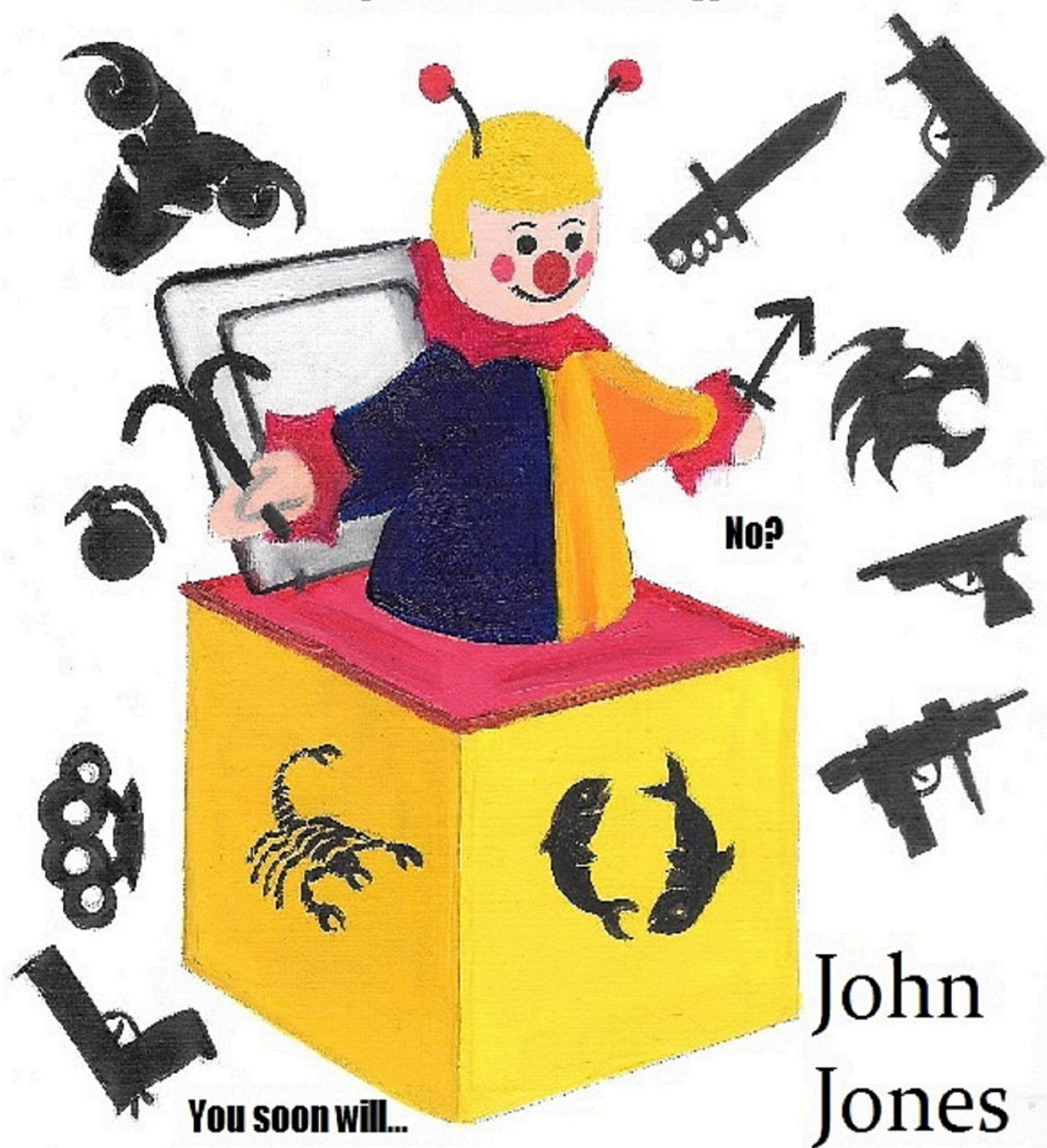


# ZODIAC'S TOY

Do you believe in astrology?



No?

You soon will...

John  
Jones

# Zodiac's Toy

By John Jones

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# Chapter 1

"Well you've got to have a go on something".

"No I haven't. There's nothing here that appeals to me. It's for kids mostly".

"No, not really. It's a funfair. Funfairs are not just for kids. Anyone can enjoy them. Except for you. Here we are, what about this?"

Caroline Trent was at a local park where there was a travelling funfair that had settled for the week with her friends, Sandie, Vanessa, Leanne, and Mandy, along with her brother Ray. With Caroline's wedding on the horizon, she and her bridesmaids had decided to go along to the fair, having all left from her house. However, at the gate on the way out about to call was Ray, and Mandy had told him they were on their way to the funfair and would he like to come along?

Before his mind could tell him to refuse, his mouth spoke 'yes' and he found himself tagging along.

They stood before a small arcade which featured one-armed bandits and various gambling machines beneath a large open-sided canvas tent. Just outside stood a fortune-telling booth which looked old and worn, made perhaps before the Victorian age.

'The all-seeing oracle will tell you your horoscope'.

Inside the cabinet was a mechanical puppet dressed in a yellow shirt with a necklace and gold headwrap, meant to represent a wizard.

"Come on, have a go on this at least," Caroline said.

"Nah, I don't believe in horoscope rubbish," replied Ray.

"Look, why are you here? I knew you wouldn't bother with any of this and that you'd rather be down the pub having a beer with the lads, but you're here now so you might as well have a go on something. It's Mandy's fault anyway for inviting you". She looked at Mandy who said:

"Yes come on misery guts. I'll have a go". She walked across to the booth and put her pound in the machine.

In front of the wizard were twelve cards, and in front of them beyond thin glass were twelve buttons.

The puppet jerked into life.

"Welcome welcome welcome," it said in a tinny, but loud voice. "I am the all-seeing oracle. Press your star-sign and I will tell your future".

The girls and Ray all gathered around the machine. Mandy pressed the Virgo button.

The inner workings toiled away as if it had not been used in a long time, but after a few moments from a slot beneath the buttons, a card churned out.

"Thank-you," said the oracle. Mandy took it and read it aloud:

"When Saturn moves into Aquarius, you will be sensitive to different conditions as you usually are and your attitude does nothing for you. With Virgo being an Earth sign, you are honest and forgiving, but you must take the reins and control the situations you have faced before, especially when your emotions threaten to overwhelm. Do not be a doormat. Virgo's welcome change and when your disappointment comes you will be in a stronger position. Drop your heavy weight, and the man with the muscle will pick it up. By the time Jupiter meets Pluto, your confidence levels will be higher, and you will be in much more control".

"Sounds like it's talking about your Carl," said Vanessa. Mandy nodded.

"It kind of does".

"They're all generic," said Ray, "You could read any of them and find something in them about yourself. Load of rubbish". The girls were quiet for a few seconds as if all thinking the same thing: 'Well go away then you miserable fucker'.

Leanne put her pound in the machine and pressed Sagittarius. The Oracle jerked into life.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome..."

A card churned out and she read it:

"A bright and adventurous fire sign. When the sun rises in your constellation, the wisdom of Jupiter will ensure your employment is ended, but for good reason. A new job will emerge and your enthusiastic lunar nature will ensure positivity for you and your new colleagues, certainly whilst Jupiter is in your sign. Talk for a while, and when opportunity knocks, answer the door. Affairs close to you will pull you in but you need to be head-strong to resist becoming too involved. Sagittarius knows you have the resolve and broad-minded attitude to not let them consume you. Some people always try and take advantage. You must be firm but fair".

Caroline stepped forward and inserted her pound. The puppet became animated.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome, I am the all-seeing oracle..." She pressed Aquarius and moments later a card came out. She read it aloud:

"Your sense of rationality and objectivity enhance your concerns for the environment and society. You love your Libra friend, although they are weak and vulnerable, but they are good for you. They are safe. Sometimes your resolve lets you down, and you place too much expectation on other people. Say farewell to a blood kin, and embrace a new dawn. Freedom is a valuable commodity to you, but your union with your Libran, especially when joined by a Capricorn will widen your horizons. Aquarius knows your independence will see you through".

"Loada shite," muttered Ray. The girls just ignored him and Sandie stepped forward.

"I'm a Sagittarius like you Leanne, do you think it'll be the same message?" Leanne just shrugged.

"Try it anyway," so Sandie did.

"Welcome..." and a card made its way out. They compared them.

"No they're different," said Sandie, and read hers out:

"Your ruling planet Jupiter needs for you to stop being naive and fickle, and step up and take what you know is rightfully yours. Your child-like quality is a positive asset, but you tend to be taken advantage of by Geminis and Aquarians. Saying 'no' will make you feel so much better. Keep being open and honest and forgive your family. They mean well. Avoid the transport and spice up your love-life. Enhance your 'can-do' attitude and your positivism will rise".

"Vanessa your turn," said Caroline.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome..." Vanessa read hers aloud:

"According to Libra, an Aries romance will be on the horizon. If your sense of disillusionment, indecisiveness and high standards of perfection are taken down, you may not grow old alone. Your ego is at a rather high level, and you look down on far too many people, even though you are their equal, but only some of your pompous attitude can be justified. Put coins in the blue tin then get out of the rain. You enjoy debate and controversy, but sometimes your mouth gets you into trouble. With a Taurus sun and Gemini moon your sense of morals will be lowered to an appropriate level. Reign in your good taste and you may find yourself in a more rational position".

"This is so wrong. I'm not posh".

"Yes you are," said Leanne.

"Come on Ray it's your turn," said Caroline. The girls all looked at him expectantly. He made an exaggerated sigh and stuffed a hand in his pocket.

"Don't spend any of your precious beer money," said Caroline sarcastically. "You can get a can of cider for a pound".

"Less, actually," he said, finding a pound coin. He slotted it into the machine.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome..." said the oracle, jerking into life. "I am the all-seeing oracle. Press your star-sign and I will tell your future".

He pressed Pisces. The inner workings toiled away and soon a card was coming out.

"Thank-you," said the wizard.

He took it, but the machine kept going.

Another card came out and fell to the ground. Ray and the girls just watched as another churned out, and another, and another.

"See, the things broke," said Ray as the final card fell on the grass. He picked them all up and shuffled them like playing cards.

"You've got all the zodiac cards," said Leanne. He found Pisces and read it:

"Pisces understands your negative attitude and disbelief in everything but reality. This, however, runs against you. If you took more positive movements to open your mind and believe, you would be happier. As you do not believe in horoscopes, it's time to have some fun. A competitive nature you once had. Then your friends took it away. Now you are a lazy drifter..."

The girls all laughed amongst each other, and Ray glared at them.

"I think this zodiac thing has got us all down to a tee," said Sandie. Ray waited a few more seconds and continued:

"...you want everything on a plate. Which star-sign will get you to believe in the zodiac? They will win, and so will you, now you are the zodiac's toy". Ray stuffed them into his pocket.

"Time to get something to eat," said Mandy. The girls all turned and headed away, Ray following. However when he was a few metres from the machine he heard it whirl

back into life and he turned and looked at it. The wizard turned its head and looked directly at him.

"Game on," it said.

## Chapter 2

On the way to the food van, they were distracted by the hook-a-duck and cups-and-saucers ride, except for Ray, who stood moping like a sulky teen, before Vanessa and Sandie said their good-byes, leaving the others to the makeshift cafe in the corner of the fair.

A few plastic tables and chairs were scattered in front of the van, and there was only one person sitting down eating a hot-dog. Litter was sporadically strewn around, not helped by a weak wind that occasionally came by.

Leanne ordered a cheeseburger and bottle of water, Mandy a cone of chips. Caroline a cone of chips and a hot-dog.

The man serving was an overweight grizzled chef with a grey, greasy short beard and a stained apron.

"Can I have a cone of chips and a hamburger, please?" Ray asked. The man turned to get his order, and a few moments later placed a package wrapped in newspaper in front of him. He held out a five-pound note but the chef just waved it away and turned to his grill.

Caroline watched as Ray came across and sat opposite, carrying his package.

"Doesn't want my money," he said, pocketing the note. He opened the newspaper and saw two fish.

"This is not what I ordered," he said. "I've got two fish. I'll go back and..."

"He just give you them free," said Mandy, "just be grateful".

"But I ordered burger and chips," he said, looking disappointedly down at the fish.

"You might as well eat them," said Caroline.

"Two fish," said Mandy. "Pisces". Ray just stared at them.

"Pisces," Caroline repeated. Then added: "You gonna eat them?" His lack of answer made Leanne reach across and pick one up and place it in front of her.

"I'll have one". They ate in silence for around five minutes.

"Got to admit," said Ray, "that was a nice fish, wish I'd had the other one now". Leanne just shrugged. "Too late," she said, "but it was nice, you're right".

"Alright Ray," said Mandy, "Let's see what the Oracle said on those other cards. Seems to know about us".

"No he doesn't," Ray said, "it's not real. How can the stars possibly have an influence over everybody?"

"We came from stars, I think," said Leanne, "like humans or something came from the same elements".

"What does that even mean, we came from stars?" Ray asked.

"It means we're made of the same stuff". Ray simply looked at Leanne with a confused look on his face.

"How on earth did we come from the same womb?" said Caroline. "I work as an assistant manager in a garden centre. Our little sister down in Sussex University is studying for a degree in accounting, and you...you do work, but only on a weekend, cleaning supermarket car-parks or whatever, and even then the job-centre pushed you into it".

"Still a job," said Ray, "keeps the dole off me ass".

"Yet you still get benefits as well. The rest of the time you are just lazing around with your mates smoking and drinking, whinging about how society owes you and how wrong everything is. Putting the world to rights. Honestly I'm going to get a DNA test from our mother. There's no way we have the same father. Mum must have got knocked up by a tramp behind some pub bins and produced you".

"Now, don't say that," Ray said, frowning. Leanne and Mandy said nothing. "No defence from yous then," he said looking at them both.

"Clearly you're waiting for your master to get out of prison," said Leanne.

"Oh yes," said Caroline. "Lee Sherwin, your nut-job of a mate who you idolise".

"No I don't. He's a good lad. People have just got him wrong".

"He's a violent armed-robber who put his own dad in hospital. He's in prison for



trying to rob a bank on his own. And how did that work out for him? Best place for him is inside. What bit have I got wrong?".

"Once you get to know him, he's sound. He's out on probation tomorrow".

"I think I'll take Sandie's opinion," she said hooking a thumb over her shoulder. "She fancied him at one point until she realised he was a nutter".

"What is it about bad boys that some women really go for?" asked Leanne. "I don't get it. I don't see the appeal".

"It's because they're not really that bad," said Caroline. "It's a lot of bravado and showing off. When really they love kids and their Mums...but for the likes of Lee. He's a 'real' bad boy who most women with at least one brain cell would avoid like anything. Almost like your Carl..." she said to Mandy.

"No, my Carl, he's..."

"Oh what's he up to now?" asked Leanne.

"Nothing, but he's just never around enough".

"You've always said this ever since you met him," said Caroline, "off he goes again, sleeping around or doing whatever. I mean he gave you chlamydia at one point. Who he'd caught it off, I don't know. You've got two kids to him, and nearly twenty years later you're still taking him back because he says sorry, it won't happen again...awww...you're the one for me. Then you forgive him, because he knows you will, and then he's off again...and comes crawling back, and then you forgive him".

"Yes, yes I know..but he's just.."

