almost immediately, so I stepped in and pressed the button for the top floor. As I'd hoped, the layout was the same and there was an identical window up here, six floors above Leith. I ran along the corridor, looking out towards the docks and the Ocean Terminal. Sure enough, there was the silver car, parked by the Victoria Swing Bridge, its side wheels pulled on to the pavement.

The exhaust was belching a thin heat haze so I knew the engine was on, and after a few seconds the driver's door opened and a man climbed out, talking on a mobile phone. He seemed vaguely familiar somehow, but from this distance it was impossible to make out his features.

It wasn't Marvin the Martian anyway, because this guy had hair. He was also smartly dressed, wearing sunglasses, jeans, white trainers and a blue shirt, and he was waving his arms angrily as he spoke on the phone. At one point, he pointed towards the building I was in and I instinctively ducked away from the window.

Eventually, he clicked his phone shut and got back in the car and, after a worrying moment when I thought he was going to sit and wait for me to come out, the indicator clicked on and he drove away.

Who was this guy? He seemed a bit too classy to be one of Scrap Iron's mob, more professional, more...oh, fuck... what if he was a professional. A hit man. Had Ryan hired a fucking hit man to take me out?

I looked out over the Firth of Forth, the green hills of the Fife shore standing out clearly in the evening sunlight. There were a few boats on the water, chugging their leisurely way up and down the estuary, and in the distance I could see about half of the

rail bridge and two towers of the road bridge. It was Monday; the rip off was set for Wednesday. There were one or two things I needed to do to dot the I's and cross the t's, but I decided just to let them slide. It was more important to stay alive, and to do that I knew I had to drop off the radar from now until then.

My eyes fell to the Ocean Terminal, the big shopping centre that was the centrepiece of the docklands regeneration. Beyond it there was another harbour basin and then a load more new buildings, including offices, a health club and a Holiday Inn Express. That was the answer; I would book myself in there and lie low. I wouldn't even tell Faz and the others where I was.

But then again...gazing down further still, over the tiled roofs of the old buildings clustered around the Leith Shore, I saw a rather more enticing option. I had no money to speak of, but I still had a credit card and in two days I would either be rich or I would be dead. So I called the lift and made my way carefully through the alleys to the Malmaison Hotel, where I got myself a room with a well-stocked minibar, a room service steak and a night lying on a comfortable king size bed in front of the in-house movie channels.

On Tuesday I came down for breakfast and then returned to my bolthole to watch daytime TV, but by mid-afternoon I was starting to get a bit stir crazy so I took a stroll along the Shore to get a paper, which I read back at the hotel tucked away in a corner of the bar. Later on, at dusk, I went out again and had a curry and a few pints before getting a surprisingly good night's sleep.

The next morning, eating a hearty breakfast in the trendy black and white tiled dining room, I overheard some people on the table behind me whispering that 'Zack Keane was staying in the hotel'. I smiled. Perhaps I wasn't such a rubbish lookalike after all.

To save them any embarrassment, I waited until the starspotters had gone before pushing back my chair, stifling a contented burp and going upstairs to get my stuff before checking out. Then, not allowing myself any time to think about what we were about to do, I headed up into town to start the ball rolling. I was about to rob Scrap Iron Ryan McCann and it felt good.

The Pizzazz inner circle met on Tuesday evening for a top-level news conference in the Trident Bar, a nautical-themed dive on Melrose. It was only a few hundred yards from the office but Andy Garner always insisted on walking there, not from any moral standpoint against drink driving but because he believed that walking to the pub helped him retain a small part of his British character.

He was with Tommy Wikowski, who had been in the office for most of the afternoon, downloading ‘upskirt’ photos of various celebrities arriving at an adult entertainment awards dinner the previous night. Most of the women were bona fide porn stars, although a few of the more edgy movie actresses and reality TV personalities had also shown up. Tommy had used two time-honoured techniques to get the shots – either snapping the women as they clambered out of the back of the limo, legs akimbo, or holding the camera at gutter height and shooting upwards. Only around half of the female guests had been wearing underwear, and the other half generally wore thongs so tiny that they might as well have been bare-assed underneath their micro-dresses.

Tommy, Garner and a few of the reporters had spent several hours looking at the pictures and playing ‘Guess who’s cooze?’ It was a favourite parlour game in the Pizzazz office, only the two senior men were more like quiz show hosts than contestants. After years of ‘upskirt’ work most Hollywood vaginas were as familiar and instantly recognisable to Garner and Tommy as their own faces.

Still, there were always interesting new developments, such as the recent craze for ‘vajazzling’ and the apparent demise of the Brazilian and the Hollywood, and the two men were in high spirits as they arrived at the Trident – despite Tommy’s bitching.

“I heard it before,” he was saying, “‘bout how you used to walk from Essex-shire into old London town, drink ten pints of bitter and then walk home again in the snow. What I’m sayin’ is that was when you lived in some ass-backwards ye olde shithole. In the States we got good cars and cheap gas, so we don’t have to walk to the fuckin’ bar for a fuckin’ cold one.”

Garner just grinned, still buzzed from the parade of nether regions he had witnessed over the past few hours. Of course, most of the photos could never be used – any news outlet that printed them would be instantly sued for invasion of privacy – but they were

always worth having on file. Once a celeb dropped below a certain level of good standing in the eyes of the public – say, with the release of an Internet sex tape or soft porn DVD – then images of their most intimate body parts were suddenly back on the table. So to speak.

He ordered two beers and shook his head.

“What?” asked Tommy. “You’re not still thinking about all that muff?”

“I never thought I’d see the day, that’s all,” he replied.

Tommy nodded and took a long drink from his beer as it was placed in front of him. “I know,” he said. “Who’d a thought hair down there would ever make a comeback? Some of those chicks had bushes like Shaft’s Afro, man.”

“I think it’s fucking great,” said Garner. “Takes me back to my youth. Come on, let’s go join the others.”

Dee Dee Sprakes and Dean Simon were already sitting in a booth, along with Florence the French exchange student. Her eyes were red and raw from crying, and Dee Dee and Deano both looked suitably grim.

“Where you been?” demanded Dee Dee, angrily.

“Work,” said Garner. “Checking out some interesting new developments.”

Tommy snorted. “Yeah, could be a real growth area,” he said.

Dee Dee glared at them. “This is bullshit,” she said. “We been sitting here like prize assholes while you two been playin’ ‘Guess who’s cooze?’ I thought this was a serious news agency? Shee-it.”

“Chill, Dee, we’re here now, okay?” said Garner. He turned to Florence and put on his most concerned face. “Hello, sweetheart,” he said, stretching his hand across the table for her to shake. “You must be Florence. I don’t know what Mr Simon here has told you about me, but my name is Andrew Garner. I’m the managing editor of Pizzazz News and Pictures. This here is my picture editor Thomas Wikowski and you’ve already met my charming chief reporter, Dee Dee Sprakes.”

Florence nodded and smiled. “Detective Simon has told me you work sometimes with Scotland Yard in London,” she said.

Garner sat down but made a big show of glancing all around the bar to make sure they could not be overheard.

“That’s right,” he replied, “but please, I’d much rather you didn’t repeat that to anybody. It would hardly be good for our public image if it comes out that we act as a front organisation for the British police.”

Dee Dee glanced at Tommy, who had set his face into a serious frown; presumably to stop himself from bursting out laughing. She could not believe this dim Frenchie would buy the story for one minute but apparently she was. After all, she honestly believed that Dean Simon was a British detective – but then again, maybe lots of European cops were fags and he did have that tired old boozehound look shared by most po-lice above the age of 30.

“More importantly,” Garner was saying now, warming to his theme, “it would be a public relations disaster for our two great nations.”

“For England and the United States?”

“No, Florence, for England and France. A lot of our intelligence is passed on via Interpol all across Europe. If there are European citizens acting illegally in Hollywood, no matter how big a star they may be, we will report it back to the appropriate authorities. After all, no one wants another Roman Polanski on their hands.”

“Gawd no,” cut in Tommy, shaking his head.

Florence glanced at Deano, puzzled and a little worried. Deano was grinding his teeth, cursing Garner’s appallingly hammy overacting, but he managed to give her a reassuring smile and patted her hand.

“Don’t worry, Florence love,” he said. “Andy’s team has been keeping Zack Keane under surveillance for some time no. Unofficially, of course. Just tell him what you told me about Miriam, that’s all.”

“Perhaps I should go to the French embassy?” Florence asked, uncertainly.

“Not at all. Andy here might think he’s James Bond sometimes, but he is absolutely right. I will get on to Interpol right away and we can co-ordinate this whole operation with the French police. We will find your friend, don’t you worry about that.”

Miriam’s eyes flickered uncertainly around the table, examining each of their faces in turn, weighing up whether or not she could trust them. This, thought Dee Dee, must have been what it was like when you hired The A Team.

Only they were more like the AA Team.

“Okay,” said Florence, apparently convinced by what she saw, “this is what has happened...”

“Girl must be trippin’,” whispered Dee Dee, after Florence had outlined the basic facts of Miriam’s disappearance and her encounter with Keane. She had then broken down in tears and fled to the ladies’ room. “Her damn friend is missin’ and instead of callin’ the cops, she comes to us.”

“She thinks I am a cop,” said Deano.

“Oh, pur-lease,” said Dee Dee. “If you’re a cop then I’m Beyonce.”

“He could be a bent cop,” said Tommy, sniggering.

“Knock it off,” snapped Garner, “she’s coming out.”

They all turned to see Florence emerge from the bathroom to stand, blinking like a fawn in the flickering light of a busted Michelob sign.

“Go see if she’s okay, Deano,” Garner said.

Deano slid out of the booth and went over to Florence. But instead of returning to the table, they began walking together towards the door, deep in conversation.

“Hey Andy,” Tommy said. “What if she’s tellin’ the truth? What if Keane really has kidnapped this other chick?”

“Of course he’s fuckin’ kidnapped her,” snapped Garner, watching Florence and Deano anxiously. “I’ve been tellin’ you that Keane wasn’t right in the head for months now, haven’t I? The guy’s a proper villain.”

“Look, you already got Deano over there impersonating a police officer,” Tommy went on. “LAPD ain’t gonna be happy if this chick is locked in Keane’s fuckin’ basement while we sit around with our thumbs in our asses.”

Garner looked over at Dee Dee, who shrugged.

“He’s right,” she said.

“This is a world fuckin’ exclusive,” Garner hissed. “Zack Keane, the platinum-selling sex beast. And LAPD wouldn’t know shit about it if it weren’t for me...sorry, us... tailing this bastard for the past six months. Look, we’ll doorstep him as soon as we can. Tonight, if we have to. And then we bring in the cops, okay?”

Meanwhile, several miles across town, Rosa Velasco was emerging from the all-night pharmacy on North Mednik Avenue clutching a paper bag containing her arthritis pills. Her last pack had run out a little while ago and she had not been able to afford any more, not with the debts she had accrued during those long weeks out of work.

But then earlier today, when she and Andre were driving home from Beverly Hills her battered green Honda, her great-nephew had announced that Mr Keane had given him a cash bonus. Rosa had been suspicious – her employer had never mentioned this to her and she did not imagine for one second that Andre’s work in the garden merited such a thing – but then again Mr Keane was prone to such outbursts of generosity.

Or maybe, she wondered, he was simply salving his conscience before telling the youth he was sacked.

“It was just a hunnerd bucks, Gran-moms,” Andre had mumbled. “He still ain’t no saint or anything.”

Still, the boy had insisted his great-aunt take forty dollars, almost half of his windfall, and Rosa had let her suspicions lie. Andre had a good heart, she knew, and at times like these he reminded her a little of her late husband.

Then, just as she was getting ready for bed, her knees and hips and ankles had begun to burn and itch, as though there were a column of fire ants marching through her joints. On a whim, she had taken the two \$20 bills from her money tin and walked over to North Mednik, feeling the movement of her limbs and the cool night air soothe her condition.