"He's got you wrapped around his little finger," said Leanne, "...and you know it". Mandy nodded despondently, then rummaged around in her bag and took out her horoscope card.

"...when your emotions threaten to overwhelm. Do not be a doormat," she read.

"There you go, see, these cards have got us spot-on so far...come on Ray show us those other ones". Ray took from his pocket the cards and distributed them around.

"I'm not reading them all". He picked one at random and read:

"Virgo. Virgo knows your intellect or IQ is in two digits.."

Leanne laughed. "This is definitely directed at you Ray". He said nothing for a few moments, and continued:

"...is below normal, not helped by your penchant for cigarettes and alcohol. Your friends drag you down, as you drag them. They are like you, spiritually lost, stupid and insecure and have an aversion to work".

"Oh my God..." said Mandy, staring at him with wide eyes. "That is you".

"No it's not," said Ray. "I'm not Virgo, and I'm not lost or insecure. Okay, I may be stupid sometimes I'll admit, but so can everyone". He continued:

"There will be no taking of the cherry, because there would be no purity. You need not resist temptation. Still all is not lost. When you believe in horoscopes, things will be more endearing and humble". He picked up another card.

"Scorpio...Scorpio says it is time for you to come to believe in things that are outside of your addled mind, your few brain cells". The girls giggled and smiled. Ray sighed, shook his head and continued:

"It's clear you are vulnerable, a follower, a yes-man, a hopeless wannabe. Stop blaming society all the time and take what you really deserve. That's not too much however, but it's yours if you want it. A scorpion will sting, will bear fruit, but only for you to come to understand the constellations, for your mind to be prised open".

Caroline picked a card up and read it:

"Capricorn. Capricorn is amused by the fact that you could change your belief. Does a donkey think it's a horse? While they consider you a lost cause, they hope you will come to believe. Capricorn wants to win of course but wonders if you're too much of a nut to crack. Can a goat swim like a fish? If they get you to believe you will win nothing but they will cease to make you doubt".

"What d'you think it means?" asked Leanne.

"It doesn't mean anything," said Ray. Leanne read one of the cards:

"Leo wants you to understand the majesty of the stars, but knows you're too much of an idiot to think about such things".

Caroline made a sweeping gesture of all of the cards.

"These are all describing you Ray". Leanne and Mandy nodded in agreement. Ray folded his arms.

"No they're not. They're all just generic. They describe something everyone can pick up on".

Leanne continued: "Your casual dismissal of spirituality means you are closed off psychologically. You seem quite happy in your little negative world, but all Leo wants is for you to believe. You will never have a Lion's spirit, but not all induce fear. However, there is always hope".

Caroline picked up another card:

"Cancer despairs of you, and, like Capricorn, thinks you have too much of a mountain to climb. A mountain you won't even take the first step on because of your preference for addictions and sheer laziness. You may work, but you don't want to. Will victory be declared when the bullet is bitten? Climb out of your pit of despondency and emerge into belief".

Mandy picked a card up and read:

"Libra is convinced you can come to be a believer, but can a fool become a King? It's clear you can be like a frightened lamb, even though you may put on a brave face, but that is as far as your mettle takes you. Stop hiding in other people's shadows. Sometimes the scales of justice will be balanced in your favour. All you need to do is believe. Not just say it. We will know when you really mean it".

Leanne picked up a card. Ray still had his arms folded and looked out across the fair.

"Taurus wants you to change and can see you are stagnated but content in your little zone. You have aspirations but you don't act on them. You are a dreamer".

"Everyone has dreams and aspirations but don't mind me, carry on," said Ray, so Leanne did:

"...but they take a lot of work. Work you are not willing to do because of your lethargy. Stop smoking and drinking and try to be happy, and be happy for your sister. I know you are jealous of her and there's nothing wrong with that. You will never have the courage of a bull, and like cups and plates that can be cracked, your disbelieving mind will need to be split open also. It's fine to be realistic, but it's also fine to believe".

"See, I told you," said Caroline, "they're describing you".

"Whatever," he said, still looking out at the fair.

Mandy picked up another card:

"Sagittarius has faith in you. Unlike the little faith you have in yourself. You don't seem to have much faith in anything. Blaming others for your faults, for your lot in life. Alcohol, cigarettes and looking up to others seem to be your whole existence. How sad.

Perhaps an arrow to the head will open your mind. It's time to be at least slightly optimistic. Surely you can't be a lazy fool forever".

Caroline picked up a card:

"Aries believes you can be changed. That you can stop being the indolent weakling you are and break free into an open minded space where you will be much more understanding and aware. Rams don't like apes that like botany. There is potential, deep down within the confines of your broken brain cells. You can be repaired, and can come to understand the wisdom of the planets".

Mandy picked up a card:

"Gemini wonders how on earth you can come to believe in the zodiac, being so one-track minded. You would be sceptical even if twins slapped you in the face. Beware of your maniac friend, the one who returns. He can walk all over you, and you do not have the power of resistance against him or against his choices. You are a dog amongst wolves, even to your siblings. Redeemable, but a challenge".

"One more Ray," said Leanne. He looked down at the card, picked it up and read:

"Aquarius. Now you are a play-thing. Albeit a rather pathetic, idiotic one. Your hard-headed disbelief makes prising open your skull that much harder. We've made so many believers. Your naive outlook on the world will serve in your favour if we are to change your belief. It won't be easy but it's what we like. Formidable closed beliefs to play with. If I win, then you can shed a tear of joy, of realisation, because water can be life, and water can be death".

"Those cards were definitely aimed at you Ray," said Mandy. Ray sighed and gathered all the cards together, tried to rip them in half, but found he couldn't. Even individually they were impossible to tear. So he put them next to Caroline's empty cone of chips.

"So have you got a photographer yet?" Leanne asked Caroline.

"Not yet, I..."

Ray sighed exaggeratedly.

"Wayne," he said. "Lovely Wayne. You can do so much better than him".

"As you've said a thousand times. I love him Ray, and we're getting married and that's all there is to it". Ray pointed to his left ear.

"He wears an earring, wears pink, got long hair and wears those tight jeans. He's a

ponce. Honestly you can do so much better".

"...and I'm pregnant". Everybody on the table looked shocked.

"Tell me you're joking," said Ray, and before Mandy or Leanne could offer congratulations, Caroline nodded.

"Yes, I am joking," she said, "I just wanted to see the look on your face. Why would it be so bad if I was? Anyway, I can do so much better? Who could you have in mind? Couldn't be your nut-job mate getting out of prison. I hear he's single".

"He would be better for you than bloody Wayne". A look of confusion came over Caroline's face.

"How?" she asked in all seriousness. "He's the type of nutter who the second gets out of jail, gets his stupid backside thrown straight back. Jail is the best place for him. He can't help himself".

"He'd be more...protective of you".

"Sorry am I a helpless woman that needs looking after by a big strong man? Oh what a catch Lee would be. When he gets out I'll be there to leap into his arms. I think I've fallen in love with him already. I'll just cancel the wedding and leave Wayne shall I?"

"Wish you would," Ray muttered, folding his arms again.

"I love Wayne. D'you understand that word? I 'love' Wayne, and I'm going to marry him, and don't forget it's only you I'm having at my wedding, and that's only because you're my big brother. Do not bring your mates, especially Lee".

"Are they really that bad?" asked Mandy.

"Yes, they are. I won't have them at the house anymore as well. Things go missing don't they Ray? but I can't accuse them".

"Things that are worth something?" asked Leanne.

"Yes".

"I'm just saying you can do better than him," Ray said. Caroline sighed, gathering her belongings.

"Come on girls," she said, "let's go". They all stood up and headed for the exit.

## Chapter 3

Caroline nodded in approval at Sandie as she tried on her bridesmaid Amelia maxi dress. She turned before the long mirror in Caroline's bedroom.

"Amazing," Caroline said.

"I've got to admit," said Sandie, "I think I do look rather good. When Declan sees me in this he's going to be slobbering like a dog".

"How's it going with him anyway? Not seen him for ages".

"Oh, you know. He never changes. I think he gets cold feet about marriage. If I wait for him to ask me I'll be a pensioner".

"Drop a few hints. Or just ask him".

"Nah, gotta keep tradition. Although in saying that not as many people are getting married these days. Certainly not a white wedding like they used to have".

"Wayne just wanted a registry office. Isn't into all the tradition and ceremonies. So I said tough, we're having one and that's it". Caroline was 38, tall with straight light brown hair. Liked to wear ordinary conventional clothes. Brown or black. Practical. Usually only wore dresses for going out or special occasions.

Sandie 39, straight blonde hair, slightly concerned with her weight, said men liked women with 'meat on their bones', wore make-up most of the time, and like Caroline's other friends, grew up together in the area and went to the same schools.

She bunched up her hair.

"How do you think I should have it? Wavy or braided? Think I might have it braided. Wavy with braids. Curly and tied up. No, wavy. I'll go with wavy. Wavy and tied. No definitely braided. Wavy and braided. Or curly".

They were in the house Caroline, Ray and Shelley had been left by their parents who had down-sized and moved to Penare on the Devonshire coast. It was a semi-detached, too big for one person. Only Caroline lived there, although Ray had a key, in a nice, humble area of Secreston Heath, eight miles north of London's Big Ben. It was neither a poor area, nor posh, simply 'normal'.

Ray lived in a ten-storey high-rise block of flats two miles away with his friends

Victor Smith, Shane Montague, and 'A8498AF - Category C' Lee Sherwin. They had all acquired flats on the first floor when they had been built. Ray could have stayed with Caroline in the house but opted for his friends as the flats were basically shared by them.

"Your Declan's too set in his ways," Caroline said. Sandie was still staring at herself in the mirror, smoothing the dress down.

"You know how boring he is. I don't really know why I'd get married to him. Maybe it's because it's better than being single. He spends more time with his gadgets than me. Always wants to upgrade his computer, upgrade his phone, upgrade his bloody watch. He's a decent enough guy though.

"A bit like Wayne. He breaks into song at inopportune moments, and it's really embarrassing. He did it on a packed train once and I nearly punched him..hey, guess who's getting out of jail tomorrow?" Sandie stared at Caroline.

"No way," she said, "Lee".

"Yes, you fancied him at one point".

"Once, yes. One of those guys that, okay, I'll admit, looked good. So I went over and started talking to him. Then he opened his gob and then it's like, oh my God, he's as thick as... I don't know what. One of those guys that when they start talking, every other word is eff this and eff that. You know the type, can't string a sentence together without swearing. Talks loudly wherever they are, in front of kids and everything. Five minutes of that and I remember itching to leave. Then I was rescued by Vanessa who said we were leaving. Thankfully. I heard he's a bit mental".

"You could say that. I don't know why Ray hangs around with him".

"He's probably scared of him". Caroline nodded, and said:

"Him, Victor and Shane. Another pair of losers. I actually feel sorry for them. They're gonna be living with a psychopath, but Ray does whatever Ray does, and won't listen to me...anyway, have you made up with your Mum and Dad yet?"

Sandie sighed, nodded at herself in the mirror and went across to the edge of the bed and sat down.

"Their heart's in the right place, but it's just so frustrating. To be left by Grandad nearly £75000. Grandad who always moaned about money, about how expensive

everything is, got loads in the bank. I thought I wonder how much I'll get, and you know when you spend the money in your head. Like what you would do if you won the lottery. I'd spend it on this. I'd spend it on that. Thinking how much I'd give Declan and Toby. Maybe we could put some towards a bigger house, and what do they go and do? have a holiday in the Maldives and give the rest to charity. Give me nothing. Not a penny. Said it's for my own good, earning money for myself. Making my own way in the world and learning lessons the hard way without relying on free money. They said I would appreciate it in the long run. I told them straight I said I bloody well won't. So I've not spoken to them since they came back a week ago". She fell back onto the bed, arms splayed.

"So no, they're not forgiven".

## Chapter 4

Although they would not admit to it, they were nervous. Ray, Victor and Shane were in Ray's sparse flat, not really watching the morning breakfast show. He was stood at the window, a fist clenched.

Ray was 47, with short hair that was slowly vanishing from his scalp, tall but always walked with a stoop as though carrying weights on his shoulders and his hands often jammed in his pockets. He mostly wore the same clothes every day, jumpers and jeans, and would like to think of himself as optimistic, but in the way he saw the world that was fairly difficult. The way he saw it was that you had to get everything for yourself by fair means or foul. A similar view to his friends who sat in anticipation on the sofa.

Victor Smith was 49, but in absolute violation of 'normality', he smoked and drank, he liked to think, in moderation, but actually looked younger. At one point he gave serious thought to a conspiracy theory that it was do-gooders and hippies that told people smoking was bad. No premature wrinkles. No being out of breath walking up the stairs, although he hardly exercised anyway. He was the smallest of them with a shabby goatee-beard and was the main unofficial house-keeper. He cooked because he enjoyed it. He did the washing. No ironing though. He didn't see the point. Ray bought a cheap iron once and used it twice before it was discarded in a cupboard in Lee's flat. He came to the same conclusion. Ironing was pointless.

Occasionally he would take a brush around all of the flats because he was kind of picky about tidiness. He knew that if he was not around, then certainly Ray and Shane



would fester in a pit of their own filth.

Shane was the same age, and like Ray's sister and her friends all grew up together around the same area, attending the same schools. Shane was rather more 'bulkier' than the others. A long time ago he had tried to get himself a decent body and trained for around two years straight. Eating healthily, exercising, keeping himself trim and groomed, but then one day he asked himself: 'What am I doing this for?' There was no end goal, so the appeal of alcohol, his friend's influences, one or two low-tar cigarettes, and fast-food surely wouldn't do any harm. He thought he was head-strong enough to give them all up whenever he liked. 'I could give drink and smokes up like that,' he'd said when he started, clicking his fingers.

Yet, twenty-four years later, he still said the same thing. 'If I wanted to I could just give it all up. Cold-turkey would be easy for me'. Most of the time he wore jogging pants and a vest one size too big, as though he was ready to go to the gym, even though twenty-four years was the last time he had ever set foot in there. He would sometimes wear shades in weather that did not warrant them. They were a modicum of his perceived style.

The sky was grey with no clouds. There were a few vehicles in the car-park in front of the high-rise.

"Are you sure his flats clean?" asked Ray.

"Spotless," said Victor. Ray watched as a taxi came into view and pulled up in the car-park. Lee Sherwin got out.

"He's here," said Ray. Victor stood up and paced around. Ray clenched both fists as he watched Lee walk towards the entrance.

Lee sported a buzz-cut most of the time, although that was thinning. He wasn't tall, but rather stocky. His face was rather weathered. A 'pugilist' look from skirmishes and fights with cauliflower ears, his nose never having returned to normal shape. He looked older than his 52 years.

They heard the entrance opening, and heavy footsteps slowly coming up the concrete steps.

Ray went to the door and stepped out into the corridor. Lee emerged with a ruck-sack over one shoulder and glared at Ray.

"You bunch of fucking muppets," he said, walking into the flat. Shane stood up, Victor went to shake his hand but all Lee did was throw his bag on a table.

"No-one was there when I got out. No-one. Stood there like a plonker expecting you lot to be there, but no..." They all smiled and looked at each other, thinking he was joking.

He wasn't.

"Had to get a fucking taxi with the money they give me. I've got to go and meet me probation officer later. So I just wanted to see the boys, give me some support, but fuck no. Lazy twats are still in here on my release day. Two fucking years I've been in that place. How many times did you come and visit? Eleven times. That's it. Made some better mates than you lot".