Now, as she turned again for home, she saw a familiar burly figure weave its way through the traffic at the junction with Floral Drive. It was Andre, crossing the road with his loping gait. Rosa waved but her great-nephew did not see her, standing in the shadows, and instead he disappeared into the neighbouring Salud grocery market.

Rosa clucked. The Salud was well known in the area for its lax attitude in selling liquor to selling to minors. She was about to follow him in to the store but she hesitated, unsure of whether or not to confront young Andre. After all, he was almost a man now and who was she to deny him his pleasures after a hard day’s work in the sun? Besides, there were worse things he could be spending the money on than liquor or beer.

She turned to go, a strange feeling settling over her. Could it be a loosening of the apron strings? Rosa turned, for one last look back at Andre, and as she did so a black

sports car screeched into the lot, rap music pumping out into the night. It was a classic model, with a gold stripe up the side, and after it stopped outside the Salud it did a strange kind of hopping shuffle, settling on to its suspension.

Rosa pushed herself back against the wall, into the shadows, as Andre emerged from the liquor store clutching a bottle in a brown paper bag. He stopped, twisted off the cap and took a long drink, before walking slowly over to the car. The passenger's door opened and a young black man, with a football player's build, stepped out of the vehicle. He stared long and hard at Andre. Rosa felt her heart pound and she almost called out her great-nephew's name.

The man walked around to Andre and they bumped fists. Andre then leaned down and spoke into the driver's window, and Rosa saw him pass something in to the car from inside his pants. Another boy even younger than Andre, maybe 12 or 13 years old, scrambled out from the rear of the black car and ran into the Salud. Andre watched him go and then turned back to the driver and spoke again. He took another drink from his bottle and Rosa could tell he was nervous.

The boy returned from the store with a large, empty paper grocery sack, which he gave to the man from the passenger seat – who was no more than a boy himself, Rosa thought, maybe 19 or 20. He went to the trunk, opened it and beckoned Andre to follow, glancing around quickly as he reached in and removed an automatic weapon, a machine gun. He stashed it inside the grocery sack and gave it to Andre.

Another fist bump and he was back in the car. The rap music resumed and the black car reversed out of its space and drove away, slowly. Rosa closed her eyes as it passed her hiding place beside the pharmacy and when she opened them Andre was gone too, already walking back across Floral Drive, the grocery sack swinging heavily at his side.

Scotland 12

I had arranged to meet Marvin in Stockbridge, in a basement level pub called The Baillie, and I found him sitting outside in the sunken yard that passed for a smoking area. A cloud of cigar smoke wreathed his furious expression as I peered over the railings at

him, and with his baldy head and bristling eyebrows he reminded me a little of Ming the Merciless from Flash Gordon, surrounded by dry ice. Suppressing a smirk, I forced myself to keep in mind that he was one of Britain's most feared criminals, a prime suspect in several torture-murders and other crimes of staggering brutality. It also occurred to me that, given all of the above, the very fact he was not banged up in prison showed he was obviously more intelligent than I had so far given him credit for.

Still, it was hard to take Marvin seriously after witnessing his happy little grin just before he gobbled up a mouthful of Spam truncheon.

"Ready to go?" I called.

"I wiz born ready," he replied, raising his head slowly to glare at me with authentic, Ming-style malevolence. "Question is, are you ready tae spend the rest of yir life on the run?"

"Oh, I think I'll cope Marv."

"Yeah? I dinnae think you'll last two months before I've got you in some lock-up somewhere, burstin' yir baws wi' a lump hammer."

I was about to make some smart Alec remark along the lines of, 'Keep your fantasies to yourself, mate', but there was something in the matter-of-fact way he uttered the threat that made me pause.

Marvin inserted a meaty finger inside his mouth and raked it out against his cheek with a wet and audible 'pop'.

"That's what it sounds like when they go," he said. "They're slippery bastards but once you get a decent contact its just like burstin' a water balloon filled wi' jelly. Think you can cope wi' that, ya English prick?"

I gave an involuntary shudder as my testicles shrivelled in terror. Marvin laughed, got up from the plastic garden chair he had been sitting on and flicked his half-smoked stogie up into my chest, sending out a shower of sparks.

He climbed the stairs to the street. "Now come on, let's get this over wi'," he said, leaning into my face with a leer and a wink. "Who knows, I might even get to suck a bit o' dick."

"This way," I croaked, suddenly feeling that I was way out of my league in the blackmail and intimidation stakes.

I walked ahead, down to the bridge over the Water of Leith. There was a Pizza Express by the river and the outdoor terrace was bustling with happy diners, their contented chatter mimicking the burbling of the water over the stones below us. I watched them, reflecting bitterly that their biggest worry was whether to go for a Sloppy Giuseppe or an American Hot; they didn't have to fret about having Scotland's answer to Ronnie Kray walking two paces behind them and checking out their arse as a potential rape target.

I glanced back as surreptitiously as I could and sure enough Marvin was staring at my backside. I wheeled around to face him.

"Look, just stop it alright?" I hissed.

He made a 'What?' face.

"Let's just pretend that I didn't see the DVD, okay? You can go back to being straight Marvin; he was scary enough."

"Don't get homophobic wi' me, pal," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Have I said a bloody word about any of that?" I asked, indignantly. There were quite a few people passing by on the bridge and I noticed we were getting one or two strange looks.

"Mebbe not to ma face, but ah saved all yir messages on Facebook. Don't think I won't be getting' payback for those," Marvin ranted on, regardless.

Facebook? I had to think for a minute but it soon came to me. Fucking hell, the other night I'd left Faz and Fleming to 'negotiate' with Marvin using my bloody Facebook account.

"That wasn't me," I said, pathetically.

"Aye, right."

I looked at Marvin. This was ridiculous. Here was one of Scotland's most notorious villains, being forced against his will to help rob his boss, and his biggest concern was the fucking Equality Act. "Listen, just because Ryan doesn't know you're gay, that doesn't make me homophobic," I whispered, aware that we were attracting even more attention now. "If anything, you're the one with the problem for not tellin' folk about it."

Marvin seethed. After everything I'd said to him, the blackmail, the insults, I really thought I'd gone too far this time. I took a step backwards, thinking he was about to throw me off the bridge.

"You don't know what the fuck you're talkin' about," he said, and I could have sworn there were tears in his eyes as he pushed past me and stormed away.

I glanced around, prompting several shoppers who had obviously been watching our exchange with interest to suddenly find something interesting to study in the sky or on their shoes. Looking at Marvin's broad back as he ploughed ahead, I got the sudden urge to run after him and apologise. Jeez, he had a better line in guilt trips than Isla ever had.

I attempted to shake off the strange episode on the bridge as I ran and caught up with Marvin, before leading him across the road and down Leslie Place into a warren of elegant Georgian townhouses.

Edinburgh's most famous ever brothel had once been located around here, at 17 Danube Street, a bordello under the command of a well-spoken madam called Dora Noyce. She and generations of her working girls had been based in the house from the Second World War until well into the 1970s, helping to seal Stockbridge's reputation as a red light district for Edinburgh's middle classes.

The swingers club was in the same neighbourhood, which was today still redolent of snobbery and marginal seediness, and as arranged McConnell and Isla were waiting for us in Isla's Range Rover.

"Is the lawyer here?" I asked, leaning down to the driver's side window.

"He's just gone in," said McConnell, biting his lip and looking extremely nervous. Isla, who was in the passenger seat, had the flushed appearance she always did when she was worried.

"You already know Marvin, of course," I said, standing back so they could get a clear view of my curious companion.

McConnell and Marvin both nodded, warily, and perhaps mindful of his emotional outburst of a few moments ago, the gangster said nothing about McConnell crapping himself the last time they met.

"Okay then," I said, after an uncomfortable silence. "Why don't you all get going?"

McConnell got out and stretched the tension from his shoulders, but Isla was now fanning herself with a magazine and showed no urgency to leave the car, “Oh, I don’t know, Paul,” she began.

“Look,” I said, climbing into the driver’s seat beside her. “Just go in there and have a bit of fun, act natural, have a drink, do whatever you normally do.”

She still looked a bit uncertain, so I added. “All you have to do is keep the lawyer occupied for a bit and by teatime we’ll all be rich. Now go and shag your brains out, for God’s sake.”

Isla smiled and nodded, her courage returning. “Thanks for the pep talk,” she said.

“Don’t mention it,” I replied, but as I watched the three of them ambling away I felt a bit like a football manager who has just given his star player a few words of encouragement before sending him out to play for his team’s bitter rivals. That was me, I thought, the Sir Alex Ferguson of failed romances.

It was almost an hour before Marvin returned, smirking. He walked around to the passenger side but I had already locked the doors, although I lowered the window by about six inches.

“No’ lettin’ me in?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“Want to know what happened?”

“Not really. Did you get the key?”

Marvin smirked some more. “Some place that,” he said.

“Did you get the key or not?”

“Aye, ah got it almost as soon as we went in. Would have come oot sooner, but ah was havin’ too much fun watchin’ yir ex in action.”

I shook my head. “Marvin, just give me the key and fuck off.”

“Yir a bit touchy, are ye no? Let me in and I’ll hand it over.”

I sighed and, against my better judgement, opened the door. Marvin crashed down into the passenger seat with a satisfied sigh.

“So anyway,” he said, “we go into the locker room, mixed mind, and get oor kit off. Some had folk put on towels but others just let it all hang oot. We had a drink in the bar, then I goes back and tanned the locker. Piece a pish, by the way.”

“I didn’t ask for a fuckin’ school report.”

“I’m getting’ tae the good bit. I was on my way oot but I took a wrong turn and there’s yir ex getting taken up the arse by the boyfriend while a load of old blokes stood around the edge of the bed, wanking over the pair o’ them.”

I shook my head. “The key, Marvin.”

“Dinnae believe me? Here, Ah’ve got a video on ma phone.”

He pulled out his iPhone and began to press the touch screen, but I grabbed it out of his hands. “Let me have this thing,” I snapped. “I’ll call Scrap Iron right now, tell him what you’ve been up to.”

Marvin grabbed his phone back but said nothing.

“You weren’t the only one shootin’ videos in there,” I went on. “You’re on candid camera, Marvin, the place is stacked with secret CCTV and Conor knows the owner, so if you come after any of us Ryan’s gonna find out that you were up to eyeballs in all this.”

“All this? You mean robbin’ his lawyer? Oh aye, I recognised Ramsdale as soon as I saw him. And I know all about that stash in the safe in his office too.”

“Yeah? Well done. That’s gonna make Scrap Iron even more suspicious then, isn’t it? And if you tell him you were forced into it, then your other big secret’s gonna have to come out. Either way, I reckon you should just forget this ever happened. Now, please, give me the key and get out.”

Marvin leaned across and dropped some small keys attached to a ring with a green leather fob in the cup holder on the dashboard.

“This willnae be the end of it, Crombie,” he said. “I’m fuckin’ sure o’ that.”

As soon as his feet touched the pavement I put my foot down and accelerated away with a screech of rubber, leaning across to slam shut the door as I turned the corner back on to the main road.

I drove up to town and parked at the multi-storey in the shadow of the castle, getting changed into an outfit that had been left for me in the boot. It was a shirt and an old

brown suit that were both far too large for me, but they were clean and the shirt was crisply ironed. There was also a new tie to put on. The trainers didn't really do anything for my attempt to look like a young legal eagle, but I would have to do. Finally, I picked up an empty briefcase from the back seat and set off walking along to the Grassmarket, up Victoria Street and onto the High Street, where the legal chambers were located.

At the entrance I waited in line for the security check with an assorted crowd of ne'er do wells. The chambers were all part of the same labyrinthine complex as Edinburgh's law courts and they were taking no chances about some nutter smuggling in a knife or, more likely, a wrap of coke to snort in the gents. It soon came to my turn and I emptied my pockets into the tray to go through X-ray machine, dropping in my phone, wallet, keys and coins.

"Belt?" grunted the security guard, without even looking.

I removed my belt, which forced me to hold up my too-large trousers with one hand, and hoisted the briefcase onto the conveyor belt, suddenly worried that it would raise suspicion by being completely empty. But perhaps most lawyers only use their briefcases for carrying sandwiches, because nobody so much as raised an eyebrow.

Once inside, I consulted the text message I had saved on my phone from McConnell giving directions to Ramsdale's office. However when I got there two men were chatting in the corridor almost outside his door, so I carried on without a backward glance and, after a couple of wrong turnings and dead ends, found a gents' lavatory. I went in, washed my face and dried it on the paper towels before going back.

The bastards were still there! Did they not have any work to do? Cursing, I retraced my steps to the gents' and locked myself in a cubicle.

My phone beeped. Faz. "R U ready yet?"

I texted back. "Can't get in office. Give me 5."

This time the coast was clear and I unlocked Ramsdale's office with trembling fingers, pushed open the door and shut myself in. Phew. The office was smaller than I'd expected, but it had a nice view out over the Cowgate, the jumble of roofs and chimneys looking like a scene from Mary Poppins. There was a crystal decanter of whisky on a tray with a couple of glasses and I gratefully poured myself a healthy shot. The day when it

had stopped being acceptable to keep booze at work had been a sad one for Great Britain, I decided.

I looked at a couple of oil paintings on the walls, both Scottish pastoral scenes, and wondered whether Ramsdale's old-school office would run as far as a hidden safe. It didn't, as it happens, all that was behind the paintings were bare walls, but surely the safe couldn't be that hard to find.

The phone beeped again. Probably another text from Faz.

It was from Marvin. "Fuck it, I'm calling ur bluff. I want half the stash or I kidnap and murder your ex when she leaves the club."

Bollocks. Think, Crombie, think. I drained the whisky and tapped out a reply.

"Ok u win, meet me at Ramsdale's office quick. Where is the safe?"

I had poured another shot, the decanter clinking against the glass, before the phone beeped again.

"On way. Look under carpet."

Holy shit, the daft sod had fallen for it. But now he was on his way there was no time to lose. I glanced around but could not see any loose edges or signs that the fitted carpet had been moved, so I dropped to my knees and began crawling around the office, brushing the shag pile. Eventually, I looked underneath Ramsdale's desk and found a square of carpet that lifted out to reveal the safe.

I put the key in the lock and turned it, then took a deep breath and tried the combination that McConnell had supplied. With a soft click, the safe door popped open.

It was too dark to see what was inside, but then I noticed a little lamp fixed to the bottom of the desk and clicked it on. Jackpot. The safe was filled with stacks of banknotes, fastened with red rubber bands. At first I thought they must be some kind of foreign currency because of the strange pink hue but when I pulled out a couple of bundles I realised they were £100s. Hundreds of them. Fucking hundreds of Scottish £100 notes.

Then I froze. There were voices in the corridor, muffled but coming closer. "Here it is," said a woman, and the door opened. "Oh," said the woman, clearer now. "That's strange, Mr Ramsdale normally keeps it locked."

There was a pause and I was sure she must have clocked the open briefcase and the half drunk malt.

Then Faz said. "That's alright, James warned me he might be late back from the club. He said to just go in and wait. There are quite a few clients from the big new commercial action coming through this afternoon and I should probably just get stuck into our papers."

I heard Faz tap his own empty briefcase, as if to illustrate how much work he had to do. There was another pause, a longer one and I wondered if the woman had fallen for the bait.

"I'm sure James will be back any minute," said Faz, as cool as you like.

"Of course," said the woman's voice, still uncertain, but then I heard the door click shut. I shuffled out backwards from under the desk and stood up, chest heaving and with what I knew was a rather manic expression on my face. I waved the money at him and he punched the air silently several times in jubilation. I shook my head and whispered, "Marvin's coming, we have to move."

Without taking time to comment on his attire - Faz had possibly overdone the smart young lawyer look, with a double-breasted suit and his hair gelled back to resemble an Asian Gordon Gecko - I began to fill my briefcase with cash, before stuffing more bundles down my waistband and inside my capacious shirt and jacket - clever girl, that Isla - and marching smartly out of the office, leaving Faz behind me to load up his own case.

As I walked down the corridor, a woman appeared at the corner, watching me suspiciously. She must have been the same one I had heard while cowering under the desk, although she was much younger and hotter than I had imagined her to be.

She was about to speak when the lift doors sprang open and out stepped His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, dressed in a navy jacket and a dark green tartan kilt, with thick woollen socks on.

The woman and I both stopped in our tracks and stared, as the prince looked around him in obvious confusion. "Charles!" came the cheery voice from down the corridor, "This way, James is running a little late but I've taken the liberty of pouring you a quick livener. He won't be long."

Once again, it was Faz, beckoning HRH towards Ramsdale's office as though it was the most ordinary thing in the world. Seconds later, they had both disappeared inside.

"Smaller than he looks on television, isn't he?" I said to the woman, before stepping smartly into the empty lift and heading for the ground floor.

Susan Boyle was waiting for the lift to go back up again, and I politely held the doors for her and asked what floor she wanted.

"First," answered Susan, with a strange little giggle, so I pressed the button and left her to it. There was a commotion going on in the lobby as the court complex workers poured out of their offices to see the famous visitors. I could also see Rod Stewart over by the water cooler and a blonde who could have been Britney Spears or possibly Paris Hilton at the enquiry desk.

I checked my watch and, right on cue, Faz came trotting down the stairs carrying his briefcase and a Tesco carrier bag stuffed with cash. I waited until he was just a few yards away and then we both walked out past the security guards without a second glance, not even stopping to look at Sir Elton John attempting to get through the X-ray machine without removing his rhinestone-encrusted sunglasses.

As we marched smartly out into the courtyard and back onto the High Street, I glanced over towards the old Edinburgh City Chambers to see Frank Fleming, the city's premier purveyor of celebrity look-alikes, sitting on a bench and reading the Guardian. He nodded down the Royal Mile to where I saw, to my horror, Marvin the Martian's gleaming dome weaving its way towards us through the crowds.

I stopped in my tracks and nudged Faz.

"Marvin," I hissed.

"Relax, man," he replied. "I thought something like this might happen so me and old Frankie added a little magic to the plan while you been in hidin'. Watch this."

At that moment, a surge of people came from around the corner of Cockburn Street. At the centre of all the attention was a familiar figure with coiffured blond hair, designer stubble and a boyish grin, surrounded by three burly minders. He waved shyly and signed autographs as he minced his way up the street, and even Marvin stopped to watch the procession, allowing Faz and I to slip away unnoticed with our loot.

Zack Keane might be famous, I thought to myself as we turned onto George IV Bridge and climbed aboard the first bus that we saw, but even he can't hold a candle to David Beckham.

California 13

The text message was waiting for Keane when he arrived at Pocatello Airport in Idaho and switched on his mobile. It was supposedly from Miriam and had been sent from her phone, but there was no question over who was really behind it.

“Zack, I really miss U but I h8 it when UR an asshole, like @ Big Sur. We need 2 talk. Neal is not such a bad guy. In fact, IMO hes worth a million bucks. How much am I worth to you? Text dont call.”

The message was clear. Ollyver was saying he wanted a million dollars for Miriam's safe return, and Keane felt a wave of relief flooding through him as he realised that she must be alive and well. It was clever, sending the ransom demand disguised as a message from Miriam herself – Ollyver knew the SMS could potentially be used in evidence against him and so he had made it read almost like any other that might be received in the days after a lover's tiff.

Now all Keane had to do was lay his hands on a stone cold mill. Contrary to most reports, he did not have that kind of sum sitting around in his current account. Most of his money was offshore or tied up in investments, and it could only be accessed through his financial people. Sure, he had a generous monthly allowance that allowed him to live high on the hog in Beverly Hills but in practical terms he had no more chance of raising a million dollar ransom fee than any other one of the thousands of sun-reddened, expat Brits in LA.

Luckily, however, he was on his way to meet somebody who did have that sort of cash lying around.

He replied to the text: “Going to get some money. Will be in touch asap.”

He hired a car from Hertz, a silver Chevy Traverse SUV with four-wheel drive, and then hit the road. He drove east from the airport, through the city of Pocatello itself –

although it was in fact little more than a small frontier town – and then south on the Barstow Freeway, Interstate 15, into the western fringes of Caribou National Park. After about an hour he turned east again, onto Highway 30, heading deeper into the mountains. From here, the rugged wilderness stretched all the way to the state border with Montana and the much larger Yellowstone National Park.

Another hour behind the wheel found him at the resort town of Lava Hot Springs, where, following the instructions that he had retrieved from a sealed envelope in his safe in Beverly Hills, he sent another text to announce his arrival and then paid to enter the pools complex that gave the place its name. The scalding mineral water, heated by vents deep in the earth's crust, bubbles up through the rocks, just as it has done for millions of years, and emerges in a series of stone-walled hot tubs where it bathes the flabby bodies of tens of thousands of vacationing Americans every year.

Keane hired a pair of swimming shorts, changed and put his stuff in a locker, before collecting a towel and walking outside. Although it was still technically summer, the cool evening air was flowing down from the high Rockies and clouds of steam were rising from all the pools. He chose one and stepped in, gingerly, thinking at first that he would never be able to stand the heat. But soon the scouring sensation, along with the acidic, almost metallic smell of the water, began to relax him. As dusk fell, coloured lights came on in and around the pools, adding to the otherworldly atmosphere.

Then, all of a sudden, a tall figure emerged from the steam, his towel over his head, and perched next to Keane on his underwater ledge.

“Hi,” said the man.

“Hi,” said Keane, unsure whether this was the person he had come to see or if he had somehow stumbled into the middle of a gay pick-up night, Rocky Mountain-style. “That is you, right?” he added, peering into the mist.

“It's me,” said the man, pulling the towel down around his shoulders. He had grown a beard, flecked with grey, since the last time Keane had seen him. “But don't use my real name though, okay? Folks round here know me as Clive.”

“Clive?”

Silence.

“Right, Clive it is then. So, how’s it going? I like the beard. It makes you look... intense.”

More silence.

“Seems pretty nice around here,” Keane tried again. “Stunning I mean, the mountains. Plenty of time to think.”

“It’s okay, I guess. Although I’m thinking of moving again. Maybe to Alaska.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Alaska. That’s, well, it’s cool I guess.” Keane said, finishing with a lame chuckle.

They sat together silently for a while longer, shrouded in the fog that hovered above the still water. More people were entering the pools now, many of them drinking beers from coolers they had strategically placed around the edge. A cold beer was starting to appeal to Keane too, who had been cooking away at a rolling boil for almost an hour now.

“Seriously though,” he ventured, unable to resist one more attempt at conversation. “Do you not miss LA? Not even one little bit?”

“No,” said Clive. “Now, why don’t you cut the crap and explain just what the hell you’ve got us into down there?”

“Tell you what,” said Keane, remembering the refreshment kiosk he had seen by the changing rooms and hauling himself gratefully out of the water. “Let me go and get us a couple of those beers before I start.”

Two hours later, Keane and Clive were seated in a dark booth to the rear of the Blue Moon Bar and Grill on Lava Hot Springs’ main drag, drinking beers and surveying the wreckage of two enormous cheeseburger platters.

Keane’s mobile phone was lying on the table between them and they were watching it as though it were an unexploded bomb. Keane had just sent another message to Miriam’s phone, to say that he too thought Ollyver worth a million bucks and suggest they all meet at his house in Beverly Hills the following night at 9pm. First, however, he had said he wanted to hear Miriam’s voice to make sure she was okay.

The phone's display lit up, displaying the red and gold Manchester United club crest as its background screen, and then a second later it began to ring. Keane glanced at Clive and then hit loudspeaker.

"Hello," he said.