He sat down on the sofa with an exaggerated sigh.

"Nothing like this inside. Vic, pass us a can ta".

"Er, there isn't any left".

"Not there to greet me, and not even got me a drink, bunch of useless fuckwits".

"How about a smoke?" asked Victor.

"No, gave up inside, but wouldn't mind a spliff though. Bet you haven't got any of that either". Victor shook his head, looking away.

"We're glad you're out Lee," said Shane, looking sheepish. "I like your new tattoo". On the left side of his neck was a handgun pointing up to his ear.

"Good isn't it? Micky in prison did it. Boss artist. Is my stuff still in my room?" he asked. "My shotgun?"

"Yes Lee," said Victor, "but you're not thinking of another job now are you?"

"Well, yes I am. I don't meet my probation officer till two this afternoon so I've got time to get down to a post-office and rob it. I only got fifty fucking quid when I left. Said it was to last until I got me benefits sorted. It's a fucking joke, so I just want a little nest-egg to do me over for a bit. Lay low. I'm not going back inside".

"What was it like?" asked Victor.

"Well it's fucking shit, but you know, not that bad once you get used to it. Some decent fellas in there, just fell off the wagon you know?". He stood up, stretched, picked up his bag and walked out into the corridor and disappeared into his own flat which was open, the door ajar. He lifted the mattress and saw all his weaponry there. Two shotguns, five handguns. Three knives. A meat-cleaver and two knuckle-dusters.

He had not used them all. Lee was the type of person for whom owning such things would give him a satisfactory feeling. Maybe they would never be used, but the knowledge that they were there, the feeling of having them making him feel like a collector who had found something rare, like a school-boy that took a knife to school 'for protection', or just to show-off to his friends. 'Look what I've got', their egos boosted.

Not that Lee had many enemies. Although he was the cause of skirmishes in the past and bloody fights, he never acquired the level of enemy where he had to watch his back. There were far worse criminals than him. He knew that, but had not crossed them, and was not on their radar. He left them alone, they left him alone. He did have a small reputation amongst the criminal fraternity, and in the police, and only once had someone come looking for him for revenge. A beer-bottle was struck on his head, but it never broke. The perpetrator ran. Lee tracked him down and beat his face to a bloody pulp. That was that, end of revenge.

In a way he kind of 'enjoyed' prison, simply because he was around like-minded people. There was violence and hostility there, but Lee was mostly simply an observer, but wouldn't hesitate to get involved. Sometimes he wished he did, to satisfy his high testosterone level, but the opportunity sometimes wasn't there. He knew he would never go straight. The rewards of crime were too tempting, and sometimes it was just too easy.

He had robbed a lot of post-offices, and had gotten away with it every time. He guessed that trying to rob a bank on his own was too ambitious after having that proved the hard way, but post-offices, they were different. Quick, easy, smaller, and rarely anyone willing to take him on, certainly not the clerk who in his experience were mostly of pensionable age.

He was usually handed the money to get him away as quickly as possible, and that was what he counted on. The protective glass did nothing to stop them giving him what he wanted as when a shotgun is pointed their way it becomes instant panic mode, and the glass becomes irrelevant. Sometimes the clerk in their haste to get him away would, in their state, give him more than just money. They would hand him cards, stamps, stationary, 'just-take-it-and-go'.

He picked up the CZ Drake shotgun and loaded it, took a black balaclava from a drawer as well a small black well-used duffel bag and went back into the other flat.

"I only need one of you to keep dixie. Who's coming?". Shane put his hand up and stepped forward.

"Alright, I know which one we'll hit. I've done it before. Couple of miles in the next town".

They were soon heading downstairs and out into the car-park, and they walked all the way there.

Ray and Victor watched from the window as they disappeared from sight.

"Good to see him back," Victor said, "he's looking well".

"Yes," said Ray, running a hand over his hair.

Shane came out of the post-office in a not-so-busy corner of the town, which seemed more like it belonged in a remote village, and walked across to Lee who was leaning against a post-box. He kept his voice low, even though nobody could overhear.

"There's three people in there, none of them look like they would give you trouble".

"Alright, we'll wait". After five minutes, two left. Lee took a good look around and apart from a man walking his dog over the other side of the road, there was nobody who could see him. They walked across to the door and he gave the bag to Shane who opened it wide, then took out and pulled on the balaclava that exposed only his eyes and mouth. He grabbed the shotgun, then entered the post-office.

Ray and Victor hardly spoke for the two hours they were waiting, pacing nervously around, Victor cleaning things that didn't need it, cleaning in other flats. Ray walking up and down the corridor, looking out of the window, sitting down to watch three seconds of television, going back to the window, going to another flat, until finally there they were, heading towards the high-rise, laughing and joking.

"They're back Vic, they're back". Victor emerged from Shane's flat with wide eyes and a humourless smile.

The entrance banged below, footsteps loud on the concrete stairs.

"Fucking sorted," said Lee, emerging into the corridor followed by Shane. The bag looked bulky over his shoulder.

At the table in Lee's flat, he emptied the bag, and they all looked wide-eyed at the money that spilled out.

"One of my biggest hauls from a post-office. That'll do me for a while. Now I can lay low and just chill for a while. There must be at least three grand there. Honestly you should have seen the old girl behind the counter, soon as she saw me and the fucking shotgun, she jumped and fell over. It was hard not to laugh, but she got up and gave me the fucking lot".

"Anyone would with a shotgun in their face," said Victor.

"Too right they would, and because I'm in a good fucking mood. I'm out of prison and I've got a few bob now," he picked up a bundle of notes and handed them to Shane.

"That's yours". He picked up even less notes and gave them to Ray and Victor.

"Fifty quid each for you pair of pussies".

"Fifty quid," said Ray, disappointed. He stopped himself saying: 'Is that all?'.

"Yes, well I'm going to count this now, so I'll know if any of you thieving cunts has took any".

He settled down to count it. Ray and Victor sat, smoked and watched television. Shane went back to his flat. It took half an hour. He'd lost count several times, but eventually a smile spread across his face.

"Three thousand four hundred and twenty five quid" he said, nodding in satisfaction.

"What are you going to do now though," Ray asked. "Now that you're back. Have you been thinking about it?"

"I'm going to go and find my dad and call him a cunt. Then I'm going to try and find Hannah. Remember her? That tomboy gothy one who I was just getting to know before I was put inside. To be fair, she said she wasn't going to wait and I accepted that, and she never visited or messaged me in prison, so I'll just find her and see if she's still single. If not, then I think I remember some other one. One of your sisters mates..."

"My sister's mates want nothing to do with us," said Ray, "we're a bunch of crooks remember?"

"Yes and they're fucking right, but one of them was really into me before she was taken away by that other posh fucker. Maybe I'll track her down. Or get you to put a good word in. 'He's changed and left his life of crime behind him' and all that shite. What was her name?...oh, yes, Sandie".

## Chapter 5

"...should have seen him hit the fucking floor. Got him right here," Lee put a fist to just below his ribs on the right side. "...some of the guards...right fucking pussies".

It was the following night, and Lee had spent most of the day out, the others, most of the day in and around their flats with the occasional trip to the shops.

All of them were in Ray's flat, sat around the table with cans of lager and ash-trays curling smoke.

"Did you find Hannah and your Dad?" Ray asked, taking a drag on his cigarette. Lee nodded.

"I saw her but she didn't see me. She was with some big fat fucker. Looked like a wrestler or something. I wasn't gonna mess with him, so I just thought fuck it she's gone and went to my Dad's. He opened the door and you should have seen the look on his face..then I told him to fuck off cunt and walked away". There was silence for a while, and as Ray took a drag on his cigarette, he noticed Lee's new tattoo was not as he remembered.

"Thought that was a gun," he said, looking at the image. The image of a scorpion.

"What?" Lee asked, even though he knew what had been asked, "it is a gun. Can't you see it's a gun?"

"It's a scorpion," said Victor. Shane nodded.

"It's not. It's a gun. Micky did it inside and it's a good tattoo. Get your fucking eyes tested".

"Scorpion," added Shane. Lee frowned, put down his can and stood up and went into the bathroom.

"I thought it was a gun as well," said Victor.

"What the fuck!" came a loud voice from the bathroom. "I thought it was a gun...fucking scorpion..what the..?" He came out about a minute later and sat down looking confused.

"I really thought that was a gun. I remember looking at it in the mirror and telling Mick that he'd done a good job, but it's a fucking scorpion". There was silence for around one minute, then he added: "Still, scorpions are cool so I don't mind". They

were quiet again for almost five minutes, smoking, drinking, Lee with badly made cannabis joints.

"So come on Ray, what's been happening with you while I've been gone? Not much has changed by the looks of things".

"Well," he said, "My sister is getting married".

"Oh, right, good," Ray shook his head.

"No it isn't. She's getting married to Wayne, fuckin' vegan hippy".

"Well if she's into him, then whatever. If he makes her happy and they're getting married then good on them".

"It's just," said Ray, folding his arms, "She can do so much better".

"D'you mean me?" Lee said, smiling, taking a swig of his drink.

"Well you would be much better for her".

"Well I appreciate you thinking of me, but you know I've got no chance with her, and too be honest, I don't really fancy her. A plain-Jane mate, and anyway none of us have got a chance with her or any of her mates. Bunch of posh, snotty fuckers who think they're better than everyone else, especially us".

"They probably are, though," said Victor. Lee nodded and drank from his can.

Shane finished his drink and cigarette, then stood up.

"I'm knackered, it's bed-time," he said, leaving the flat, and soon Victor was on his way back to his place as well. Ray smoked the last of his cigarette and crushed it out in the ash-tray. A pall of smoke drifted between him and Lee.

"She can just do...so much better". Lee shrugged.

"Up to her if that's...oh hang on! Fuck me you spineless little weed. Are you asking me to warn him off? Warn him off your sister, Caroline. Stop him getting married to her. Is that really what you're asking me to do?"

"Maybe just scare him a little. Make him think twice. Warn him off seeing her. Get him to call the wedding off". Lee laughed, loudly and for around ten seconds. They could have probably heard him on the third floor.

"Now come on Lee don't be like that".

"You want me to fight your battles. I've just come out of fucking prison and you want me to intimidate some hippy cunt off getting married to your sister. Well, Ray, it's got fuck-all to do with me".

"Keep your voice down," Ray said, flushed red and sheepish, arms folded and sunk into his chair like a chastised child. Lee didn't.

"If your sister wants to get married then so what? I don't care. Do it your fucking self. Obviously you haven't got the bollocks so you get me to do it. Can't intimidate a fucking hippy," he laughed again. "Good luck to her. It's fuck-all to do with me".

"He works at Tiger vegan cafe in the town centre, just in-case you know...ask him to leave off her. Try and split them up, just a little warning or something".

Shane came back in, a look of concern on his face. He was holding something which he placed on the table.

Twelve zodiac cards.

"I was gonna make a cuppa and found these next to the kettle. Who put them there?" Ray just stared at them.

"I got them the other day at the funfair when I went with me sister and her mates. I just left them there". Shane put them on the table.

"Why are they in my flat?"

"I don't know"

"Didn't think you were into that shit," said Lee.

"I'm not. I just had a go at the fair the other day".

"Whatever. I'm starving. I'm going for a takeaway. Not had one in ages. Fish and chips. Think I'll get two fish. Anyone want anything?". Shane and Ray didn't, and Shane and Lee both left the flat to leave Ray staring at the cards. He spread them out. They were all exactly the same as they were.

Somehow they'd found their way in there, he thought, but it must have been by some accident. Some normal method. Maybe Caroline picked them up, put them in his pocket when he hadn't noticed, then they fell out somewhere and Victor picked them up thinking they were Shanes and just put them next to the kettle where he would find them because not only did he have a predilection for alcohol, his equal addiction was cups of tea.



It had to be something like that, he wondered, because I certainly don't believe in the zodiac.

## Chapter 6

Gorgeous, she thought, looking in a large window of 'Shiffon's fashions' at the mannequin wearing a yellow and blue floral dress. The dress she wore at present was not too dissimilar. Her father had bought it when she had been window shopping last year, but Vanessa always had a penchant for things 'new', and 'now'. If she bought the dress in the shop window it would maybe be worn once, and become 'old' after a month. It would be onto the next new item of clothing. Vanessa loved to shop and despite her wildly fluctuating bank account, always found the money to buy expensive but not 'silly money' items.

Today her credit card would be taking some damage, she thought. There were two pairs of shoes she wanted, although she hadn't exactly chosen them yet. Just the feeling of shopping, of browsing, of picking things up and putting them down, of complaining about the price, of going into the dressing rooms with several items and fussing over them in the long mirror. I like it I don't like it, well maybe...

In the paved shopping area of Secreston Heath were plenty of fashion retailers nestled amongst 'lesser' shops in her opinion. Shops she reluctantly entered. A champagne lifestyle, rubbing shoulders with celebrities, royalty, government, was a lifestyle she had aspirations towards and her credit card attested to that. Her parents were even more lavish, and even though their house was in an expensive area, of that area theirs was in the lower price range.

Vanessa, and certainly her mother, knew there was one thing missing in her life.

Someone to share it with.

She had had three previous boyfriends. Only one of them met her standards. Although at the time, those standards were still being formed and changed, where now, they were kind of hard to budge, but not set in stone. A man who is on benefits, no matter how good-looking, or even if he had a good personality, was a no-go. Even if he had a menial job. A cleaner. A shelf-stacker. A call-centre worker. All on her mental 'no thank-you' list. However, should she meet one of those or the equivalent, then they would have to be handsome with a winning personality. The man would certainly have his work cut-out. Perhaps then she may say yes.

One previous boyfriend, Sam, said he was taking her out for a meal. So she got herself dressed and made up. Only to be taken to a pub that served food. To say she was disappointed was an understatement. However she managed to hide it and gave him another chance by not breaking up with him. Yet, he did it again. She got dressed up and taken to the same place. So she dropped him like a stone.

Another boyfriend, Tristan, didn't dance. She found this out two weeks into their relationship when they went to Tristan's friend's wedding. When the DJ played a popular tune, one of those where a lot of people head to the dance-floor, Vanessa was one of those joining them, but Tristan wasn't, opting to sit alone, arms folded with a glass of coke, shaking his head, resisting 'come on' gestures.

'No, I don't dance,' he said. So Vanessa boogied on her own for a while, then joined in with other strangers there, and soon Tristan received a 'We're finished' text message.

Then came Bill. A computer 'whizz', a self-employed software engineer who companies hired for him to fix their systems. She could honestly say she loved Bill. He ticked all her boxes. He danced, took her to posh restaurants and paid for everything. Was 'decent' looking, had a nice personality, made her laugh, stimulated her mind, was liked by her mother. Then one day one of his weaknesses, of which there were a few made itself known.

He received a job offer from China for doing the same job for a multi-national software corporation, and didn't hesitate to take it or even consult with her. He made no mention of wanting Vanessa to come with him. She would have refused anyway. On a Thursday when he'd received the job offer, he simply said: 'I leave on the week-end'. That was that.

She knew he was out there somewhere. Mr Right. Mr Right for me. Her single status was something she just had to bear. When usually out wherever she was, it was probably a psychological trait that meant she would see couples 'everywhere'. Couples hand-in-hand, young couples smooching and fawning over each other, couples naturally comfortable with each other, couples chatting and laughing, older couples still in love after so many years.

Half of her life was empty, and needed to be filled by a partner, by someone for whom she could give her love to. The love she had 'bottled-up' inside her, taken back from her previous boyfriends, needed to be let out, to be given to somebody, and in return they needed to do the same, give their love to her, and only then could she call herself satisfied, could she fulfil the biological urge in everyone. She knew her parents would be happy if she would settle down, find somebody 'nice'. Although she wouldn't admit it, her mother's approval of her boyfriends meant a lot.

She sauntered further down the high street, the clouds slowly roiling in above, threatening rain. I've no umbrella, she thought. Might be an excuse to go into a clothes shop and buy one.

From her vantage point as she walked, she saw two clothing shops she wanted to go into almost opposite each other, 'Maxine's' and 'Ruby Angels'. She headed down towards Ruby Angels and as she did passed by a crowd circle, surrounding a street entertainer performing acrobatics.

She had nothing against them, but saw them as beggars. If you have to ask the public for money, then you were a beggar. They weren't as bad as sitting down outside shops or by cash-machines. They simply held out their hands hoping for money and was begging in its lowest form according to Vanessa. 'Please give me free money', but at least the street entertainers did something for it. Had a talent they could show-off, but still that word 'beggar' entered her mind when people asked for coins. Her attitude totally changed though when it came to charities shaking their collection buckets outside supermarkets or doing an event in a public place. She even gave money.

As she neared Ruby Angels she was aware of another one in the middle of the paved shopping area. Someone playing the Viola.

She had to admit, they could play, but had no idea as to the tune. Something classical, but there was no crowd around them. A few people put coins into a blue tin as they walked past.

She was close to the shop entrance when the words 'blue tin' made her stop. Why is that familiar? she thought. Then the memory wound itself together and she reached into her lace bag and retrieved the oracle card.

'Put coins in the blue tin then get out of the rain'. She stared at it for a few moments, then up at the dark-grey clouds. She didn't believe in horoscopes, and didn't give money to beggars, but she looked across at the blue tin, then slowly headed towards it, reaching into her purse and taking out a few coins.

Why not? she thought. I can afford it. She liked the melody of the instrument, the talent playing it, and whatever tune it was as it coursed around her music-loving brain.

She stooped to drop the coins into the tin, and saw the man was wearing shiny shoes. He stopped playing. Her eyes gradually travelled up. He was wearing a suit, albeit rather haphazardly, but it didn't look cheap. A bit rough around the edges. The Viola itself was an expensive instrument, and looked buffed and shiny. The man had long straight hair, the type that he had to keep flicking out of his eyes. He wore rimless

glasses. When he parted his hair, she stared at him.

'Oh my God,' she thought, 'he's fucking gorgeous'. It was a rare thing for Vanessa to swear, even in her mind. There were always exceptions.

"Thank-you," the man said, "I really appreciate it".

'...and he talks posh!'.

Then the rain came. They both looked up at the sky, squinting against the droplets.

Across the way there was a coffee-shop next to 'Maxines'.

"Fancy a coffee?" Vanessa asked. The man smiled and nodded.

"Yes, I could most certainly do with a latte".

With that, Vanessa's standards cracked.

## Chapter 7

"So that's a black tea and tomato juice, and can I recommend the lentil stew?" said Wayne Roberts to two student girls sat by the wall at Tiger vegan cafe. Another customer was sat at the opposite wall frowning at a laptop. As he walked to the back to make the order he didn't notice somebody else come in.

Lee Sherwin stood looking around. He sat in the seat closest to him at the entrance, looking completely out of place.

Perhaps a little bit of 'aggro' wouldn't go amiss, he thought. Ray had planted the seed in his mind about intimidating Wayne to stay away from Caroline and it was just a simple warning. Something to get the blood flowing again after being in prison. Easy. It was too tempting. If I can't intimidate a hippy I might as well shoot myself, he'd thought. Even after the adrenalin rush of the post-office, it was not enough. He needed to feel he still had enough menace to make people afraid of him. If a hippy wasn't scared, then he had work to do, and if he even got the better of him somehow, then Lee could not imagine the shame he would feel. He liked people being scared of him. It gave him a sense of gravitas and massaged his ego, which every now and then needed a boost.

He took from his pocket a pre-prepared joint and lit it up. Cannabis laced smoke

curled into the air, and from behind the counter Wayne stared at him. He hesitated and approached cautiously like somebody nearing an unpredictable dog.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm afraid you can't smoke in here". Lee just stared at him and took a drag. Wayne came closer and stood a few feet away.

"Could you please take that outside there's no smoking allow..." Lee got to his feet and squared up to Wayne.

"Can't I have a fucking smoke mate?" he said, taking a drag and blowing smoke in Wayne's face.

"Wayne, isn't it?" he continued. "I've got a message from her brother Ray. Stay the fuck away from Caroline. Okay? and if I hear you've been near her then I'll know about it and I'll come back and smash the fucking place with you in it. Trust me," he said poking his chest.

"Remember," he said loudly, "stay away from Caroline". Then he left. Wayne just stood rooted to the spot, and could feel fear coursing through him causing him to tremble slightly. The student girls were staring at him as he sat down. The businessman was still engrossed in his laptop.

"Excuse me," one of the students said. "Can I have that lentil stew?".

## Chapter 8

In her office in the back of 'Davita's garden centre', Caroline, with her elbows on the desk, hunched over her computer sighed with exasperation as she spoke on the phone to Mrs Mullins as she had plenty of times before. One of those customers that was never satisfied. Wanted refunds, wanted perks and privileges because she had seen an offer somewhere.

It was nearly five o'clock. Caroline looked at the time in the corner of her monitor. 16.58. Nearly time to go home.

"Mrs Mullins I've told you plenty of times, your credit card details are not sold on to third parties. They are secure with us, but your payments are not dealt with by us. It's another company, and all online payments are at your own risk, not our responsibility".

"Then why am I getting emails from companies I've not dealt with. Emails about

garden centre offers. Where else could they come from other than from you?"

"Nothing is guaranteed. Sometimes your details are picked up by others who use them to send you adverts".

"Picked up by others, how? You don't think I've been hacked do you? That's a matter for the police". Caroline sighed with despair down the phone, then realised what she had done and hoped Mrs Mullins hadn't picked up on it. It seemed she hadn't.

"D'you think I should call them?"

"No Mrs Mullins, I don't. You've just been targeted by adverts".

"Nothing to do with you? because you hold my details on the computers, so you can't guarantee that you haven't been hacked either".

"No, we can't, but I can email you our data protection act if you like. It tells you what we hold on any individual customer". There was silence on the other end.

"Yes, I think I would like to see that, but don't email, post it to me, you've got my details".

"Post it. You want a print-out?"

"Yes, I'd like to go through it. I can't do that on a computer". Caroline saw the time turn to 17.01.

No chance, Caroline thought, I'm not printing that off now.

"Alright," she said. "I'll get that in the mail as soon as possible".

"Yes, you do that. I'll expect it in the post tomorrow," she then clicked off. Caroline just looked at the receiver as though it was a strange object.

She had taken over the desk of the previous manager who had retired but had left it rather messy and didn't even take a framed photograph of him and his daughter smiling together in a theme-park. It was as if they had left and only taken their coat.

Caroline leaned back and stretched, shut down the computer and left the office. She said her goodbyes to those she passed along the way, including a work-experience student she had only seen once and was soon in her metallic blue Rover reversing out of her parking place.

It had been a hectic day. There was a meeting that went nowhere, several other phone-calls like Mrs Mullins, and two staff that wanted their shifts altered, and one that was having problems with the till. She would be glad to get home, forget about all that,

have a cheese pasta bake and watch reality tv, but as she drove home along a dual-carriageway, a text message pushed that back.

She looked down at the message and drew in a panicked breath. The car swerved slightly but other vehicles were sufficiently far away enough to not be affected. It was from Wayne:

'I think we should break-up. Don't come and see me. I'm sorry'.

## Chapter 9

The car screeched to a halt outside Wayne's parent's house where he lived. She knew he would be home because he only worked part-time.

She wasn't so much angry, although that was part of her emotions. Anger, confusion, and lack of understanding caused her to march up the pathway and bang on the door. Something she had never done before. Love, or lack of it, could cause people to behave beyond their normality.

"Wayne!" she shouted, "Wayne, answer the door". It was her confused father who answered, and sheepishly, Wayne knew there was no hiding, so he appeared behind him.

"It's okay dad," he said.

"You're not breaking up are you?" his father said with wide eyes. Wayne closed the door on him. He pointed to the car.

"Let's go to the car. My mum and dad will only eavesdrop".

Soon they were sat on the back seat, Wayne looking dejected, slumped as though he was running on low battery power.

"I'm having cold feet, and I can't see you anymore".

"Wayne," she said, "You were so excited about us getting wed. You've practically organised half of it, and the date is set for next month. I don't get it..."

"Like I said, you know...cold feet. Look, I can't be seen with you, so please just leave, sorry".

"You can't be seen with me. According to who?" Wayne ran a hand through his hair.

"Look, it's alright, I can't be seen with you, so I need to go".

"Don't you dare get out of this car. Why can't you be seen with me? Says who?" Wayne was quiet, but inside his mind was racing, and feeding out into his face by him flushing red, avoiding eye-contact and one side of his lips twitching. He looked to be on the verge of telling her everything, but Caroline told him, as though she could read his mind.

"It's Ray isn't it," she said.

"Cold feet..." he muttered.

"You are a bad liar Wayne. What's Ray said to you?". As if his bottled up emotions couldn't be contained any longer, they spilled out in machine-gun verbiage:

"A man came in the cafe and he started smoking weed and I told him he can't smoke in here and he warned me to stay away from you said Ray told me to or he'll come back the cafe and smash it up and dome in but I don't know he said keep away from Caroline of course I want to marry you you know I love you he warned me to keep away..!"

"Wait hold on. A man. Not Ray, warned you to stay away from me. A man Ray asked to warn you. He sent his mate Lee who's just got out of jail". Tears escaped from Wayne's eyes.

"Look," she continued, "I'll deal with Ray...we're getting married and that's that".

She left Wayne to slink back to his parents who would no doubt have a thousand questions to throw at him, and before Caroline drove home, she formulated a text to Ray on her smartphone.

'Don't you dare come to the house, or my wedding!'. Send.

## Chapter 10

"Turn that up," said Shane, pulling on a cigarette, nodding to the sound of drum 'n' bass from an old hi-fi system. Victor reached over and highered the volume. They were in Lee's flat in the living room. Shane stood by the hi-fi as if he was an 'old-skool' raver but had lost all sense of hedonistic behaviour because of the effect of years of tobacco and alcohol use adapting into his system, causing his movements to slow, so as the music blasted out, all he did was nod and move his shoulders. Victor did nothing at all,



except lay on the sofa smoking a strain of cannabis he had never had before, 'Red Rooster'. Every now and then he would puff out a smoke halo, smiling as he watched it travel and disperse.

Lee was coming up the stairs, found Victor and Wayne with their eyes closed in his flat, but found Ray in his own place.

"Job done lad. I did what you haven't got the balls to do while I was out. I warned that fucking hippy off your sister. So if he goes back to her then it's tough shit, I'm not doing it again". He left and went into his own flat.

Ray put his hands to his face. Okay, he thought, walking to the window and running a hand over his hair. She'll be upset. I'm gonna have to console her.

Down in the car-park, he saw a police car pull up. That's got to be for Lee, he thought, then turned and ran out and through into the other flat.

Lee had decided to count the money again, and had put it in neat piles on a table in the corner of the room. Occasionally he would look up at the other two and shake his head in slight despair.

"Police!" Ray shouted. Lee looked up from counting twenty pound notes. "The police are here". Lee understood, then stood up.

"Turn that off," he shouted at Shane, louder than the music. Shane didn't need to be told twice. "Where's me bag?"

"It's the fuckin' cops," said Ray, still loud, and Victor and Shane found a sudden burst of hidden energy and scrambled around as if it was their parents about to catch them smoking.

Lee found his bag and stuffed all the money in and shoved it at Ray.

"Keep that in yours". Ray took it and hurried into his own flat. Shane and Victor soon followed behind. Lee came out into the corridor and heard the door below open and close.

"When's someone gonna fix that door?" he hissed, "it was the same before I went inside. Anyone can just come in..." he heard footsteps then went back into the flat and closed the door. A few seconds later there was a knock. He knew to expect this. He had had enough dealings with the police to be a veteran, but still there were always those that got under his skin, that extracted things from him that got him arrested or fined.

The fear of the unknown was especially high when visited by the police. Even if you

took a library book back a day late, and the police turned up, you could have visions of being locked up, key literally thrown away, left to rot in solitary confinement. So Lee knew he always had to be on his 'A' game when it came to the law.

Another knock came, and rather than suddenly answering it, he walked around for a few seconds, took a deep breath, then opened up.

There were two police constables there, man and woman, the man looking younger, almost as if this was one of his first jobs and the police-woman was observing, seeing how he fared on the job.

"Mr Lee Sherwin," he said.

"Yes,"

"My name is PC Stillman, and this is PC Jordan, we need to question you about a recent post-office robbery. I need to see if I can eliminate you from the suspects".

"There's been a robbery! you're joking".

"Can I come in?" Stillman said and without waiting for an answer stepped inside, followed by Jordan.

The others were all huddled by Ray's front door trying to listen, but not venturing into the corridor incase they came out.

"Can you hear anything?" asked Victor. They could indeed hear slight muffled voices because Lee had left the door open, but no words could be made out.

Ten minutes later they emerged. Both police were smiling.

"...like I said, I'm sorry to have disturbed you".

"You're a good lad, for a copper," said Lee, "but it would be really stupid wouldn't it. Robbing a post-office on the day of my release," Stillman nodded.

"Yes, yes..anyway," They reached the top of the stairs and Stillman stopped and looked towards Ray's flat. Jordan continued down the stairs.

"Ray, you're in your sister's bad books," he said loudly. "You see, Aquarius was right about you, you're a fucking idiot". Lee just stared at him, and as the policeman made his way down stairs, he shook his head slightly, as though trying to rid himself of an unwanted thought.

"Why did I say that?" he muttered. Lee saw him to the door and they waved good-bye as though they were friends.

He turned and strided up the stairs. Ray's door opened.

"Fucking coppers believe anything," he said, "and they send around PC Pussies. They were easy. And now I'm not a suspect". He went and grabbed his bag. "What the fuck was that about Ray, when he knew you were there?"

"I dunno," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "something about my sister. I'll have to go and see her, she'll be upset probably".

"...and something about Aquarius, and you being an idiot. He got that right. Anyway I'm gonna start counting again," he said, hefting the bag and walking out and through into his own flat, followed by Shane and Victor.

Ray rummaged in his coat over the back of a wooden chair to find his Nokia mobile phone. An old version that only did text and phone-calls. He switched it on intending to ring her, but when it started up, he found he had a text message and opened it.

'Don't you dare come to the house, or my wedding!'

His eyes widened, "Shit!" he muttered. "Lee, what did you say?". The drum n bass started up again and he rang Caroline's number, but a pre-recorded voice simply said: 'This number has been blocked'.

A fire inside Ray ignited. Not a raging red mist, or relentless fury, but something he had experienced only a few times, and never once towards Lee, but anger burned in the mind and needed an outlet. Needed to confront the cause.