"Zack?"

Clive went to speak but Keane held up his hand. "Miriam," he said, relief coursing through him once more. He could hear both a smile and tears in his voice as he spoke again. "Are you alright?"

"I'm...I'm okay," said Miriam. "I mean, I'm not hurt or anything but...well, it's not a nice feeling, you know? I can't say too much."

"Don't worry babe, I'm going to get you back safe and sound. You tell Ollyver I've got his money and I'll be waiting."

A few undistinguishable sounds came from the other end of the line before Miriam's voice came back on. "He says no police, okay? I've got to go now..."

"Miriam," began Keane, but the call had already been cut off. He stared at the phone, saying nothing, until eventually the club crest disappeared again.

"So," Keane said, looking up. "What next, Clive? Are you going to come back to LA with me?"

Clive looked shell-shocked. "I didn't really believe you before. I guess I thought..."

"What?"

"That you were trying to shake me down for more money or something. But now..." Clive broke off again, shaking his head in disbelief.

Keane chewed his thumbnail and looked at the man across the table, only too well aware of what he was capable of when pushed. Clive picked up his fork and stabbed a pickled gherkin, pushing it around and around his plate. Then he seemed to come to some kind of internal decision and raised his head, calmly meeting Keane's gaze. There was something missing in his eyes now.

"Stacey," he said, simply. "You think he killed Stacey too?"

Keane, who had already spent half the bloody evening outlining in the most explicit terms possible that he did indeed believe that to be the case, assumed the question was rhetorical and simply nodded his head.

Clive blew out his cheeks. “That settles it then,” he said. “I’ll have to go up to the ranch and get the money, so you might as well get a room here in town for the night. What time is your flight back tomorrow?”

“The first one’s at ten o’clock.”

“Okay, I’ll fly down from Brigham over in Utah – it’s probably best if we aren’t seen together – then I’ll meet you up at the house around five.”

Scotland 13

The first surprise was that, really, there was quite a bit more money in Ramsdale’s safe than any of us had anticipated. Half a million had been the estimate we had been working to, based entirely on McConnell’s guess as to how many one hundred pound notes would fit inside a microwave oven.

All I can say is, he must have had a bloody small microwave.

Two million quid.

That’s right.

Two. Million.

Dead on, too. We didn’t actually count it all (although I could tell that Faz wanted too) but we did count one bundle when we all met back at Isla’s flat. It contained 250 £100 notes. And there were 80 stacks.

“That’s four hundred grand each,” declared Faz, within seconds, before catching my somewhat sceptical expression. “Go ahead, work it out yourself if you don’t believe me,” he snapped, sounding hurt.

Somewhat embarrassed, although still not entirely willing to trust him, Fleming, McConnell and I tapped away at the calculator function on our phones, while Isla peered over McConnell’s shoulder. Eighty divided by five gave us sixteen bundles each, or four hundred big ones per head.

We did not hang around after sharing out the loot. Faz, still in the huff because I had not believed his calculations, left first. He hugged Fleming, shook hands with Isla and

McConnell and then hugged me, saying, "I'll bell you." Fleming and I left together soon afterwards, following another rather awkward goodbye. It all seemed a bit unreal.

As we descended the stairs Fleming tapped me on the shoulder. "Paul, wait," he said. "We haven't got much time, Frank."

"Just hear me out, this won't take a second. There's somebody you might want to meet. Don't worry, it'll be perfectly safe."

I sighed. After all the meticulous planning, all the fantasising about what we were going to do with the cash, why hadn't we planned this bit more thoroughly? Suddenly the practical difficulties of absconding with £400,000 of stolen drug money seemed to swim before my eyes, and what before had seemed like minor hurdles now seemed insurmountable.

I also realised that I was missing Faz already. At least he would be good company on the run, but he had just disappeared with barely a word. Now I was stuck with fat old Fleming, who was out of breath already after descending two flights of bloody stairs.

"Oh fuck," I said, "Frank, what are we going to do?"

"Don't worry. Come with me, I've got it all planned out."

Fleming pushed past me and walked out onto the street, turning right towards the Margiotta store where I had blown up JK Rowling's Ferrari. He went in and emerged a few minutes later carrying a plastic bag filled with clinking bottles.

"We never even had any champagne!" he said with a chuckle, handing me the bag and walking away deeper into Marchmont. A few minutes later we arrived at a parking area for the City Car Club, a car sharing service, and Fleming produced a key from his pocket and pressed the button. One of the cars, a tiny white Kia, obligingly beeped and he got in behind the wheel.

"Good thinking, Frank," I said, climbing into the passenger's seat. "But can you at least tell me where we're going?"

"Certainly my good man," he said. "To Livingston, and beyond! Now open one of those bloody bottles, will you?"

Half an hour later, with the first bottle of Moet already gone, Fleming steered the Kia a little unsteadily from the inside lane of the M8, up the slip road and into the Deer Park

Services. There was a pub here, a new-build Beefeater type of place with a cheap hotel attached to it, and he parked outside.

“You’ve got to be kidding?” I asked, peering out of the window. “Almost a million in readies between us and you bring us here?”

“Just go on into the bar, dear boy. There’s somebody waiting for you.”

Which brings me to my second surprise of the day.

It was refreshingly dark inside the pub, with only the flashing of several unplayed fruit machines and the soft illumination of the specials board to lighten the gloom. It was also almost entirely deserted, except for a familiar figure in the far corner, nursing what looked like a gin and tonic and reading a celebrity magazine. Her liquorice hair was dyed peroxide blonde and her face was creased with a worried frown that suggested her thoughts were far away from the bright Hollywood lives depicted on the glossy page before her.

Then she looked up and smiled.

“Janine,” I said, rushing over to her.

“Hello gorgeous,” she replied, standing up and throwing her arms around my neck. “You missed me so much you decided to join me on the run? It’s not what its cracked up to be, you know.”

“It’s looking a whole lot better than it was five minutes ago,” I said. “I thought I was going to be spending the night here dodging Fleming’s amorous advances.”

“Oh no,” said Janine, as she leaned in to kiss me. “I’ve got far bigger plans for you than that.”

The rest of the journey passed in something of a blur, to be honest. Fleming drove and Janine and I shared the rest of the bubbly, which meant that we had to stop for regular pee breaks all the way. I remember crossing the Erskine Bridge, seeing the tower blocks of Glasgow and the lower Clyde Valley spread out below us and bellowing the Taggart ‘No Mean City’ theme song out of the window. I also remember the drive along the western bank of Loch Lomond and persuading Frank to stop at a pub in a little village called Arrochar, way up into the mountains, but I don’t recall much else of the journey.

I know we did arrive, eventually, at an old hotel in Inverary, a picture postcard kind of a place by the side of Loch Fyne, because I remember the double room Janine and I

booked into. It overlooked the high street, the whitewashed buildings leading along to a mirror smooth harbour where an old sailing ship lay at anchor, reinforcing the impression that the whole village was some kind of living museum of Highland life. There was a king size bed with a Persil white duvet and the bathroom had a huge, inviting tub, although somehow, instead of soaking in post-coital bubbles, my final recollection of the evening is of being downstairs in the bar, alone, and becoming involved in a heated argument with a South African bloke.

The next thing I knew was...well, I've already described it to you once.

[The Island 2](#)

I wake to a painful thud detonating deep within my skull. I am lying face down on cold, hard sand as an icy wind whistles across my back. Waves break somewhere nearby. I try to lift my head and whimper in pain as a blinding whiteness blitzes my brain. I screw my eyes shut and bury my head in my arms, waiting for as long as I dare before risking a more cautious peek. I am on an empty beach beside a wild grey sea, topped with frolicking white horses...

Yeah, then that happened. Are you with me now? The penny, she is, 'ow you say, starting to drop? Good, because she was starting to drop for me too, as I scrambled back up that fucking beach, with the heavy wet slap of an approaching jet ski ringing in my ears (or whatever the hell it was I said).

See, back at the start of the tale I was coming over all mysterious and dramatic simply to ramp up the tension. But in reality, once my head had cleared, I figured out pretty quickly what must have happened.

Namely, that Frank fucking Fleming and Janine the fucking love of my life scheming whore bitch Giacomo had stitched me up. Had got me totally pissed, and possibly even knocked me out with an extra shot of something or other, then dropped me on some Godforsaken beach in the middle of nowhere to await execution by 'Scrap Iron' Ryan

McCann, who was at this very moment displaying a hitherto unsuspected passion for motorised watersports.

That was the 'who', the 'what' and the 'how', but I even had the 'why' nailed, or so I thought. Just a few hours of life on a gangland 'most wanted' list had convinced me that it was not going to be all that much fun, and so it was not hard to imagine Fleming and Janine offering to turn me over to McCann in order to save their own skins. At a price, of course.

The only puzzling aspect of the whole situation was why they had gone for this whole James Bond in 'Goldfinger', game of cat and mouse on a desert island crap? Why not just drive me to the scrapyard and let Marvin shoot me in the back of the head? What, as the expression goes, the fuck?

All this came to me in the snap of a synapse as I plunged into the relative safety of the dunes. I was still clutching all the crap from the boat, like an impulse shopper who has rashly decided against picking up a basket in the supermarket, so I pulled on the hat and gloves, shoved the foil packs of food and the first aid kit into my suit jacket pockets, wrapped the rope around my shoulder and, feeling a little bit better, ran on through the elephant grass. After a few yards I realised I had forgotten the water canteen but, willing to bet there would be plenty of fresh water in the hills, I decided to crash ahead without it.

The dunes quickly gave way to stubbly grass pasture with a few sheep droppings dotted here and there, although no sign of actual sheep. I made for a clump of low, wind beaten trees about five hundred yards away but, just as I reached them, something whistled past my left cheek and tore into a trunk with an authentic, Sherwood Forest-style 'thwock'. It was a sound that Robin Hood himself would have been proud of.

I should have dived for cover, but instead, foolishly, I turned around to see a man standing on the dunes, armed what was unmistakably an enormous hunting rifle. With the sun at his back, I could even see the red glass lens of the telescopic scope and the US Army-style lettering on his camo jacket.

The rifle jerked and, a millisecond later, another bullet whistled past my head. Only this time, instead of a 'thwock', it continued on out of earshot with barely a rustle of twigs and leaves. Once again, instead of diving for cover, I acted on my instinct and turned on my heels and ran into the shelter of the trees. It probably saved my life.

I charged on and on, up hill and down dale, fear flooding my body with reserves of strength and stamina. I hadn't played football for a while but I was still relatively fit and I reckon it was a good two hours before I finally stopped running. I was now high up in the mountains and I had not seen or heard anything of the shooter since the dunes. I sat down in the heather behind a dry stone wall, cursing my stupidity in leaving the water canteen behind. The sun was directly overhead and I could see clear across the island to a wide blue expanse of ocean beyond. There was little sign of life up here, except for sheep and deer. Where the hell was I? Surely Fleming and Janine couldn't have taken me that far from Inverary, which itself was only an hour or two's drive from Glasgow? My knowledge of Scottish geography wasn't great, but I would have bet that nowhere in the entire country was quite as empty and deserted as this place was.

My thoughts returned to the gunman. It was not McCann, I knew now, but the same guy I had seen in Leith. And presumably the same guy who shot at us in Oakley and at me on the roof of the Scottish Parliament. Add to those three occasions his two free shots from the dunes and it was starting to become clear that, although he may have had the equipment and appearance of a professional assassin, he was a fucking shit shot. Maybe you just couldn't get good hitmen in Scotland these days, I thought, or anywhere else for that matter. In films like *The Bourne Identity* or *The Day of the Jackal*, your average assassin could split a minge hair from half a mile away, but that was probably just typical Hollywood exaggeration.

Then again, they had shooting in the Olympics didn't they? And the Army had plenty of marksmen who were crack shots – I had read about their exploits in Iraq or Afghanistan from time to time – so hitting a target from distance was obviously not impossible. Therefore the question remained; why had McCann hired such a rubbish hitman? Although obviously I was very pleased that he had.