At the back of his mind, exerting caution, but having little effect was his common sense, trying to get him to stop and think. Maybe talk to him, see what he said. It might have all been a misunderstanding. Just take it easy.

Yet his anger was having none of that, and compelled him out into the corridor and into Lee's room where it was similar to before the police turned up. Victor and Shane were both stood in front of the sofa, smoking joints, eyes closed and very slowly 'dancing' to the drum n' bass. Lee was counting the money.

The common-sense part of Ray's brain tried one last ditch attempt to stop him, but failed dismally.

"Lee what have you done?" he shouted, thrusting the phone before his face with the text message.

Lee frowned, nodded upwards and mouthed 'Wha..?'

"Caroline wants nothing to do with me and I can't go the wedding. What did you

say?" he shouted. Lee stared at him for a few moments and nodded towards Shane who was looking at them, smoke curling above him.

'Turn that off' he mouthed. Shane turned off the music. Victor opened his eyes, thrust back to reality.

"What did you say to Wayne? She knows it was me who warned him off. For fucks sake Lee!"

"Since when did you grow a pair of bollocks?" Lee said, slowly standing up. "I did what you asked me. I warned off that hippy, and that was that. Job done. I did exactly as you asked".

"..but you must have told him it was me that was warning him off".

"I did yes. You never told me not to. I said something about a message from Ray, which is what you fucking told me to do. Give him a warning". Lee put both his hands on Ray's shoulders and pushed him back to a wall, "The warning wasn't from me was it? 'cos I don't give a fuck. That was a favour to you. I wasn't gonna do it, but I chose to. I did exactly as you told me. Warn him off for me, you said".

"But you should have known not to say it was me warning him". Ray could see in Lee's face he was getting more irate.

"That copper was fucking right, you are an absolute idiot." He tapped the side of Ray's head.

"D'you expect me to read your fucking mind? I delivered your message. That's it, and d'you know what..I was gonna just do that for free, but not now. In fact I'm gonna do you another favour. Fuck knows you don't deserve it, but I'll get you back in Carol's good books, and d'you how? I'm gonna make you do it, because you know that other bird, whatshername? Sandie. One of Caroline's mates. Get me her phone number, and don't you dare come back without it". He pushed him towards the door. His mobile phone clattered to the floor and Lee kicked it. It broke against the wall.

"Go on fuck-off," he said "Get that number".

"Oh come on Lee!" Ray shouted.

"Did you hear what I just said?"

"I'm never gonna get her number, Lee..!"

"Out!" Ray slinked out, and Lee waited for him to leave the building before bursting into laughter. Victor and Shane laughed along also, but there was no humour behind

their smiles.

"Did you see him? Shithisfuckingself. I know he's not gonna get Sandie's number. That's impossible. I'm just fucking with him. Let's see if he does come back tonight". He pointed to the hi-fi.

"Get those tunes back on". He went back to counting his money.

## Chapter 11

Like a slowly deflating balloon, Ray's anger dissipated, and he walked through the town in a kind of daze, ending up sat on a bench in the park where the funfair had since moved on.

The sky was a Paynes Grey, and around the park was street-lighting that looked like it had been there since it was formed. He was bathed in orange as one street-light was only feet away.

What am I going to do now? he thought. No way am I getting Sandie's number, and Caroline isn't going to speak to me. He took his keys from his pocket and fingered the key to the house. His and Caroline's place, but it was basically hers. There were a few things of Rays there, but he accepted that, knowing he could return anytime he liked and sleep in the spare room or on the sofa.

Not tonight though. He felt homeless. Maybe Caroline would change the locks. If so there would be nothing I could do, he thought, having no money on him at all. Everything was back at the flat, including his coat. All he wore now was a thin jumper and jeans with well-worn trainers. Maybe find a hostel. Do you have to be registered homeless for that? he wondered, and would it be full? His mind had conjured up Lee practically shooting him if he set foot back in the flat without the number, and Caroline to stab him if he set foot in the house. He knew Caroline would never actually stab him, but as for being shot by Lee. There was a question mark over that.

He knew he would have to go back to one or the other tonight. Face the hostile bear, or the hostile tiger, or freeze in a shop doorway, but in the end, he could freeze sleeping out at night on a park bench and still at some point go back to both. He would have to face Caroline's music sooner or later.

He decided sooner and slowly got up, making his way along the outer pathway of the

park and was soon passing by a pond. Orange light filtered out into the darkness, and he could just see on the edge a fisherman with a shelter umbrella, surrounded by paraphernalia. The man looked at Ray as he passed. He stood up and shouted across to him.

"I can't catch anything with this rod," he said, throwing it aside. Ray just stopped and stared. He could think of no reply at that moment, but the man, who he couldn't properly make out looked to probably be sixty-plus. Even from here, he 'looked' like a fisherman. He even wore a canvas hat.

"So I'm just gonna have to do it myself," he said, then leapt into the water. It was only three feet deep and he waded further out into the darkness where Ray couldn't see him, but seconds later he returned, arms above the water.

"I caught two fish," he said. "I caught two fish". Ray could only stare at him as he held forth the fish in each hand, then put them beneath water and released them.

He waded back to the edge and clambered out, back on his folding footstool and looked confused, even from this distance. He slumped forward clutching his head as if he had a headache.

Ray still did not know what to do, or say, so simply turned and continued along the path, exiting the park at the nearest entrance.

Pisces, he thought. Pisces...Pisces...Pisces. It's nothing to do with horoscopes, he thought. It was nothing but coincidence. A coincidence even about what?

He made his way into the town-centre, and was slowly but surely making his way towards Caroline's, rather like a school-boy who has been told to go to the head-master's office and has to make his way along the corridors until he reaches the door. Maybe he walks slowly. Maybe he takes the long way round. Does he stop to check on things he finds suddenly fascinating? yet the knowledge was there. Confrontation had to happen, but the stress of what had happened, and the stress of what was to come made him wander through the streets like a lost soul. Like somebody who had just lost a lot of money on a bet, or who was spending his first night homeless.

On a main road, he found an empty bus-stop and sat for a while. Pubs were open and people and traffic milled around as a normal night, no-one paying him any attention.

Except that was for twins. Over on the other side of the road, teenage boys wearing similar clothes and sporting similar hairstyles were looking over, pointing and muttering at each other. They waited for traffic to pass then came jogging over to the bus-stop. They can't have been more than fourteen.

"Aww, look at him," said one. "Not the brightest bulb in the pack".

"What? who on earth are...?" said Ray, but he felt too lethargic to protest. His stress had sapped his energy.

"Only a mother could love him".

"Nah, if she'd known what he would become she would have aborted him. His parents are secretly ashamed".

"I've got no...money on me". They didn't seem to hear him.

"Even his sisters are embarrassed for him". One of them stepped forward and leaned down, his face inches from Ray's.

"You have no respect do you for your ruling planet?". He then slapped Ray hard across the face.

"No respect whatsoever," said the other twin, and slapped him hard across the other side of his face. Ray was shocked but the twins laughed and backed away.

"Mercury deserves respect," one said, then they both ran, leaving Ray wide-eyed and breathing heavily. He thought he had to get to Caroline's now, and fell to the floor as he tried to get up, but he staggered onwards, through the streets, and twenty minutes later, he was slowly walking up the pathway to the front door.

## Chapter 12

The house was dark. Perhaps she's in bed, he thought, so he used his key to enter and tried to close it quietly behind him. Except it wasn't quiet, certainly when the door locked, sending a shot throughout the house.

Soon the landing light came on and a voice said: "Who's that?" She would probably have guessed it was Ray, but he wasn't the only one with a key. Their parents and a few neighbours had spares.

"Ray!" she said, storming down the stairs in her bath-robe, slapping on the hall light. "Get out. Didn't you get my text? You're not welcome..."

"Look I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it".

"Yes you did. Yes you did," fury on her face, pointing an accusing finger at him.

"You sent your nut-job mate to threaten my Wayne".

"Well, I only asked him to have a quiet word, not to threaten him as such".

"You wanted him to tell Wayne to leave me, so I could find somebody better".

"Ye I just thought you could find someone else who wasn't a..." he hesitated.

"...and you know Wayne do you? You've met him once and that was enough to judge him was it? Get out Ray. It'll be a while before I even think about forgiving you, maybe after the wedding".

"I can't, Lee'll kill me".

"There you go, and you're friends with that psycho".

"He's not a...look he won't let me go back without Sandie's phone number".

"Sandie! he wants her number? There's no way on this planet I'm giving you, Lee, or your other thick-head mates her number. She's a good friend to me. I couldn't do that to her, and she's got a boyfriend who she's very happy with".

"...but Lee'll kill me if I don't go back with it".

"Tough, it's only what you deserve". Ray was trembling. He nodded, knowing he wasn't getting it.

"Enjoy your night sleeping in the gutter".

"Please..I'm sorry. I just thought you could do better than Wayne".

"There's only one way. One," she emphasised it with her index finger, "...way you might, just might get the couch tonight and that's if you apologise to Wayne".

"Aww...Caroline," She pointed to the door. "Out, and I hope it rains". Ray sighed with exasperation.

"Fine," he muttered.

"What was that?"

"I said fine. I'll go the cafe tomorrow and apologise to Wayne". Caroline shook her head.

"No you won't. You'll apologise now...Wayne!" she called.

At the top of the stairs, a sheepish looking Wayne appeared in tracksuit bottoms and



a t-shirt, hovering there like he didn't know whether to go back in the room or down the stairs.

"Wayne, Ray has got something to say".

"It's okay, I heard," he said, disappearing.

"Wayne! get down here now". He appeared again and made his way down the stairs. He tried to, but could not make eye-contact with Ray, and vice-versa.

"I'm sorry," Ray muttered.

"For what?" Caroline asked.

"Sorry for asking my mate to warn you off her".

"We're still getting married," said Wayne. Ray nodded, and offered his hand for him to shake. Wayne stared at it for a few moments, then reluctantly shook it.

"Promise you won't send Lee around again," said Caroline. Ray nodded emphatically.

"I promise, but about Sandie's number..."

"No chance, now you can use the sofa but I want you gone the second you wake up. I'm still annoyed with you". She and Wayne went back upstairs. Ray went into the living room and collapsed on the sofa.

## Chapter 13

When Caroline awoke the following morning to find an absent Wayne, she dressed quickly and went downstairs to find an absent Ray.

She found them both in the kitchen, their backs to her, engrossed over a sizzling cooker.

"...then you can season it with black pepper," said Wayne. She smiled slightly, and Wayne turned and saw Caroline standing there.

"Morning love, breakfast?"

They all sat at the small kitchen table, Caroline and Wayne dressed and ready for work because Wayne was being dropped off at the cafe, so they had a quick bite to eat

with green teas, and despite a vegan breakfast for Ray, he found it tasty.

He nodded his approval at the food.

"Was nice that," he said.

"We need to go," said Caroline, moving to leave, as did Wayne, and she pointed an annoyed finger at Ray.

"I'm still angry with you. You can't hide here from Lee. You've got to face him at some point, so I'd rather you weren't here when I get back, okay?" Ray reluctantly nodded, looking away.

The front door clicked shut and he was alone in the silence.

Sandie's number, he thought. Need to find it. He drank the last of his tea and proceeded to search everywhere, trying his best to not look as though anything had been touched, like a burglar with a conscience, trying to put things neatly back, and he spent a good half hour searching, fear slowly burning within him the more he couldn't find it.

He didn't want to admit it, but he knew the truth. Lee terrified him, and walking on eggshells around him was something he hated. Progressively, over the years Lee had become more and more 'hardened' to the criminal way of life, due to experience and a lack of desire to be anything else. He had never shown any inclination to go straight, and despite Ray's dipping his toe in the criminal world every now and then, such as smuggling out cigarettes and alcohol from the supermarket where he worked, and selling counterfeit clothing when Shane obtained 'knock-offs' that had 'fallen off a lorry' he was certainly no jailbird like Lee, and the more entwined in criminal activity Lee became, the more Ray knew he would be dragged along, because saying no to him was never usually a good idea. He was very good at persuasion.

Where am I going though? Ray asked himself. Am I just going to spend the rest of my life living that way? He did kind of like Lee though, in a roundabout way, but not as much as he used to.

Rifling through the bedroom drawers, he found no sign of the number, and found himself in the hallway, wondering what on earth he would say to Lee, like the school-boy that has to tell the teacher he hadn't done his homework.

He saw on a tall occasional table beneath a mirror the cordless answer machine telephone, and pressed a few buttons. Recent calls. He scrolled back a few days. Sandie.

There it was. He went about finding a piece of paper and a pen and with the nib poised, he wrote all of the number except for the last digit. He remembered what Caroline had said: 'I couldn't do that to her', and the fact she has a boy-friend, but he knew he had to take something back to Lee, so with trepidation, wrote a different last number and wrote 'Sandie' next to it. He hoped Lee would never ring it at all.

It was his week-end in work and he didn't start until eleven, so sat watching television until it was time to leave, feet on the coffee-table eating a packet of Caroline's onion-ring crisps.

So an hour later, he was in the supermarket car-park in his high-vis jacket, pushing a few trolleys back to where they belonged. Then he went around picking up litter, and in aisle three somebody had spilled a carton of strawberry milk and he had to put up a yellow 'caution' sign next to the spillage and go and get the cleaning equipment.

He didn't really hate the job. It was work. It was a few extra pounds in his pocket, and he just got on with it. Other employees hardly spoke to him much. There were a couple of people he spoke more than a few sentences to, and others who were on nodding terms, but other than that he was simply the type of employee who only did it for the money, nothing else, who held no loyalty to the company, didn't care about rising through the ranks, and would drop it in a heartbeat if something better came along.

The store was busy as it usually was and he pushed the cleaning trolley towards the spillage and stopped next to it. He was about to grab the mop when he noticed that further along, a little girl was staring at him. She was with what was probably her grandmother who was mulling over the margarines, oblivious.

The girl slowly walked towards him and stopped about eight feet away. The grandmother noticed and came across.

"Chantelle, I've told you never to..." but Chantelle pointed at Ray and said:

"Grandma, Aries thinks that man is a cunt". Grandma audibly breathed in. A few other customers looked in the girls direction.

"Chantelle! where did you hear such language?" She looked at Ray.

"Sorry," she said, "I'm really sorry". She grabbed the girl's arm and pulled her away. Ray stood there for a few moments.

I don't believe in astrology, he thought, and went back to work.

## Chapter 14

He stood in the car-park of the high-rise flats with his heavy bag of whisky, vodka and cigarettes he always managed to steal from work, looking up at the windows, surprised with himself how nervous he was, but he knew he had to go in.

One of the other residents who he had only ever seen in passing, a man who looked ten years younger than him was talking on a mobile phone as he left the main entrance and passed near Ray.

“...so go and ask him. Ask him if he’ll give us a lift back as well, and tell him that my star-sign is Taurus. I’m a Taurus”. Ray just looked at him as he walked past, then the man seemed confused.

“...don’t know what I said that for. Anyway, go and ask...”

He slowly walked up the stairs, and found Lee and Victor sitting together, looking bored, watching television in Lee's flat.

"There he is," Lee said, "where have you been?"

"I stayed at Caroline's. Got that number you wanted". He held out the piece of paper to Lee.