Pondering this puzzle in the pleasant warmth of the afternoon sun, and still reasonably certain that I would find a farmhouse and raise the alarm before too long, I promptly fell asleep.

When I awoke the sun was a low red orb dropping rapidly towards the western horizon, promising a spectacular sunset. But there was already a chill in the mountain air

and the grass and heather were cold and wet beneath me. I was going to freeze if I stayed up here all night, that much was becoming clear. And my earlier certainty of finding help had deserted me; I could see for miles and miles around, and there was still nothing; no smoke, no telephone lines, no roads, no sign of life whatsoever.

Cautiously, I knelt up and peered over the wall, back the way I had come, back to the eastern side of the island. I watched for maybe ten minutes but there was no movement on the hillside or in the valley below. In the distance, I could see the channel between the island and the mainland, which didn't look all that wide from up here. Maybe the gunman had left his jet ski down there on the beach. If I set off now I could slip back down there by dusk and maybe get it started. Did jet skis have keys or just one of those ignition cords? Either way, it was worth a try.

It was a long way down the hill and I felt incredibly exposed as I ran and skidded down the bare slopes, much more so than on the way up when I had been charging ahead on pure adrenaline. However I soon came across a shallow gully with a clear stream in it, which allowed me to take a long, cold drink and also offered some welcome cover. From there, I was able to flit from hiding place to hiding place, and the going began to get easier.

As I went carefully along, I thought about the gunman's apparent failure to track my headlong dash into the hills and it made me wonder again about his effectiveness as an assassin. Still, it didn't matter whether he was the pudding basin-haired killer from No Country for Old Men or Frank Spencer – it would only take one shot on target from that hunting rifle and I was a goner.

The sun had long since disappeared behind the mountain by the time I returned to something approaching sea level, and although it was not yet fully dark the landscape was cast into deep, velvety shadow. The extra protection it provided was welcome but it was also much harder to figure out where I was in relation to the beach. I was standing by an old, gnarled tree, set at the edge of a sprawling thicket of brambles, and certain that I had been here earlier in the day when I heard the voices.

Some kind of primeval autopilot kicked in at this point. The infamous fight or flight reflex had told me to run earlier in the day but now, tired and hungry and with my nerves fraying, I was filled with a kind of strangely fearless resolve. There was a knotty branch

from the tree lying tangled in the upper leaves of the brambles and I fished it out, thinking that it would be rotten and light as paper but somehow certain that it would not be. Sure enough, it was as hard and unyielding as a hockey stick.

Clutching it, I crept on towards the voices. They belonged to at least two men, which suggested that my hitman had called for reinforcements. Of course, they could also have been hill walkers, men from some distant farm or even forest rangers, but I didn't want to jinx it by allowing myself that kind of luck. I followed the edge of the bramble thicket, walking through waist high grass towards a small copse, until from somewhere within the brambles a tumbledown stone wall emerged and I was able to squeeze up against it. The men sounded as though they were on the other side, in amongst the trees.

I looked over the wall but could see nothing, so I edged further along. The wall ended up ahead in a jumble of fallen stones and I suddenly realised I was at the edge of a steep, thickly wooded slope. The voices were clearer now, much clearer, and coming from somewhere down below me. Both were raised in anger, and one sounded familiar. I couldn't make out any words but a Glaswegian bark followed by a throaty laugh gave it away. It was Scrap Iron Ryan.

I gulped, thinking that I would rather face my hapless and heavily armed pursuer than McCann. Nevertheless, the fight or flight instinct was still doing its stone age thang because I began to descend the slope, trying not to scrabble and slip on the loose soil and leaf litter.

It was all going well until a careless step knocked loose a small shower of gravel, which rattled lightly as it bounced and rolled down the hill. I froze, and gripped the branch tightly as I prepared to swing at the first movement through the trees.

[California 14](#)

When Keane arrived in Beverly Hills he sped past the silver Toyota SUV parked at the entrance to his private estate without a second glance. He had missed the first flight back to LA from Pocatello and he was running late – it was already almost five in the

afternoon. Clive would be arriving in a few hours with the money and Ollyver and Miriam would not be far behind him.

The Toyota itself was rocking gently to the sound of snoring. Tommy Wikowski had lowered the driver's seat to an almost horizontal position and he was dreaming about the characters from Ghostbusters. It was the first film that Wikowski had seen as a kid and it had made a huge impression on him; instead of cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians, his childhood games had usually involved him joining Venkman, Ray, Spengler and Winston as a fifth member of the crew.

He hardly ever remembered the dreams, however, although he often woke up with the unsettling idea that the drool on his pillow was of paranormal origin.

It had been a long night for the Pizzazz team. After leaving the Trident, Garner, Tommy and Dee Dee had headed into the hills to confront Zack Keane, while Deano had taken Miriam back to Garner's place to await developments. Keane had not been there and so they had settled down for another stakeout. Wikowski, as the snapper, had been required to stay for the duration while Garner and Dee Dee did six hours each.

At 10am, seeing the photographer dozing in his seat, Garner had sent him home to get some shut-eye. But Tommy, who always got horny when deprived of sleep, had instead gone to a little place he knew of over in the Valley and got himself laid.

Consequently, the first thing he had done when returned to take over from Dee Dee in mid-afternoon was fall asleep in Garner's car, with the engine running and the air conditioning turned up full blast.

When he woke up it was after seven o'clock. The sun had already sunk out of sight behind the western skyline, and deep shadows of evening were pooling underneath the palm trees that lined the road.

"Shit," he muttered.

Tommy sat up quickly and stared at the clock on the dashboard, refusing to believe it could be accurate. He had only intended to have a few zees. And what the hell had he been dreaming about? A dog in a fridge? Man, he really had been out of it.

He turned the key in the ignition and drove up the hill towards Keane's place, praying that the Irishman still wasn't home. But his Corvette was parked in the drive and there were lights on the mansion.

"Shit," Tommy said again, then flicked open his phone to call Garner.

"It's me. He's back. Yeah, just got in. Okay. Naw, I'm cool. Just been a long day is all. Yeah, see you there."

Keane had planned to stay off the booze until the trade was complete and Miriam was safe, but eventually he could stand it no longer and went into the kitchen to get a beer. He stood for some time, just staring at the vast, stainless steel Sub Zero refrigerator, listening to the insistent hum of its motor and admiring its flawless machined contours. It had probably cost at least ten thousand dollars. For a fucking fridge.

He opened the door, a simple act that took almost all of his strength, and exposed the cavernous, brightly lit interior, as clean and sterile as a small operating theatre. It didn't even smell like a fridge, thanks to an automatic air purifier that removed all odours and bacteria every 20 minutes. What the hell for, Keane wondered?

He took out a cold bottle of Heineken (the old Sub Zero did put a nice chill on a beer, he had to admit) and flipped off the lid, taking a long drink. Just then, the doorbell rang and he rushed to the living room window, peering out through the curtains into the deepening gloom.

A large man wearing a Raiders cap, a black body warmer and white jeans was taking photographs of his front door with a long lens camera. The man glanced up in Keane's direction and immediately began taking shots of the window. Keane ducked inside, feeling a sliver of déjà vu, as the doorbell rang again. He went to the front door and flung it open, to find two grim-faced white men and a black woman standing on his doorstep.

Keane glanced at his watch. It was almost nine o'clock, and Ollyver and Miriam would be here any minute. A flashbulb illuminated the doorway and Keane blinked, shielding his eyes as he realised the snapper was still taking photos.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

One of the guys – Keane vaguely recognised him as an English reporter – shoved a Dictaphone in his face. "Where is she, Zack?" he asked.

“Where is who?”

“Where’s Miriam?”

Keane floundered against a second explosion of flash photography, no doubt perfectly capturing his guilty, dumbfounded expression.

“What...how do you know about that?” he asked.

The reporter exchanged smug smiles with his two pals.

“So you have killed her then?” he asked. “What about Stacey? Did you kill her too, Zack?”

Whoever this guy was, he was obviously not a great believer in playing his cards close to his chest.

Keane, unsure what else to do, slammed the door shut in their faces and threw himself against it, breathing heavily. How the fuck had the Press worked this out? And why did they have to come round right at this very moment?

Outside, Garner turned to Deano and whispered, “We’ve got him, mate. You’d better go and call the cops. This is going to make us all very rich.”

Deano trotted away down the drive, pausing only to speak briefly to Tommy.

“The bastard confessed,” he whispered. “We’ve hit the fucking jackpot.”

Keane opened the door again.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Let’s start this again. Who are you, exactly?”

“Exactly your worst nightmare, motherfucker,” muttered Dee Dee.

“You know me, Zack,” said Garner, a little confused, squinting again at the man standing before him. It was getting dark and this was the first time they had met face to face for months, but there was definitely something different about him. “It’s Andy Garner, from Pizzazz. This is Dee Dee Sprakes, my chief crime reporter.”

Garner. Of course! Keane had even punched the guy once, at a boozy pool party over in Bel Air.

“Andy, I don’t know how you’ve found out about this,” said Keane, although even as he said it he realised what the connection must be – Florence! “I haven’t done anything to Miriam, the exact opposite in fact. I’m trying to save her life. She’s been ...Listen, why don’t you come inside? And bring your bloody snapper too. Miriam is due back here any minute.”

Garner turned to Dee Dee, who opened her jacket to reveal what appeared to be some kind of terrible medical apparatus strapped over her white polo shirt.

“Are you okay?” asked Keane, before realising that he was looking at a large silver pistol in a holster. “Sorry, I thought it was...” he tailed off, uselessly.

“Just so’s you know,” said Dee Dee, looking at him meaningfully as she trooped inside after her boss. Keane held the door for the photographer, recognising him as the fat slob from the McDonald’s that day, and then slammed it shut on the night.

Five minutes later he was perched on the edge of a soft leather sofa, breaking the seal on a bottle of 18-year-old Glenfiddich. He sloshed the malt into four glasses on the coffee table, then picked one up, took a sip of the burning golden liquor and waved at the other three measures.

“Help yourself,” he said, sinking back into the sofa.

Tommy, who had been sitting on the windowsill, bounded across the room and grabbed a drink. “Slayntey,” he said, before knocking back the whisky in one go. Garner and Dee Dee did not move from their seats.

Keane looked at Garner and then at the blinking red light of the Dictaphone on the smoked glass tabletop. He knew there was no point trying to bluff his way out of it as they obviously knew enough already to go public with their story, which, inaccurate as it was, nevertheless left him with no choice but to come clean entirely.

He took a deep breath... and the doorbell rang again.

“Excuse me,” he said, getting up and walking out of the room. He wondered how Ollyver would take the discovery that there were three journalists sitting in his living room, and decided that ‘very badly’ was probably the best prediction.

But it was not Ollyver. It was Rosa Velasco and her nephew, Andre, and if the Pizzazz dudes had looked grim earlier, then Rosa’s face was beyond apocalyptic.

“Mr Keane,” she said. “Andre has something he would like to tell choo.”

“Rosa, this maybe isn’t the best time...” Keane began, looking at Dre. The boy’s head was down and he exuded an air of utter dejection, like a ghetto Billy Bunter dragged to the headmaster’s study to confess his latest wheeze. Keane imagined Rosa twisting his ear as she led him up to the door. Yaroo!

“No, he wants to tell choo now,” insisted Rosa, kicking Dre sharply on the back of the calf and then making the sign of the cross.

“I brought some drugs up in here,” Dre mumbled, still not looking up from his Nikes.

“Oh for God’s sake,” Keane snapped. “I know you did, Dre, do you think I’m stupid or something? Rosa, I honestly don’t think it’s such a big deal that you had to come all the way up here at night.”

Dre lifted his head for the first time to shoot a confused glance at his great-aunt.

“How did you find out?” asked Rosa.