"I was only messing with you, you know. I didn't think you would actually get it. See, told you I would get you back in her good books. If you listen to old Uncle fucking Lee you'll do alright. Tell you what...fuck this hanging around the flats, let's all go the pub. I'll pay. Vic, go and get Shane".

With that, the four of them left the flats, and headed along the roads to their local, 'The Green Castle'.

When they entered, several of Lee's old friends and acquaintances were there, and cheered when he walked in.

'Welcome back' they said slapping him on the shoulder and shaking his hand, offering to buy him drinks. Lee accepted. Some of them rang up a few of their other friends in the neighbourhood.

'Guess who's back?'

So for that night, the Green Castle became the hub of an unofficial 'Welcome home' party, and the other regulars who had no idea who he was, or did know who he was and

didn't like him, slinked away as more people, friends of friends turned up, people who carried around with them an aura of negativity, an atmosphere building in the pub towards that of potential violence. It simply needed one spark. However, that night, that spark was not lit. There were a few arguments, a couple of 'squaring-ups', but no blood spilled. The staff did not enforce the 'No smoking' ban as the place became a pall of smoke, and glasses got smashed, and laughter punctuated the place throughout the night. Some people who were coming to the pub, stood on the threshold, took one look inside, then turned and left.

Then as the clock ticked past midnight, and the staff were even afraid to call last orders, they were quietly relieved when Lee himself stood up and shouted:

"Come on everyone, all back to mine". Most of them left. Some left and went away, but about twenty-five people all headed back to the high-rise. Some went via the off-licence and brought with them all kinds of alcoholic beverages and cigarettes.

On the ceilings of all the flats, there was at least one spider, maybe hiding in a corner, but that night they were witness to laughter, arguments, the pall of smokes from different types of cigarettes, cigars, joints, the music of drum 'n' bass. Witness to genuine fights, glasses being smashed, people falling over, the crushing of empty cans, beer being spilled and vibrations from the hi-fi and heavy footfalls.

Poor spiders got no peace that night.

When Lee woke the following morning, face down on Shane's sofa, he was surprisingly sober. Although he indulged in all the behaviour, perhaps he had not as much as some of the other people, or maybe he was just hardened to it. In days gone by when he had had a lot to drink, inebriation took a while to take over. He was slightly hungover, and a dull ache inside his head told him he wasn't a hundred percent.

He found the place looking like it had been the epicentre of a raucous party, because it basically was. Empty bottles of whisky, vodka, cider and lager cans with white powder and cigarette filters strewn around, and there were people asleep. Someone lay on his back in front of the television as though they'd been shot. Someone was asleep on a wooden kitchen table chair. He wandered out into the corridor and found a man lying down, asleep by Victor's flat.

He found somebody asleep in his own flat in the arm-chair. He slapped him in the face.

"Oi, wake up and fuck off". The man murmured and stirred.

"Go on, out!" Lee said, hooking a thumb to the door, and he did the same in all the

other flats, slapping people awake.

"Time to fuck off", and so around ten minutes later, in the corridor people moaned and staggered around.

Lee didn't recognise half of them, but he could tell some would be the type to hang around where they could feed their addictions.

Crack-heads, he thought. those who usually looked double their real age, who if they weren't given their marching orders would hang around doing nothing but smoking and drinking. Those who were mostly drunk or high every time you saw them, who were never seen without a cigarette between their nicotine-stained fingers. People who spent twenty-four seven feeding their habits.

"Come on, out!" Lee shouted, and they all managed to shuffle down the stairs, and Lee opened the entrance, nodding outwards.

"Go on, fuck off". Like zombies, they moaned and staggered aimlessly into the car-park. When the last one left he slammed the door, and a light-bulb went on in his mind.

My money.

He ran up the stairs into his flat and moved the mattress. Everything was still there. He sighed with relief. I really need to hide that properly, he thought, but I'll count it again.

He went into Ray's flat, and there was a man on the sofa he had deliberately not thrown out.

Blotto. Blotto who was awake and looking up at Lee with a smile on his face.

"I've got a proposition for you," he said, "Fancy some work?"

Ray woke up on the floor beside his bed with a banging head-ache, but five minutes later was sat at the table in front of a steaming cup of tea, half an hour before he had to go to work. This will never clear up before then, he thought, but this was the price to pay, and he knew he would be stealing more cigarettes and bottles.

When he was ready to leave, he shrugged on his jacket and was at the top of the stairs when he heard laughing coming from Victor's flat. It sounded like him as well.

Curiosity caused him to walk in there. The laughing was coming from the bedroom. The door was wide open and he could see Victor lying on the bed in tears of laughter.

His shirt was open.

"Ray," he said, "Come and look at this". Ray entered and Victor gestured to his chest.

"Look what some-one has drawn on me. I love it". Ray saw that, in thick black ink, like that of a felt-tip marker, somebody had drawn an accurate outline.

Of a crab.

## Chapter 15

Mandy Summers sent a text to Caroline on her break-time from her work at a nursery in her Mini-Cooper, trying to hold back tears.

'He's left me again'. Carl, her childhood sweetheart, was a rather loose cannon. A free-spirit, but not in the traveller sense, in the 'I-want-to-see-the-world' sense. A person who could never make up his mind about anything. He wanted to get married, then he didn't. He wanted children, then he didn't. When he did, and Mandy agreed, she was mid-way through her pregnancy when he told her get an abortion. 'Told' her. 'I don't want no bloody kids', but while Mandy was usually rather passive and humble and usually let Carl get his way, when it came to children a mother's instinct was ruthless. She was keeping the baby, and that was that.

Carl had nowhere to go. He wasn't violent, and had to accept with a sour face the fact he was to become a father, until he left her with the prospect of being a single mother. Not the first time he had had her in tears.

So off he went, 'I-don't-wanna-be-a-dad', to London, '...'cos-there's-loads-a-good-jobs-down-there'.

Except there wasn't. He found a job as part-time glass collector in a wine-bar.

Yet after a day, and the huge city looming over him as if it was getting ready to chew him up and spit him out, he came crawling back, his mind changed. 'I'd-love-to-be-a-dad'.

He was fairly decent for a while, settled with a job as a kitchen porter, but again he felt constrained, and decided he wanted to study to become a vet, so he signed up for courses, but soon the work became overwhelming and difficult for him.

There was a job in Cardiff which he applied for, and got an interview. Customer service in a call-centre for an energy company.

'You're holding me back Mandy', and off he went, staying down in Cardiff. He was down there for two weeks, got the job, but could only hack it for three days. The city didn't offer much more for him, and he gave serious thought to going abroad. There was fruit-picking in Holland somewhere he had heard.

Yet, the lure of safety, of comfort, led him to get a train back to Mandy. However, Mandy didn't want him back.

So the prospect of singledom, of having no job, with no real fixed abode was a rather scary notion for him, and so he pleaded with Mandy to take him back.

There wasn't really much pleading to do. She took him back, but within a week he was off again. The lure of pastures new was too much. He decided to join the army reserves, but they took one look at him and decided he wasn't for them, but he had the military in mind, and went to the naval reserve, and the royal artillery, but for all his talk and self-promotion, none of them took him in, and his vision of standing on the bow of a battleship armed with a rifle coming into dock was just that, a vision, which is as close as he would ever get.

So back to Mandy he came, who refused to take him back again.

'Nope, not this time'.

'Please'.

'No'.

'Please'.

'No'.

'Oh please I won't do it again I promise'.

'You promise?'

This time he was back for a year, and Mandy found herself pregnant. Carl was non-plussed, and with two months to go, he found a prospect of work on a cruise-line, sailing from port to port around the Mediterranean, and off he went to Southampton for an interview to work behind the bar in a ship, but when he got there the position was taken, and he hung around making a nuisance of himself, got a job on another cruise-line as a glass collector.



However, before sailing day, he had a crisis of conscience, and was sorely tempted to set foot on the ship, but he watched it leave the port, and made his way back to Mandy.

'I'm not taking you back'.

'I did it for you and the baby'.

'Really..?'

With Mandy working in a nursery, she was sometimes required in various nurseries around the city, which meant she would always go back to the same house wherever she went, but a temporary posting up in Blackpool meant three months away.

Arguments ensued.

'You're not going'

'Yes I am'.

'What about the baby?'

'She's coming with me'.

'No. You're not going'.

Carl eventually wore her down, and the doubts, put there by him, festered in her mind until she eventually agreed.

'Alright, I'll stay'.

So it went on. He would stay awhile, then see a prospect in the distance and leave. Her friends, just shy of calling her stupid wondered why she put up with him, because on some of his trysts away, they were not always job related.

He was on several dating websites and would sometimes message women. Mostly he would not receive a reply, but occasionally he would engage in conversation, and when he thought something might come of it, off he would go.

'I'm leaving you Mandy I've found someone else,' said a note on the kitchen table. Cue Mandy's tears. Cue Carl's return with his tail between his legs the following day.

'I'm not taking you back'.

'Ah babes...I'm sorry. That was definitely the last time...I promise'.

'No...definitely?'

Sometimes she would find his phone unattended, and scroll through and find that he has been sending 'dick pics' to various women.

'Hi gorgeous. Think you can take this on?'. There was one reply to such a request, as most women thought that any man who sent those pictures were 'sad losers', there were those out there that would respond in a positive way. They were rare, but they did exist, and one such woman replied:

'I know what to do with that. Let me show you'. So off he went again, texting Mandy:

'Sorry, I found someone else. Bye'.

However, slinking back again, Mandy really did try and put her foot down.

'No chance. You're not coming back here'

'Please'

'No way'

'Oh please...babes. That was definitely the last time I promise, and the kids need a father'.

So on it went, time and again. Three years was the most he hung on for before following some mythical pipe-dream and discovering it was an illusion, sliding his way back into Mandy's good books.

This time was no different. He had decided he wanted to go mountaineering, and thought it looks easy enough. How hard can it be? He wasn't exactly climbing Mount Everest, but Snowdon, Tryfell and Glyder Fach, and while he was there he would find a nice woman with similar interests and they would 'get-back-to-nature' and live off the land and start a farm.

Mandy knew that even if he should find such a woman, it wouldn't be long before she would be in tears as well because he would be off again when something else catches his eye, but Mandy, at the back of her mind always guessed he would be back, but it was never guaranteed. Maybe he really was going to start a farm. Maybe he really was going to work on cruise ships. Maybe he really would get with a woman who said yes to a 'cock pic'.

While she never exactly waited for him to return, venturing out into the single world was a daunting prospect for her. She was safe in her bubble. Telling herself there was

no rush for a man. Two kids, a house, a job. She was fine.

She tried to convince herself on some lonely nights curled up on the sofa with a cup of hot chocolate, watching television. Maybe it would be nice to cuddle up to someone, but having to start all over again with a new man was something that filled her with apprehension. 'Hi, what are your interests? I like this this and this, but I don't like this this and that'. Dating was basically an interview process. 'Getting-to-know-you' with each having to prove to the other they were not a 'freaky weirdo'. At least she knew Carl, knew his foibles and faults, and there were good points too. Sometimes he made her laugh, and bought take-aways for them, and tidied up, even the children's bedrooms, but mostly he was just 'around', just being Carl. Nothing remotely unique about him. He wasn't handsome or ugly, just a bland guy you forget the second you look away.

There were more cons than pros in their relationship. He would complain about her sometimes, put her down, tell her she looks 'cheap' and that she was stupid. She was asked occasionally what she ever saw in him, and why she's still with him. Why hadn't she dumped him years ago? Mandy never really had an answer. Why does the wife stay with the violent husband? What is it about being single, about what's over the horizon that's so scary? Whatever is over there can't be worse than staying, but stay they did, and Mandy had a similar state of mind. She was so embedded in the comfort zone, even though there was hardly much comfort there at all, getting out would be difficult, because even if she was to meet somebody else, there would be a lot of emotional 'baggage', and getting her mind-set locked into somebody new would prove to be hard because they would be taking Carl's place, or she would be taking the place of somebody on his side. Either way, it was a daunting prospect, and she stayed, because here she knew where she was.

Mandy never tried to escape, but knew she could if she wanted. If she really tried. The door was open to leave, but it was too difficult. Carl knew what side his bread was buttered on. Knew Mandy would relent in the end. Perhaps because she wanted to. She thought she loved him. Carl played with her emotions enough for her to not know exactly whether she loved him or not. Perhaps it was somewhere in the middle. She had 'affection' for him. Sometimes.

'See ya babe' was his text.

He'd got some basic mountaineering equipment and caught the train. She often wondered why she cried for him at all. He annoyed her a lot, and even when she was with him they would bicker and argue, and sometimes he would be out all night and not tell her where he had been.

I don't want him back, she thought. Not this time, but there was a little amber light of caution deep inside her mind that said: 'Maybe', and she guessed it would be the same this time. When he found the grass wasn't as green as he'd thought it was, he knew he had a family to return to.

He always takes advantage of me, she thought, and the children. They guessed he would return, but he wasn't exactly father-of-the-year. He let Mandy take care of everything, and they kind of hardly knew him. He was like a guest that came to stay, wouldn't play with them much, take them anywhere, or engage in conversation that lasted more than a minute. In fact he would just ignore them a lot of the time except when they got under his feet and he would get angry.

Nope, not this time if he comes crawling back. I've had enough. I'm not a doormat.

'Don't be a doormat' she thought, remembering the card she had got from the funfair Oracle. It was in the glove compartment along with other things she didn't particularly want to keep or throwaway.

She retrieved it and read: '...when your emotions threaten to overwhelm, do not be a doormat'. She nodded at this.

Okay, she thought. Carl, don't come back, we're finished.

With her tears subsided, she was about to leave the car when her phone pinged for a text.

It was from Vanessa.

'I've got a new boyfriend' it said, along with a picture of her and the viola player hugging and smiling.

## Chapter 16

Caroline was hunched over her computer analysing whether or not to buy in insulated dog kennels and if the budget could stretch that far as nobody seemed to be buying the garden storage boxes so perhaps they could be a replacement.

She rested back in her creaking chair and checked her personal phone. There was a text message.

'He's left me again'. Caroline sighed and knew she would have to ring Mandy and

have the same conversation she had had many times. Convince her he would return, then tell her to finally kick him out, but knew she wouldn't, and would buckle under the pressure, and the record would be played over again:

'I'm definitely leaving him this time'.

'No you're not. You'll just take him back like you always do'.

'Not this time'.

'Nope. He'll come crawling back and you'll say no, but he'll pressure you and pressure you until you give in and back he comes because he knows you're a walkover and he'll keep doing it until you grow enough confidence to dump him for good. He needs to realise he can't keep doing this. Get another boyfriend, and kiss him in front of Carl. If he sees you with a new man then he'll know you're for real'.

Then she added: 'But not Lee. Don't get with Lee. Rather Carl than him'.

She rang Mandy, who was just about to enter the nursery.

"What's happened?" Caroline asked.

"He's left me again. I don't think he'll be back this time".

"I'm sure he will be". The conversation continued for around fifteen minutes, during which her phone beeped for another message.

"...ye, I'm definitely gonna start looking for a new man. I'll set myself up on a dating website. Oh, did you hear from Vanessa? She's got a new man".

"What? no".

"Anyway, got to go I can hear crying toddlers". She hung up, and Caroline checked the new message.