“Well, I could hardly miss it could I? Stinking out the house like that. No wonder he never got any work done round the place.”

Rosa frowned for an instant, and then suddenly reached up and smacked Dre around the side of the head. “Andre!” she cried. “Choo been smoking marijuana here too?”

“Just a little chronic, gran’moms,” mumbled Dre.

Keane looked from one to the other. “So you aren’t talking about the joints then?” he asked.

Rosa smacked Dre again and he looked at Keane, his eyes red-rimmed but filled with defiance.

“No sir,” he said. “I planted some coke in your damn pool house, that’s what I’m talkin’ ‘bout.”

Keane grimaced. Fucking hell, he thought, this was going incredibly badly.

“Why?”

“Somebody pay him to do it, Mr Keane,” said Rosa. “They were gonna try and set you up in the newspapers.”

“Right,” Keane snapped. “You’d better come in and bloody well get it back then, hadn’t you?”

He stood aside to allow Dre to lumber past him into the hall, followed by Rosa.

“Don’t go in the living room, I’ve got some people round. Let’s just go straight down to the pool.”

Keane led the way through the den and down the spiral staircase to the pool. It was a chilly night and when he switched on the lights he saw that the heat from the water had steamed up the windows.

“Where is it?” asked Keane, suddenly remembering the way Dre had started when he emerged from the pool house into the garden the previous day.

Dre said nothing but slunk around the side of the pool, his sneakers squeaking on the wet tiles. He went over to a wooden bench and lifted it up, exposing a storage space that Keane had never even realised he had, and retrieved a small, tightly wrapped brown paper parcel. He returned to the foot of the staircase and went to hand it over to Keane, who threw his hands up.

“Oh no, I’m not touching that,” he said. “It’s your problem now pal.”

Rosa shook her head balefully and uttered a few sharp sentences in Spanish, before turning to Keane.

“Mr Keane, I don’t want choo to get into trouble. Neither does Andre.”

“He has a funny way of showing it.”

“But I don’ want to take this drugs back to my home and God knows I can’t trust Andre anymore,” said Rosa. “Do you think you could allow him to flush it down the pan?”

Keane shrugged. “I don’t see why not,” he said. “You can use the master bathroom. Just hurry up – and don’t spill any of it, okay? Now I’d better go back and see my guests.”

They trooped back up the stairs and into the kitchen, where Keane heard a shout from the living room.

“Zack,” called the voice. It sounded like Garner. “Zack, you’d better get in here, mate.”

Keane glanced at Rosa and Dre. “Go on,” he said. “And just let yourself out when you’ve done it. I’ll drive down to talk to you about this tomorrow Rosa, okay?”

He went into the living room through the back door, finding Garner, Tommy and Dee Dee all sitting very close together on the couch, their hands tucked behind their backs. They looked terrified, although Keane could not figure out why.

“Not so fast,” came a voice from the hallway, and seconds later Rosa and Dre entered the living room through the front door, at the point of a large gun in the hands of Neal Ollyver. A second pistol, a silver one just like Dee Dee’s, was tucked into the back of his trousers.

Keane noticed a brief look pass between Dre and Dee Dee, and intuitively he knew that she had been the one who had given Dre the coke to plant. But he was not able to dwell on the idea, as Ollyver was speaking.

“What you got there, esse?” he asked, snatching the package out of Dre’s raised hands. He kneaded it and then cackled with delight, looking over at Keane.

“I thought you quit this shit, Indy?” he asked. “Tut tut, naughty boy.”

“I have,” said Keane, glaring at Dee Dee. She looked away and he knew his hunch had been accurate. Not that it helped him very much.

“You planning a party? I thought I said to be alone tonight?” Ollyver asked. “Hey ho, it’s turning out to be quite a profitable evening.”

He laughed again as he put the coke into the pocket of his leather jacket.

Then, still chuckling, he took the silver pistol from his waistband and lifted both guns so they were pointing directly at Keane’s head.

“Now where’s my fucking money, dickhead?” he said coldly, cutting off his laughter as though with a knife.

“It’s here,” said Keane. “Where’s Miriam?”

Ollyver glanced at the trio on the sofa. “I don’t know who you’re talking about,” he said. “This is just a business deal, right?”

“Look, asshole,” said Tommy Wikowski. “We know you kidnapped the chick, okay? We thought it was this guy here, but you just went and proved us wrong. So just go ahead and do what you need to do, get the money, give back the girl and get your scrawny carrot ass down to Panama or somewheres. With no extradition treaty, know what I’m sayin’?”

“You think you’re going to put the cops onto me, is that it?” asked Ollyver.

“You’re damn fucking right,” replied Tommy, flexing his broad shoulders against whatever was holding his hands.

Ollyver scowled and then looked up at Dre. “You, Cheech and Chong, get down on the floor,” he said, moving one of the guns away from Keane and pointing it at the youth.

Dre lumbered down on to haunches and then lay on his belly, as Ollyver stooped over him and bound his hands together with a plastic cable tie. Satisfied, he walked across to Tommy and smashed him around the head with one of his guns.

“You fat fuck,” he snapped. “What makes you think any of you are going to be alive to talk to the police, huh?”

“Come off it, man,” cut in Dee Dee. “You ain’t gonna kill us, not unless you want to go down for, what, six murders, one of them a little old grandma too. I suggest you cut the shit and do your trade as fast as you can.”

Ollyver glowered at her but didn’t move.

“And for the record,” Dee Dee wasn’t finished yet. “Tommy there suggested Panama but that wouldn’t be no good for you – too hot for your whitebread ginger ass. Try fuckin’ Siberia instead.”

Ollyver laughed. “You’re pretty funny, Oprah,” he said. “And you know what? You’re right, I wasn’t going to kill any of you. But I think I might make you the exception, you black bitch.”

He turned to Rosa. “You too granny, down on the floor there.”

“Come off it Ollyver,” said Keane. “She’s an old lady. Look, do you want me to go and get this money or not?”

“Okay, go. But if you’re not back in two minutes, the Golden Girl here is the first one to get it.”

“First I want to know that Miriam is okay.”

“Oh Indy,” Ollyver said, in a high falsetto, “you’re my hero.” He shook his head and laughed. “I expected you to come out with that old clichéd line,” he went on. “I didn’t expect the rest of it, with all these clowns and a sackful of coke, but I did expect this. Don’t move a fucking muscle.”

Ollyver took a step back and, without taking his eyes off Keane, picked up a canvas rucksack from the floor. He took out an iPad and switched it on, before gesturing Keane over to an empty armchair.

“Siddown,” he said. “You got wireless in this place?”

Keane nodded as Ollyver handed him the tablet.

“Click on the Skype logo,” he said. “There’s a video call saved... there, right, call it.”

Keane stared at the familiar blue screen, feeling guilty for not calling his parents more often. He might end up getting himself killed tonight, he thought, and he hadn’t spoken to his mum for weeks. Then the call connected and he saw Miriam.

She was in a dark room, her face lit only by the eerie glow from a computer monitor. She had been gagged and her right eye was bruised and swollen shut. At first, Keane thought she might be dead but then he noticed the sheen of tears on her cheeks.

“Miriam!” he called.

The ghostly figure on the Skype screen jolted awake and opened its good eye. She mumbled something completely unintelligible through the gag and moved her shoulders, weakly. Keane knew she had been tied up, probably with the same cable ties used on the others.

“Are you okay?” he asked, aware that it was a stupid question.

Miriam nodded and mumbled something else, before Ollyver snatched the iPod away.

“You bastard,” said Keane.

“Sticks and stones, Indy,” he said, closing the Skype window and returning the tablet to his rucksack. “Now, to save you any more stupid questions, here’s the plan. You get my money and then you take your snazzy ‘Vette out there and drive to Vegas. Once you get there, call me and I give you a zip code to put into your Sat Nav. It’ll take you straight to her. If I even think that you’ve tipped off the cops about me, I’ll hang up and throw the cell in the Pacific. And you’ll never fucking find her without that zip code, believe me.”

Keane nodded, shocked at how ruthless and calculating Ollyver had been. The bastard was going to get away with it, he realised. With this, and with Stacey, and with Anna and any more besides.

[The Island 3](#)

“Hey!” came the shout, followed by the whip crack of a gunshot; and then another, almost immediately. Two shots. I dived to my left and landed heavily, before rolling over onto my back. I knew that I had not been hit and leapt to my feet. From this new vantage point I could see a clearing in the woods, where in the deepening gloom one man was standing over another, looking down at his adversary on the ground.

I stepped forward into the clearing but the standing figure did not turn. It was the hit man, still in his camo gear but now with a fur-lined hunting cap on his head. His rifle was lying by his feet, not far away from Scrap Iron Ryan, who now had a hole the size of a snooker ball in the centre of his forehead. So much for the assassin not being a crack shot.

All that information was processed in an instant, along with the fact that I was still holding the gnarled, heavy branch. Without actually making a conscious decision to do so, I strode across the clearing and swung it at the shooter's head, hard, like Viv Anderson clubbing an England fast bowler out of Trent Bridge, up, up over the stands and into the river. He went down at the first attempt, which was lucky because I think I must have fainted at that point.

Certainly, when I came too – it could have been an hour or more later, but I think it was only a matter of seconds because the light in the clearing was exactly the same – there were three of us stretched out there on the grass. At least one of us was dead, and at the memory of the shocking thump I had delivered to the gunman's temple I feared it may have been two. Shaking, all the fight now drained out of me, I knee-walked the few yards to where the felled assassin lay.

His hunter's cap had survived the blow, and probably saved him from any serious damage, but he appeared to be out cold. Once again, I was struck by a weird sense of déjà vu, just as I had been when I first saw the bastard from the window of that converted warehouse in Leith. I lifted off his hat and turned his head so I could get a proper look at his face.

Fuck me.

Fuck.

Me.

It was Zack Keane.

He didn't come around for ages, which was lucky really as it gave me a bit of time to get my head together. I suppose I should have been more freaked out but after all I had been through over the past few weeks, this final insult to reality, this slap in the face to common sense, this wedgie to the natural and proper order of the universe, well, it just seemed to fit perfectly.

What's more, I found some cigarettes and a half bottle of whisky in the pockets of Scrap Iron's parka and I sat for a long time with the hunting rifle across my knees, drinking and smoking and feeling the tension and fear gradually ebbing out of my body.

Keane finally began to stir when I was lighting a small pile of dry sticks from the clearing with Scrap Iron's Zippo, so I went over and tied his arms tightly behind his back with the length of rope that I had been lugging around all day. Soon he was rolling around and groaning, so I helped him sit him up and gave him a sip of whisky.

"Got a tab?" he slurred.

I nodded and lit one up for him, putting it between his lips before lighting one for myself. I returned to my seat by the fire and picked up the hunting rifle.

"It was Janine, wasn't it?" I asked.

"What?"

"That's how you found me, through Janine."

"Yeah, sure. I was seeing her for a while a few years back." Keane had an odd kind of accent, like somebody from California doing a bad impression of an Ulsterman. I ground my teeth, feeling utterly ridiculous as I realised that the whole thing between me and Janine had been a sham. It wasn't just that she had decided to sell me out after hearing of the plot to rob Ramsdale's safe, it had been a lie from the very beginning when she told me she had turned down Keane in that London club.

"Oh fucking hell," Keane exclaimed now, letting out a loud groan. "I forgot about that. I fucking shot him, didn't I?"

I followed his stare to McCann's corpse, which I had earlier dragged away to the side of the clearing and covered in leaves. I had even closed his eyes, an action that had always seemed like a corny movie stunt but was in fact entirely natural; to have left them open, reflecting nothing but the night sky, seemed like the cruellest thing imaginable.

"He is dead, isn't he?" asked Keane, unable to disguise the sliver of hope in his voice.

I felt it was a rhetorical question, so I just blew out some smoke and flicked my cigarette at the fire, which was already beginning to burn out.

"Fuck. Course he is, shit," Keane went on. "Well, we can't just leave him there."

"Can't we?" I said. "Isn't that what you were going to do with me?"

“Huh?” he grunted, looking genuinely puzzled.

“After you shot me, you dick. What were you planning to do with my body?”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” Keane replied, with a dismissive shake of his head as though he was tired of me going on about it.

I said nothing, forcing him to continue.

“I don’t know,” he snapped. “I wouldn’t have shot you, man. It was all just... oh for fuck’s sake, this wasn’t supposed to happen. Nobody was supposed to get really hurt.”

“No, hang on. It was all just... what, exactly? Because it seemed to me like you would have shot me. In fact, I think you tried to shoot me on three separate bastard occasions.”

“Exactly. Three times, man. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“Yeah, that you were trying to kill me.”

“Listen, if I was trying to kill you, you’d be dead, right. I go to target practice in LA, okay, I’m a good shot. It was just...”

He broke off again and groaned loudly as his head slumped forward, like a puppet with a cut string.

I lifted the rifle and pulled the lever on the side to cock it, forcing a bullet into the chamber. Keane’s head jerked back up again.

“Got your attention now, have I? Good. Don’t do that again or I will shoot you, you fucking dickweed.”

“Do what again?”

“Start to explain why you’ve been trying to kill me and then go, ‘Ohh, it was just...’ and stop. Just what, exactly? Just a random murder thing? Just for shits and giggles? What... the fuck... were you playing at?”

“It was therapy, okay?” he yelled. “I know I must sound like a total idiot from California but it’s the truth. It was my therapist’s idea, okay.”

“Your therapist told you to come to Scotland and kill me?”

“No, ‘course not. And I wasn’t going to kill you, I told you that already. He just gave me the idea. I have... I have issues, okay. And since my wife died, since everything went stir crazy, my problems, well, they got a lot worse.”

“We’ve all got problems, pal.”

“Yeah, but not everybody gets them splashed all over the Daily Star every morning. Ah bollocks, you probably know about them better than I do. I had a thing with drink and drugs...and sex. I had addictions, okay? And then I got suicidal and I tried to kill myself.”

I lowered the rifle and took another hit of whisky, before realising the implications of what Keane had just told me about his alcohol addiction.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Ah, don’t worry about it. In fact, given what’s just happened...”

I caught his meaning entirely. If you couldn’t have a drink after you had just killed a man, then bloody hell, when could you? I stood up and crossed the clearing to give him more whisky and another cigarette.

“Carry on,” I said, as I sat back down. “You might as well spit it all out now.”

“Yeah, well, it got really bad for a time, pretty fucking dark you know. You want to try losing your mind when the paparazzi are following you everywhere you go. It’s just the pits. I hate it, I fucking hate my life. I’d do anything to trade it all in, to live like a normal person again.”

“Nobody’s forcing you to live the high life in Beverly Hills, you know. You could go anywhere with your money, do anything.”

“Oh yeah? I’ve got contracts that say I have to keep myself in the public eye. If I don’t then the royalties stop coming in, the chat shows and magazine interviews dry up, the whole nine yards depends on me staying in Hollywood. Zack Keane the pop star isn’t me, the guy you see in the papers, that’s not me, it’s a cartoon, a fucking character in a soap opera that’s peddled to the masses as being real life. If that Zack Keane’s going to continue to exist then I’ve got to put myself out there, no matter how much everyone hates me. I mean, what do you really know about my life, or about any of the prancing idiots in Hollywood or Notting Hill or wherever. Nothing. You only ever see us on TV, you read interviews in Heat or in the tabloids that have probably been drafted by a publicist, and yet you think you fucking know us. It’s a game, a charade, that’s all.”

“Jack it in then. Move away, change your name, get a normal job.”

Keane snorted. "Like I said, I've signed contracts. And, if I'm being honest, I don't want to jack it in. I like being rich and I like performing. I want to ride out the storm, have another hit record..."

He paused and took a deep breath.

"Anyway, that's my life and it had all gone to shit and that's why I tried to top myself. A couple of times, actually. It never made the papers and I won't go into the gory details, but it was brutal. In hospital my therapist told me I had self-destructive urges, and if I could find a substitute to take them out on, a surrogate 'me' if you like, then it would help. Or something like that anyway. Then I saw a story about you and Janine on the net and that was it, it all just seemed to fall into place. I rang her up and she arranged the whole thing, the guns and everything, for a hundred grand. I'm sorry man, but you were my substitute suicide. I never planned to really kill you, but I thought that trying to do it might help me. You know, like role play."

I shook my head in disbelief, and then took another belt of the whisky.

"Bloody hell," I said. "Let me get this straight. You thought that by trying to murder your lookalike you would feel a bit better about yourself, maybe cheer yourself up a bit, is that what you're saying?"

"Yeah, basically, although when my therapist explained the idea it didn't sound quite so stupid. I was really trying to kill me, you see, to get rid of the self-hate and all that. I just..." he tailed off, finally aware perhaps of just how bonkers he sounded. "By the way, I reckon you're a pretty good likeness, you know. Congratulations."

I shook my head. Congratulations? He had just confessed to attempting to kill me as some kind of warped therapy session, and then with the next breath he was telling me how lucky I was that we looked alike. How self-centred can you get?

"I can't see it myself," I replied, with something of a bitter laugh.

"Oh come on," said Keane. "You must do. I know the circumstances are pretty unusual anyway, but you must admit it's a bit weird sitting here and talking to somebody who looks just like you."

"Only a bit better looking."

"Well, yeah, obviously but you are still pretty damn close."

I snorted. "I'll tell you one thing you and I don't have in common," I said, clambering to my feet. "In about 15 years time when you finally get out of Barlinnie for murdering the Godfather of Glasgow, only one of us will have an arsehole as wide as the Manchester Ship Canal. And it won't be me."

"Oh, that's not fair," said Keane, as I strode out of the clearing, feeling a bit foolish for adding that final, unnecessary clarification to what was surely an otherwise excellent parting shot.

I walked through the woods and up to the crest of a stony ridge, realising I was at the top of one of the low hills overlooking the beach. I could see Keane's jet-ski in the moonlight, pulled up onto the sand with another boat, a RIB with an outboard motor, now berthed alongside it.

I sat down and slugged the whisky, already feeling the resentment starting to ebb away. Despite his huge ego, homicidal tendencies and many other undoubted character flaws, Keane didn't seem to be such a bad fellow and I had even found myself feeling a bit sorry for him back there.

I finished the bottle and flung it away into the darkness, before turning and heading back to the clearing. To my surprise, Keane was sobbing quietly and he started when I patted him awkwardly on the shoulder. It was a bit weird seeing him up close – for all my scepticism, I had to admit we really did look very alike. Not that it was such a proud boast to be honest, with his drink and drug ravaged eyes, sallow skin, puffy eyes and the enormous welt across his cheek from where I had hit him with the branch.

"So what happened with McCann anyway?" I asked, as I produced the last of the dead man's cigarettes.

"Fuck knows," said Keane with a sniff. "I figured you'd come back and try to steal the jet-ski so I was just waiting around when suddenly he turned up. I met him a few times before, when me and Janine had our thing going. He was a real psycho, kept coming down to London and threatening me but I had all these minders, real big dudes, so I just laughed him off. Course, I never expected to see him again, especially not out here."

"Where are we anyway?" I cut in.

“Jura,” replied Keane. “You can see Ireland from here on a clear day, but there’s hardly a soul actually lives on the island.”

“Perfect place for a murder then,” I said.

“Yeah, well. Listen, Paul, I should have said this before but, you know...it is okay if I call you Paul, isn’t it?...seriously, I am sorry for putting you through all this shit. And honestly, I never intended to kill you, man.”

“Okay, apology accepted. But I don’t know if I can just forget about it, just like that, you know? Anyway, go on.”

“Yeah, well, that’s it really. McCann turns up looking for you and we end up having this big barney. Mostly old grievances about Janine, really. Then I heard you falling down through the trees, he went to shoot me and I shot him first.”

“Twice.”

“No, once. He shot at me first.”

McCann had a gun? I scanned the clearing again, almost immediately spotting a handgun with chipped black paint lying among the leaves.

“So what are you going to do?” asked Keane, after I had picked up the weapon. “Turn me in to the cops?”

I shook my head slowly and blew out my cheeks. “I think I’d have a bit of explaining to do myself, to tell you the truth. It’s been a strange couple of days.”

“Yeah, so I heard. Janine told me you and some others had ripped McCann off, big style. Like I said, that’s what he was doing here in the first place. He was planning to kill you.”

It was at that point, standing in the clearing with two guns, one of them a murder weapon, my finger prints all over both of them, that the idea hit me. It arrived fully formed, but hazy, shimmering, chimeric, like a dream that you are on the verge of forgetting, dangerously close to slipping away again, never to be retrieved.

“So, really, I saved your life, man. You probably owe me one,” Keane was saying.

“Shut up a minute.”

“I didn’t want to mention it but...”

“Seriously, shut up. You said you hate your life in Hollywood, right? And you want to jack it all in but you can’t?”

“Right.”

“So what if somebody were to go out there and live your life for you? Leaving you free to do your own thing? Move to a shack in the mountains. Grow a beard and go surfing in Australia. You could come back to LA a couple of times a year, say, for awards ceremonies and what not, but the rest of the time...”

“You mean, like a double?”

“Exactly.”

I looked at Zack Keane and he looked at me, and suddenly the idea became a real, concrete thing. He had an escape route, a chance to slip out of the spotlight for a while and get his head back together and I had...well, I had the chance to go and live in Hollywood as a rock star.

“Let’s just say that if this double were to go back to LA in your place, he would have full access to everything that you have. The cars, the houses, the money, the girls, the drugs, the parties. Everything, yeah?”

“Absolutely,” Keane said. “He, you, could have my life, if you really want it. It would work, too. Apart from Stace, I never really had any close pals out there. And since she died, well, like I said, things have been tough and I’ve been pretty cut off from everything. The only problem would be the paps.”

“How hard can it be to fool them? Every time I see you in the paper you’re wearing shades and looking dog rough, so that should be easy enough to mimic.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I’ve just got a new agent who hardly knows me too, so he would never notice. He could get you into premieres and clubs and guest lists and all that shit. Just steer clear of too many Brits and you’ll be okay. To most Yanks, I’m just a moody pop star they never really heard of. Nobody who knows me well enough need ever know.”

“And in return, I’d be willing to forget about anything that happened over here these last few weeks.”

“Even McCann?”

“Especially McCann. I just nicked £2million from him remember. He wouldn’t have stopped until it was me with the hole in the head. Shit, that reminds me, Janine and Fleming will have run off with all that cash by now.”

“I don’t think so,” said Keane. “McCann said he’d left them both tied up in your hotel room in Inverary. He seemed to think that you’d spent the night shagging her in there and that pissed him off more than anything.”

I turned to look at the dead gangster. Maybe, just maybe, for all his tough talk, Janine really had broken his heart and his campaign to do me in had in fact been powered by love rather than a desire to get his money back.

“That girl really is bad for your health,” I muttered, stooping to untie the rope around Keane’s wrists. He stood up, rubbing his arms and we faced each other for the first time.

“We’d better start digging,” I said.

And that was pretty much that. McCann’s intention to leave me on Jura was confirmed when I found a spade in his RIB on the beach, and then it was a relatively easy matter to dig a shallow grave in the clearing. Keane pushed Scrap Iron’s body into the hole and we set off for the mainland, me in the boat and Keane on the jet-ski, before stopping halfway across in the deepest part of the channel. I smashed a hole in the fibreglass hull and clambered on to the seat behind Keane, leaving the RIB to fill with water and sink. I wiped the guns as best I could and then threw them in after it.