'I've got a new boyfriend' it said along with the picture. Caroline wanted to ring her, but with being at work she knew another personal call was a no-no. Sometimes she made exceptions though and would disapprove of others doing it, but it was rather like temptation to eat sugary or fast-foods. Maybe just this once it'll be okay. She never felt guilty in the few times she would do it. Others probably did it all the time, and business wouldn't suffer, and what her colleagues didn't know couldn't harm them, but she had emails to answer and staff to supervise, so she simply texted her back:

'Lucky you' with a smiley-face emoticon. She stood up and went to leave the office when she received a reply.

'His name is Franklin, and he plays the viola. He's lovely'. Plays the viola, thought Caroline.

She texted back:

'He looks nice. I would like to meet him. Ask him if he will play at my wedding'.

No sooner had she put the phone back on the desk than it pinged again.

'He said he would love to'. That was quick, she thought.

'Are you in bed with him now, dirty slag?'

A message pinged back. Two emoticons. A smiley face and a thumbs up. Caroline smiled and shook her head. She texted Wayne.

'Vanessa's new boyfriend will play viola at our wedding'.

Wayne's phone was in his coat which was hanging up. He was in the cafe kitchen cooking up hash browns with tofu scramble. Two student waiters were serving out as it was quite busy. Steam billowed over him as he stirred the scramble. One of the waitresses opened the door and called in:

"Wayne! someone to see you".

"What?"

"Someone to see..." The waitress was pushed past and Lee stood there. She frowned and said:

"You can't just..." but Lee gave her a look that meant she quickly went back to work. Fear began to course through Wayne as he came around to stand by him.

Lee held out his hands in a gesture of appeasement.

"Just to let you know mate," he said, raising his voice over the cooking. "I apologise for what I said the other day. I'm not gonna do anything. You were probably worried out of your mind. You don't need to be. Ray put me up to it. Blame him. If you wanna get married to Carol, be my guest. Nothing to do with me. Just sayin' I'm sorry, okay?" Wayne nodded, fear still coursing through him.

Lee turned and headed for the door, Wayne followed him and said:

"That's alright, Ray's apologised."

"Has he? well, okay".

"Would you like a complimentary black coffee?"

"No ta mate, got to meet me fuckin' probation officer". Then he left, but the fear took its time to leave Wayne's system.

Lee's appointment to meet his probation officer was in the back seat of a purple Volvo outside of a police station.

Billy Price was 22 years old but looked younger, and had only been a probation officer for six months. He was full of enthusiasm, almost as if he did the work as a hobby, and wore black and white clothing, as if attending an interview, but probably wore them as his casual gear as well. He sported short blonde hair and had ruminatory aspirations to go into politics where he could see himself as a bureaucratic official with a sense of influence and authority.

"So, everything alright? Your mental health is good. I mean it seems good". He also liked to talk, and asked questions which he himself then answered. So Lee reigned in any animosity he held towards him, said what needed to be said, sat with his arms folded trying not to listen as Billy waffled on and on.

"...now with regards training and rehabilitation I have what is called the 'Blossom programme' because you blossom out like a plant. You grow from what you were into a new and better person. It's a rehabilitation charity based not too far from the prison. Plenty of others have gone through it and loved it". Billy produced a booklet and handed it to Lee.

"Fine, I'll think about it,"

"No," Billy said, "it's mandatory. You'll start when they have a space available, so I will let you know, and book you in for our next appointment".

"Fuck," Lee muttered, and left the car.

Somebody had been sick in Shane's bath, but as Victor scrubbed away, tidying all the flats after last night's revelry he felt a twinge of satisfaction as he did. The place was being cleaned his way. Ray and Shane were at the park nursing the fringes of their hangovers. Lee was out somewhere wherever Lee goes whatever Lee does, so he had all four flats to himself and could clean to his heart's content. His own and Ray's flat

were gleaming, but Shane's was proving tricky. There were new stains on the carpets to join the ones Shane himself had put there over time.

He wondered if Ray had acquired an interest in astrology because in his flat there were zodiac cards strewn throughout the place. He had gathered them in a neat pile and put them on the kitchen counter.

He had been to the shop to get cleaning equipment. His own expense and had set up the one Hoover between them.

After a good hour, Shane's flat was as good as it was going to get and he dragged the Hoover into Lee's flat.

He decided to start in the bathroom, and caught himself in the mirror. He only had a thin shirt and could see the pincers of the crab poking out.

Opening his shirt he looked at it again and rubbed it, but knew it was going nowhere. He had not come across a felt-tip pen. Whoever did it had taken it with them. His chest was red raw around the outline where he had scrubbed, but the crab stayed, as if it was a tattoo.

Why would someone do that? he thought. I'll ask Lee to see if he knows who did it, but getting it off was the main thing.

As he beavered away, he eventually came to the bedroom and knew where Lee kept the weapons, lifted the mattress to find them still there.

The money, however, he found in his bedside cabinet in neat piles. Lee really was poor at hiding things, he thought, but knew better than to move anything of his.

He liked Lee, but knew, like Shane and Ray his boundaries were up and down. Lee would sometimes have an outburst of anger, and over the years Victor had been punched in the face three times. Ray six and Shane five. They had crossed his line at the time, and violence was Lee's way of telling them that. Yet sometimes he would get frustrated about something that was nothing to do with them, and take it out on his friends, sometimes with smacking and shoving, and 'Get out of my fucking sight!', but a lot of the time he was fine, simply simmering on low gas and could be friendly for a while, so they didn't always have to tread on eggshells around him, but knew they had to tread carefully because his boundaries could be anywhere.

Victor was one of those people that had at one point been coasting in life. His path laid out before him heading into the high-rise. He went to college to learn languages, but with Lee and Ray's influence he basically fell into line. He could not catch up with



his work, and with being a teenager, influences that were nothing to do with languages came at him from all sides, and he was helpless.

Smoking, drinking, having a good time with mates was all that mattered, but there was always that bird in a cage, fish in a bowl wonder he had. There was a big wide world out there, but here I am. Trapped. What if...?

What if I had gone to college, learned languages and got myself qualified? Where would I be now?

What if in school I had made other friends? Ones who preferred education over hedonism, who preferred to hold a pen rather than a cigarette.

Still, the path of his life had led him to now, to Lee's flat, to staring at the money with slight temptation to take it and run. He guessed if Lee had better prospects he would drop his friends like a stone, may not even say goodbye if a good proposition came his way, but it hadn't, so kept his friends around him because he knew where he stood, knew he could get away with anything. Ray, Shane and Victor didn't have a line that Lee dare not cross. He could say and do anything, and they simply accepted it, because they could do nothing else.

He continued to clean Lee's flat and was mopping down the kitchen when Lee walked in.

Victor felt a twinge of embarrassment as though he'd been caught trespassing, but Lee didn't seem to notice or care. He threw the handouts onto the kitchen counter.

"Good lad," he said as Victor mopped away. "Can't stop, just seen my probation officer, gives me some shit about some fucking programme I've got to do. I think I might give some serious thought to blowing the fucker away. I've got to go and see Blotto in about half an hour, but it'll take me half an hour to walk there, so just come to drop this shit off and grab my coat. What would us fuckers do without you eh?" he said, picking up his jacket from the back of a kitchen table chair. Victor blushed, smiled slightly, and carried on mopping, but then stopped.

"You wouldn't happen to notice who did this, do you? Can you find them and beat fuck out of them?" He opened his shirt and exposed the crab. "I can't get it off. Someone can't have brought a tattoo gun surely". Lee just stared at the image for a while.

"To be honest Vic, I haven't got a clue. I don't know who half those fuckers were, but it should come off if it's just felt pen or something. It won't have been Ray or Shane, but well, fuck knows...sorry fella". Victor nodded, and went back to mopping. Lee left,

and even though the weather and inside the flats was fairly warm, Victor felt shivery, and started coughing. He knew it was not a resurgence of a hangover, but some of the spittle that landed on the floor was red. I'm not feeling too well, he thought, and sat down for a while.

It wasn't particularly sunny, but they just about got away with seeming like they were sun-bathing, even though they were fully clothed, and laying on the grass, staring up at the clouds. A few people passed by and looked on with curiosity at Ray and Shane but they were in no position to care.

The hangovers they had clung on with straining fingers but let go, and they felt like rough sleepers.

"Not had a night like that in a while," said Shane, sitting up. Ray sat up as well and slowly climbed to his feet, stretching.

"Fucking starving," he said, and Shane got to his feet as well. Shane's mobile rang and he fumbled around trying to answer it.

"Unknown caller, who the fuck's this?" He answered. "Hello," he said rather loudly. "Caroline? Oh hi Caroline how are y...? right ok, he's here". He passed the mobile to Ray.

"Ray, where's your bloody phone? I've been trying to ring you but the line's dead".

"Er, well, Lee accidently broke it. I need to get a new one".

"Why am I not surprised by that? Anyway, your boss from Ambroses was trying to ring you. He wants to see you".

"What? why?"

"What d'you mean why? how am I supposed to know? he's not gonna tell me".

"When?"

"Now, as soon as possible, and get yourself a new phone". Ray nodded, and ended the call.

"Boss wants to see me".

"Why?"

"Fuck knows. I'm getting some food before though"

## Chapter 17

The light blue door was sandwiched between a butchers and a florists, and the scent of honeysuckle invaded Lee's nostrils. It looked like the place could be abandoned as the door was thick with dirt and the paint was cracked. It almost looked as if it had not been opened in years. One of those places that goes by unnoticed. Even if this was your local shopping area, you could go years without noticing it, and one day, see the door and ask:

'How long's that been there?' such was its insignificance.

Lee wondered if he had got the right place and decided to ring rather than knock. There wasn't even a number on the door.

'Next to the butchers on Hendrick street', he was told, but on the other side of the butchers was an opticians, so this had to be the place. He took out his mobile and rang the number he had been given. It was answered immediately.

"Blotto," said Lee, "I'm outside, I think I'm at the right place".

"Alright I'll be down now". Blotto took a few minutes to open the door, and when it did it dragged on the carpet and he had to pull hard, but soon he was closing it again as him and Lee made their way along a gloomy corridor, up stairs and into one of the rooms above the florist.

It had been made into a makeshift office. A man sat behind a desk, leaning back on a wooden chair. On the desk was a laptop attached to a printer and three mobile phones. In one corner there was a filing cabinet that looked old and ready to be thrown out. In front of the desk there was a wooden chair and on the right wall was a light brown two-seater sofa that looked like it had been salvaged from a skip.

"This is Lee," said Blotto, "A friend of mine from back in the day, the one I told you about who's just been inside for two years and needs a bit of work. Lee, this is Gary".

The man nodded. He was in his late fifties, but looked older, wore a badly fitting brown suit and had scruffy hair as if it had never been combed with a short black and grey beard.

"Yes, thank-you". Blotto sat down heavily on the sofa. He was shorter and slightly older than Lee, over-weight but not too much, was bald through choice. Lee had never seen him with hair. He walked across to the chair and sat down without waiting to be asked.

"First of all," said Gary, "I don't care about your background, what you've done. It doesn't concern me. Blotto's filled me in". Lee looked across at him but Blotto just smiled and nodded.

"Did he tell you what the job is. What I do?"

"You borrow money to people, I get it back, something like that".

"When the banks and even those payday loan places don't lend you money, then people come to me, and I will, but I'm not one of those that charges high interest rates. I charge modest rates. I've got to make a profit somehow, you know how it is, but lending money is as you're probably aware, risky business. Nobody likes to pay money back. I'll tell you that for free. Everybody hates to owe money, so you'll understand getting what is owed to me can take a little work, so I employ Blotto here, as well as others in different places, to help people keep up with their payments. Thing is though, one of my agents left to be a security guard in Wales, getting less money than what I gave him, so fuck knows what he was thinking, and Blotto here suggested you".

"Ye, thanks for this opportunity," Lee said, and Blotto looked pleased with himself.

"Most people indebted to me are fine. They pay on time. Everything's good, but then sometimes there are those that don't pay, or need reminding, which is where you and Blotto come in. Sometimes folks needs a little persuasion. You won't always be working together. Sometimes only one of you is needed, but then there are times, when, I'll be honest...we".

Blotto interjected. "We need to get what is owed. So if they can't or won't pay, we take the equivalent. We've got several lock-ups with expensive stuff. Televisions, computers, jewellery, whatever, which they can get back when they pay up, and if they haven't got it in what we take from them, well we have to take it out of them in what I call 'medical fees'. We then write the debt off, but by then it's cost them a whole lot more".

Lee nodded, understanding.

"Sounds easy," he said. "So what's the pay?" Gary smiled and nodded.

"We'll discuss that in due course but I need to make sure you can do it. You understand that right?"

Lee nodded, "Fair enough. I'll just give them a reminder". Gary took a note-pad from the desk drawer and began to write in it. For a few moments there was only the sound of pen on paper, traffic outside had seemed to stop, but then it began again.

Lee was handed a scrap of paper. On it were three names and addresses.

"The top two are overdue with their repayments. They're the ones that need reminding, and get something of a deposit from them. Rachel Ward owes me three-hundred quid, always pays but never on time, and sometimes it's never enough, but she's a week overdue. So a little nudge, and Harvey Stewart. He's got a good job. One of those computer geeks that earns, well, I don't know but it's a pretty penny. He owes five hundred quid. I do know he's got a gambling problem, loves betting on greyhounds, and I understand he owes other money-lenders as well, so probably lends off me to pay someone else, but I don't care about that. If he owes me he owes me. So just remind him his payment is overdue, and remember if they haven't got any money on them then take something of worth. They'll get it back when they pay up. The other one, Keith Matthews owes me a grand. The payment was overdue two weeks ago. I've heard nothing. I understand he's a bit of a fuck-nut. Never answers his phone. I've had problems with him before, but this time I want you to take one of his possessions. His brand new sports car. That'll wipe off the grand". Lee nodded.

"One small problem," said Lee. "I haven't driven a car in years".

"Don't worry about that," said Blotto, "I'll meet you at that job and drive back, just give me a ring".

"There you go," said Gary, "See how you do with them and then let's see about getting you paid".

"Fucking right," Lee stood up and shook hands with Gary.

## Chapter 18

Ray felt apprehensive. An employee called into the bosses office usually conjured up images of being sacked, being given marching orders, and that was what he envisioned.

With hands wedged into his pockets, he walked across the car-park and nodded an acknowledgment to a worker in the shop foyer before making his way to the back of the store, through a staff-only door, along a corridor, up a flight of stairs and across to a small office, the door slightly ajar. He could hear nothing from within, and tentatively knocked.

"Come in," he heard, and Ray walked into the cramped office where his store

manager sat at a desk looking at a computer monitor. He glanced at Ray and gestured for him to sit in a well-used grey fabric office chair opposite.

Allan Chandler basically stepped into the position straight from university, from a graduate training scheme and with a father who had deep pockets encouraging him along, he never started from scratch, at the bottom of the ladder. He took the lift, and passed by those on the ladder, stepping out into the position he was in in the supermarket, and at the age of twenty-four, he had many employees beneath him, many who had been there since before Allan had set foot in university. Rather small for his age, as though he should really still be studying, he always looked put upon, even though he brought it on himself by knowing the authority he had, and wielding it like a weapon he did not know how to use.

Ray thought him rather aloof, as if he thought the job was beneath him, as if the lift could go to higher floors. Perhaps it could, but for now he was here, superior over Ray, and he tapped at the keyboard as if he wasn't doing any proper work, more like playing games, but Ray could see the monitor, and it wasn't games, but emails.