There was a Land Rover with a trailer waiting by a beach on the other side, and we loaded the jet-ski and set off for Inverary in the half-light of a Scottish summer dawn. The George Hotel was quiet and nobody saw us as we walked in, trotted up the stairs and stood outside the room I had hoped to share with Janine, several lifetimes ago. Keane, who had taken a spare room key with him in case of emergencies, opened the door.

Just as McCann had said, Janine and Fleming were still there, sitting back to back in the bath, clad only in their underwear and bound together with reams of electrical tape, which had also been used as a crude gag. There was a stench in the room and as I stepped closer I could see that Fleming, who seemed to be unconscious, had soiled himself. Janine was sitting in a cold puddle of piss and shit, one eye glittering malevolently as she glared up at me, the other swollen shut. There was dried blood on her forehead and in her new peroxide blonde hair.

I walked past her and opened a window. Keane had consistently said that he had never intended to kill me, and I suppose I believed him. But had Janine known that? I would probably never find out for sure.

Keane called through from the bedroom. The two bags full of money, Fleming's and mine, were in the bottom of the wardrobe. My passport, wallet and mobile phone, ready for fleeing the country following the raid on Ramsdale's office, were still in the side pouch.

"I guess its all yours now," Keane said. "I'll go and get my stuff from my room then meet you back at the car in five minutes."

"What about them?" I asked, nodding towards the bathroom.

"What about them," said Keane. "Leave them, call the police from the airport. Nobody would believe them if they talk and besides, Janine would be implicating herself in an attempted murder and Fleming in a massive cash robbery."

Keane left and I picked up the two bags, before one final twist of the knife occurred to me and I stuck my head around the bathroom door.

"I'll be off then," I said to Janine. "Me, Zack and Ryan had a good long chat last night and got a few things sorted out. One of them being that you planned the raid on his safe and the other that you were blackmailing his gay BFF Marvin. Funnily enough, he didn't take it too well."

"MMMFFF!" Janine thrashed as best she could under the mummifying grip of the tough black tape.

"Anyway, you can explain it to him yourself when he gets here."

And with that, I walked out and locked the door behind me. Before returning to the car, I walked down to the harbour and made one quick call, before throwing my phone as far out as I could out into the waters of Loch Fyne.

The following day, when Keane and I were in New York after taking the daily Continental transatlantic flight from Glasgow, The Scottish Sun ran a photo exclusive on its front page:

It was Janine, half naked and bloodied and tied up in the bath, glaring at the camera's lens just as she had glared at me shortly before I had called the paper's news desk and left a message.

“SCRAP IRON’S TORTURE CHAMBER,” ran the headline. “Police seek gangster after sickening assault on glamour girl and rival.

“COPS are today hunting Scotland’s leading villain ‘Scrap Iron’ Ryan McCann in connection with the kidnap and torture of his former fiancée and a shady underworld rival.

“Model Janine Giacomo and Edinburgh businessman Frank Fleming were beaten, stripped and left bound and gagged for up to 24 hours in a bath in a secluded Highland hotel.

“The crime, which has shocked the tiny village of Inverary, is believed to be connected to the theft of several hundred thousand pounds from the Edinburgh offices of McCann’s solicitor, John Ramsdale.

“Police were last night waiting to question Ms Giacomo and Mr Fleming, who were still being treated for their horrific injuries in Vale of Leven hospital in West Dunbartonshire.

“Meanwhile, The Scottish Sun reporter and photographer who rescued the brutalised captives from right under McCann’s nose are being tipped for bravery awards.

“The gang boss, 43, is now thought to have fled the country and detectives in Glasgow are working with their counterparts in London and Spain in an attempt to track him down.

“However, one police insider said last night: ‘It’s a bit of a mystery. Janine and Frank are not saying much and unless Scrap Iron turns up we may never establish exactly what happened’”

[California 15](#)

Just then the door opened and ‘Clive’ stepped into the living room. He had been hiding upstairs in one of the bedrooms, waiting for me to come up and collect the money. We had been planning to rush Ollyver, disarm him and then call the cops, which with hindsight was (yet another) pretty rubbish plan.

But he had obviously grown tired of waiting to put it into action and decided to crash the party.

Clive said absolutely nothing and he was completely unarmed but his appearance alone was enough to cause Ollyver to lower both his guns to his sides and stand, gaping in disbelief.

“Fuck me,” the three Pizzazz people on the couch spoke with one voice, all their heads turning from the figure in the doorway to me and then back again.

Even Andre, lying face down on the floor, his mouth full of shag pile, exclaimed: “Fmmf mmmff!”

‘Clive’, as you might have guessed, was actually the real Zack Keane.

My name is Paul Crombie, from Wigan, and tonight Matthew, I’m going to be impersonating a rock star. And what’s more, I can’t sing a fucking note.

“I knew it!” exclaimed Garner. “I knew there was something different about you!”

“Shit a brick,” said Tommy. “Shit a fucking brick.”

Ollyver, still apparently lost for words, narrowed his eyes as he too stared at us both in turn. He looked like a man upon whom fate has just played a particularly cruel joke.

In fact, the only person who did not freeze at this most unexpected turn of events was Rosa Velasco.

She reached into her handbag and pulled out a small, blue, automatic sub-machine gun, stepped forward and twatted Neal Ollyver around the back of the head with it. He dropped to the floor and rolled onto his back, starting to bring both guns up towards Rosa. But she calmly shot him in the lower leg, just once, showing an expertise with automatic firearms that I had frankly not expected of my – well, Zack’s – cleaner.

Ollyver howled in agony and dropped his weapons, wrapping both hands around his leg as blood began to bubble through his chinos.

Rosa put one foot on his chest and shoved the machine gun in his face, the barrel pressing into his cheek.

“Tell Mr Keane the zip code or I’ll shoot choo down like a dog,” she said. “Don’t think that I won’t.”

“I’m bleeding!” howled Ollyver.

“The zip code,” said Rosa. “Or so help me, I’ll blow your brains all over this carpet, even if it means I never get the stains out.”

Ollyver, to give him his credit, knew when he was beaten and coughed out the location where we would find Miriam.

And that’s it, really. Before we could even call an ambulance, Dean Simon, the other Pizzazz guy, showed up with a convoy of Beverly Hills cops and Ollyver was hauled away to hospital in handcuffs.

The cops called some other cops in Las Vegas, who burst into a room in a mid-range hotel on the Strip to rescue Miriam, who was tired and bruised but generally okay. Physically, at least. Ollyver had tried to molest her several times but she had been able to fight him off. Eventually, however, he had forced himself on to her and then flown into a rage when he could not achieve an erection, blackening her eye with his fist. It was then, apparently, that he had broken down in tears and told Miriam he had been diagnosed with prostate cancer, and the disease and his medication were affecting his libido.

The doctors at the hospital were able to confirm this diagnosis and apparently it is so far advanced that they think he might not even make it to trial. Hey ho. If he does, then the DA thinks the booking ledger from Shelter Cove Cabins and the flakes of white VW paint from his pick-up truck would be enough to tie him to Stacey’s death as well.

Of course, the cops who arrived at the mansion could scarcely believe what they were seeing and we all spent a good while being questioned that night. But Rosa, Zack and I had managed to have a good chat before we were carted away, while the rescue in Las Vegas was still ongoing, and we got our stories straight.

Apparently, she had known that I wasn’t really Zack Keane from the first time she saw me down at her flat in East LA.

Anyway, as far as the Beverly Hills detectives were concerned, I was a double/minder/housesitter employed by Zack to stand in for him at various functions, not an imposter who had actually been living his life in its entirety for months. Such arrangements must be more common than you might think in Hollywood, because they didn’t seem that fazed by it at all. In fact, they were more impressed with Zack’s

gumshoe work in tracking down Ollyver and bringing him to justice. I was a bit annoyed at him taking all the credit, I must admit, but I suffered in silence.

But the newspapers had a field day. Zack Keane tracks down his wife's killer, who is then shot by his cleaner in a bloodbath at his luxury mansion – it was a story so off the scale that it made headlines around the world.

Of course, the Pizzazz News and Picture Agency knew the story had an even more remarkable twist but they agreed to keep quiet. Partly this was because Zack agreed to give them exclusive photo and interview rights in exchange for favourable coverage, but mostly because otherwise we would have pressed charges against Dee Dee Sprakes for paying a minor to plant cocaine in Zack's house.

Dee Dee, by the way, left Pizzazz soon afterwards and returned to the National Enquirer, where she has a great life chasing aliens in the Nevada Desert and door stepping serial killers all across the United States.

Garner turned out to be an okay guy in the end, and he came over all Max Clifford as he battled to make sure Zack got as little negative press as possible. He has now sold the agency to Tommy and Deano and is currently writing a book charting the pubic hair fashions of Hollywood over the past 75 years.

Andre was never prosecuted for the cocaine he stashed, for the simple reason that the police thought it was Ollyver's, or for the Uzi that probably saved all our lives. Rosa herself took the rap for that one, but given her age and respectable standing in the community, not to mention her downright heroism, the police overlooked the unlicensed machine gun.

As for Zack, he found that he was enjoying being back in the glare of the spotlight, and within a few weeks he was behaving like an insufferable prick again.

I went to Las Vegas to visit Miriam in hospital as soon as I could. As a victim of a sexual crime, her name had been kept completely out of all the coverage but needless to say she was more than a little bit confused and upset by everything that was going on. We had a long chat and I came clean about everything (well, almost everything. She didn't need to know about me robbing Scrap Iron McCann, for instance).

Still, she had been through hell and, although she never blamed me for her kidnapping and subsequent sexual assault, I always suspected that she did. I certainly

blamed myself for what happened, and Florence definitely did. She came across to Vegas and I paid for us both to stay in a hotel while Miriam was in hospital but in the end, I was glad when Miriam was discharged and the girls decided to return to France.

Of all the people involved in this crazy story, Miriam is the only one who got hurt who didn't thoroughly deserve it, and I don't think I can ever truly forgive myself for that. Sorry, mon cher.

As for me, I returned to LA to start looking for my own place, maybe down in Santa Monica, when Zack suddenly announced that he was going to return to Idaho – or was it Alaska? – to work on a new 'concept' album.

So I've got the house to myself again. The story has held so far, but I reckon my identity and my role in it is bound to come out sooner rather than later. And then it might be time to move on, before big Marvin or Fleming or even (God help me) Janine decides to come looking for money and revenge. Maybe Strathclyde Police will find a body buried somewhere on the east coast of Jura, although somehow I doubt it.

For now, though, nobody knows where I am. Well, almost nobody. Just yesterday, in fact, there was a ring at the doorbell and there was Faz, as bold as brass. He'd been living down in Rio and spotted me in the background in one of the photos from the Beverly Hills crime scene, which apparently even made the Brazilian papers. He put the whole thing together and caught a flight to LAX, along with a couple of girls he had met in a beach bar down there.

And so, here we are, back in a strange way to where this story began; it is a Wednesday afternoon and I'm having a beer with Faz, already tired of his banter but enjoying it at the same time. Only, instead of sitting in a crappy sports bar in Leith, about to be assaulted by a couple of headcases, we are soaking in a hot tub outside a Beverly Hills mansion with two tanned and tactile Brazilian girls in bikinis, one of whom is rubbing my leg with her toe, getting closer and closer to her intended target with every stroke...

[About the author](#)

My name is Ben Borland. I'm a newspaper journalist living in Glasgow, Scotland, although I'm originally from south of the border in Lancashire. I'm married to Fiona and we have two fantastic children, Katie and James.

If you enjoyed LA 3-Way, then please read my other novel published by OBOOKO. Sharko is a fast-moving historical thriller featuring love, lust, murder, corruption and the hunt for a serial killer with seemingly supernatural powers – not to mention several man-eating sharks – set against the backdrop of the 1930s Depression and amid the breathless heat of an Australian summer.

http://www.obooko.com/obooko_thriller/bookpages3/thr0221-free-ebook-sharko-borland.php



This free edition was downloaded from
www.obooko.com

Although you do not have to pay for this e-book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author and obooko.