Allan sighed and turned to Ray. Before his keyboard was a sheet of paper with several names on. Some were crossed off. There were also several sheets of paper that looked like some kind of document.

"Ray, is it?" Ray nodded, looking around the tiny office.

"Basically all it is, is that I'm putting you on to a zero-hours contract". He picked up two of the documents and placed them before Ray. They were the same.

"If you could read this and sign them thanks. A copy for us and one for you". Ray just glanced at it, not really reading, seeing lines such as:

'It is hereby agreed...' 'pursuant to the employment rights act...' so he just picked up a pen and poised it over the signature line.

"This means you will need a phone Ray," said Allan. "I was trying to contact you but now that you'll be on zero hours you will need a phone on you at all times". Ray nodded, knowing he would have to either buy, or persuade Lee to get him a new one considering it was him who broke it.

"It'll also mean you could be working anytime during the week. Not just weekends. Nights maybe. More hours than you work, or less, but I need you on-call. So get a phone or we won't be able to contact you. No phone. No work. Understand? get it into your stupid brain. No phone no money". Ray just stared at him, not knowing how to reply, but signed both papers with a nearby pen. Allan continued. He put both hands

flat on the table and leaned forward.

"What's your star-sign?" he asked. Ray could do nothing but continue to stare.

"Pisces," he said after around five seconds. Allan nodded.

"I'm Sagittarius. In fact, I'm going to show you something". He picked up Ray's contract and exposed his left wrist.

"Ever give yourself paper-cuts? hurt don't they?"

"Sorry, why are you..?" asked Ray, but it went unheard. Allan sliced at his wrist with the edge of the paper, but it didn't cut the thin skin. He tried again. It didn't work. A third time he cut and a few drops of blood spurted onto the table. He had cut it just enough for the droplets he wanted, and held his wrist over the blood on the desk where more drops landed.

After a few seconds, he clamped on his wrist to stop the dripping.

"Look at that," he said, looking at the drops of blood on the desk. Ray could do nothing else but follow his eyeline.

"See the arrangement of the droplets. That is the exact constellation of Sagittarius". Ray just nodded.

"Alright..."

"Now take your contract and leave". Ray did so, quickly getting out and hurrying away.

Allan, still stemming the drops from his injured wrist, wondered why on earth he just did that.

Ray could think of nothing else as he made way home. What the fuck did he do that for? he asked himself.

Eventually he entered his own premises and stood in the kitchen between the fridge and the kettle, trying to decide between the two. Cold can of beer, or hot cup of tea.

He prepared a cup for his tea and turned on the kettle. The zodiac cards were there, and he spread them out, thinking of Allan, and of the other times he was reminded of star-signs.

I don't believe, he thought. It's all nothing but coincidence. What else could it be? He

nodded, satisfied with that. Coincidence. That's all it was. He convinced himself as the kettle boiled.

## Chapter 19

"Take your job then, and shove it up your bleeding jacksie," said Leanne to her boss in his office, the office of a small vets where she had worked as a receptionist for eight years. She was trying not to cry, to show resolve, to show they can't treat me like this and get away with it.

"You won't get away with this you know, I'll be seeing my solicitor".

"You won't have a leg to stand on," said the man, ten years older than her, always wore unironed shirts and trousers with a trendy earring in one ear. "We're restructuring, downsizing and making changes".

"You're still going to need a receptionist".

"We've got Mrs Alexander until we get your replacement".

"Well now let me guess. It's not going to be some fat old man is it? some pensioner".

"Mrs Alexander's a pensioner".

"Yes, and she works part-time, and you haven't got the guts to let her go because she's married to a judge".

"We don't need to let her go, as I've said we're having to make redundancies, we're down-sizing. It just happens. There's nothing I can do about it". Leanne just stared at him for a few seconds.

"But you're still going to replace my job though aren't you? How is that down-sizing? Let me guess. Little bimbo who'll flutter her eyelashes at the big boss. Yes sir yes sir". There was a weighty silence, then:

"I'd keep you on if I could. You've been a good worker. We're having to let one of the vets go as well, so it's nothing personal. I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do".

"Yes there is, and you know it". She walked out in to the reception area where Mrs Alexander was jotting down notes. It was quiet. There was only one person waiting with a sad looking Border Terrier at his feet.



"I'm going now," she said, and Mrs Alexander stood up and gave her a hug.

She soon found herself wandering aimlessly through the streets, apprehensive of calling her parents which she knew she would have to do soon. They were both veterans of activism. If something wasn't right they would badger away until it was. They knew their rights. Solicitors knew of them well, so to fight Leanne's corner was something they would unconsciously 'enjoy'. He can imagine her father reading the riot-act to her boss.

'She's got rights...you can't do this...you'll be hearing from a solicitor...I'll see you in court'.

Yes, she thought. Chances are I'll be back working there soon, and...

For around half an hour, her brain cells burned with the implications and ructions of what she could foresee, and ended up sitting on a bench in the paved shopping area, but still her brain whirled on:

'There's no way I can sign on. I'd be ashamed. I've never signed on once. I'll be definitely going to an employment tribunal. They're not getting away with this. Didn't give me any notice. That's not right. I've definitely got a case here'.

She took out her mobile phone and rang her father, who answered after two rings.

"Dad, I've been made redundant..."

Two hours she sat there, talking to him.

'...can't do that to you..', '..solicitor', '..rights', 'they won't get away with this..' then her mother joined in the conversation, taking the phone off her father and continuing talking while some passers-by looked in her direction. Her voice was rather loud but she didn't notice, such was her focus.

Eventually the call petered out, but her brain was still on fire, and she called Caroline, but only got through to voicemail.

"Hi Caroline, it's Leanne, guess what? I've been made redundant, and..." There was a time-limit on the message she could leave, and Caroline had never changed it, so it was set at a default sixty minutes. Leanne used every second.

"...so when I see my solicitor and..." There was a beep, and Leanne looked at her phone and realised what had happened. Without hesitation she called Mandy who answered after several rings.

"Mandy, guess what you'll never believe it. They've only made me redundant..."

Forty-five minutes later she had 'vented her spleen' to Mandy who wasn't particularly offay with the legalese and simply listened to Leanne mostly, offering what she could. She immediately rang Sandie, who answered quickly:

"Sandie, you'll never believe it, I've been made redundant. I'll tell you what, there's no way they're getting away with it..."

One and a half hours later the call petered out. Sandie was of a similar frame of mind, and offered her some good advice, and she did half of the talking and wanted to be kept updated. She'll back her all the way.

Still angry, she noticed her phone battery was on thirty percent. Enough for another call, she thought.

"Vanessa, you'll never guess what's happened..."

Thirty percent lasted two hours and twelve minutes, but Leanne managed to catch it before it went off.

"...new receptionist...sorry Vanessa my battery is about to run out I'll let you kn..". The fire in her brain was slowly going out, leaving her rather exhausted. Vanessa also offered her sound advice and was a good person to talk to if you had problems. She seemed to have advice on most things and you would come away from a conversation with a feeling of satisfaction. She seemed to know something about everything, and had a good grasp of the legal system, so for good portions of the conversation Leanne was quiet, simply listening. Had the conversation continued, Vanessa would have steered the conversation to her new boyfriend, and Leanne would not have been able to wrestle it back again.

Across the paved area, opposite where she had been sitting for hours, was a private gym, and she had barely noticed people coming and going. However, somebody angrily crashed a door open and stormed out. A woman who looked younger than Leanne marched away followed by a smaller man in a suit.

"Go on," he shouted, "You've been warned a hundred times, don't be coming back, you're fired!".

The woman turned and waved her arms around in protest.

"...told you I've got a kid to look after..I'm gonna go the citizen's advice.. you've got no right to sack me.."

"Yes I have. You can't carry on doing that. Go on, out!"

"This isn't the last you'll be hearing from me. I'll see you in bloody court".

"Ye whatever, go on," said the man, making a dismissive gesture. Passers-by slowed to gawp. Leanne watched the woman storm away into the pedestrians, and the man turn and walk back into the gym.

She was kind of in two minds. Maybe the woman had been unfairly dismissed, like her, and she could go and help her and offer advice.

Or...

There was a job vacancy in the gym.

The prospect of winning all her legal battles and getting the vet's receptionist position back was appealing, but it meant working with her sarky boss who she ignored most of the time, and he seemed to avoid her.

It was just an ordinary position, but she would miss the animals. The vets and the other workers there all seemed to feel the same way.

It was just a job.

She had not made any real friends there, just acquaintances. People who should you see them outside of work, just reminded you of the job. All the employees were just in it for themselves. So a better job, even if it meant less pay, might be a considerable option.

She stood up and walked across and entered the gym. The man was talking and pointing animatedly at the entrance to a receptionist who was just nodding as he spoke.

Leanne hesitated, but slowly walked across until the man saw she was looking at him and could do nothing else but acknowledge him.

"Hi, do I understand there is a job vacancy?"

"Absolutely," he said. He gestured to an empty chair besides the young man who was being spoken to.

"It's a receptionist," he said, "Can you do it?". Leanne nodded.

"I've been a receptionist," she said.

"Well, as long as you're not late all the time, swear at our members, smoke in the building like Tanya out there, then the job's yours".

"Really?" The man, who looked to just be over five feet tall, was smaller than her and looked like he didn't do that often, as if anger was not becoming of him. In fact, he looked like one of those people, one of those strangers that 'looked' trustworthy the moment you set eyes on them. They gave an aura of positivity, like you could unload all your secrets onto them and they would be perfectly safe. Give them your bank details and your money would not be touched. Give them the keys to your car, your house, as opposed to people who were the exact opposite. The second you see them for the first time, you know you would not trust them even to tell you the correct time, but this man smiled at her. His agitation diffused, his warmth radiating over her.

"Tell you what," he said, "come to my office, we'll discuss things. Pay and whatnot, then you can show Jeremy here the ropes maybe. He's still learning". The youth at reception looked like he was on work experience. He smiled humbly.

Leanne nodded, and followed the man as he walked towards a flight of stairs.

## Chapter 20

Ray had a small flame of anxiety flickering inside him. He had decided to ask Lee to replace his phone, and he guessed he would. It all depended on Lee's mood, which he found to be pleasant when he went into his flat and saw him munching on toast.

"Ray, what you been up to?"

"They put me on a zero hours contract in work, so it means I need to keep my phone on me all the time. See the thing is..." Lee nodded.

"Someone, some bone-head broke it," Lee said, smiling, "...and now you want me to buy you a new one".

"Well, see..."

"Alright, in fact, I've got myself a bit of work for some loan shark that Blotto's mates with, just reminding people to pay up, that kind of thing. I'm working on that this afternoon. Why don't you tag along? I'll buy you a phone while we're out".

Ray wanted to say: 'No thanks Lee, if you could just give me the money, I'll get it myself', but instead he just nodded. So they wound up, and found themselves out on the streets while Lee read the piece of paper he had been given with the names and addresses.

"Just along here," he said, walking along a road which sloped down with identikit accommodation lining both sides.

"Student flats," said Ray, looking around. They finally found the correct place and Lee banged on the door. He banged on it again and a dozy looking long haired teenager answered. Clearly his sleep had been disturbed.

"Wha..?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Rachel Ward," said Lee. The youth continued looking at him for a few moments, the clockwork in his brain gearing up.

"Hang on," then the youth vanished upstairs and Lee could hear voices, then a stomping down the stairs. Rachel appeared, with gothy black hair and make-up. Lee spoke before she had a chance.

"Gary has asked me to remind you you are overdue on your payments, so I'm going to need some kind of deposit". Rachel went on a diatribe of her financial situation and the whys and wherefores of being a poor student, all the while Lee just sighed and stood there looking around. Ray was behind, hands jammed in pockets.

"...then it's three weeks until I get my student loan I'll pay it back then". Lee wondered about this. Would Gary give her the three weeks?

"Hold on," he said, then rang Gary, who answered after four rings. Lee told him about Rachel and Gary said:

"Don't fall for any of that. She's a bad payer. I mean, she does usually pay up in the end but she always waits until my patience is at breaking point and I'm about to send the boys round to get what's owed, so, I'll give the three weeks to pay it back in full but take something from her. A deposit or something. Thirty quid. Alright".

"Okay," Lee put the phone back in his pocket.

"He'll give you the three weeks until you get your loan and then he wants it back in full, but until then he wants a little sweetener, just so you don't forget. Thirty quid".

"Thirty quid! No way I can't afford..."

"Well you better get it, because I'm going nowhere," Lee said, pointing to the ground.

"I'm staying right here. Go and get it off your mates. I don't care where you get it from, I'm not going back to Gary without it". Rachel could see he was serious, then vanished from view. There were raised voices from within, a slammed door, more

shouting. Eventually she reappeared and shoved the money in his hand and closed the door.

"Thanks," Lee said, "fucking little bitch". He shook his head and smiled. "Alright, who's next on this list?"

They walked along the road, Ray wondering whether to mention his phone, but Lee veered away down a side-street.

"This way. Harvey Stewart. Computer nut. Owes five hundred quid. Guess he probably won't hand it over". Ray stopped and looked at the generic houses lining both sides.

"That's strange," he said, more to himself. In the living room window of every house along that street, there were identical ornaments of a rearing bull.

"Every house has got the same ornament," Lee saw them and frowned.

"Weird," he said, "that salesman's probably getting a nice bonus".

It was a fairly long road and they simply looked at them as they passed by.

"What will you do if he starts being awkward?" Ray asked, as they emerged from the street.

"Well, it wouldn't be very wise of them not to pay up. You know me Ray. If you owed me money, what do you think would happen if you didn't pay me back? I wouldn't be too pleased would I? So if any of these fuckers start trying it on, well it won't be in their best interest".

They practically walked around two miles, past a recreation ground, past a nursing home, past several pubs and shops to get to the PC repair shop. They entered and found no customers inside, just an elderly man sitting fiddling on a phone behind the counter. It looked like he was playing a game on it. He didn't look up until Lee was at the counter, and even then he didn't say anything.

"I'm looking for Harvey Stewart". The man looked to the door at the back.

"Harvey," he shouted, and went back to his game.

Harvey appeared. A stocky, disheveled man who looked like he slept in the attic, and the expression on his face was that of irritation. However his expression changed when Lee said:

"I've got a message from Gary". Harvey quickly came out to the front and gestured

for them to go outside.

On one section of the wall behind the long counter there were refurbished mobile phones.

"Here you go," said Lee to Ray, taking out fifty pounds from his wallet.

"Get yourself a new phone, and if it costs less then keep the change". Lee and Harvey went outside, and the game-player looked at Ray.

Parked in a bay outside there was a grey Lexus which Harvey leaned against.

"Listen, I've got the money, I just can't access it at the moment".

"Oh really, I'll just tell Gary shall I? and he'll be alright with that. You're behind on your payments so either you pay up or I'm going to need some kind of deposit, something to keep the bossman happy".

"Look I'll pay up, I just need more time to get at it".

"Gary's sent me to remind you of your dues, so I'm not gonna go back to him and say he gave me nothing, but he said he'll pay and I believed him. Give me a deposit, give me something. Is there nothing in that shop worth anything? Computers, phones..."

"Not from the shop, the boss will kill me if I take anything from there. If I took a pen he would know about it. He notices...well sorry but I've got nothing to give you".

"You really think I'm leaving here with nothing?"

"I can't afford to pay, so just tell him I'll have his money soon," then he walked back towards the shop.

"Is this your car?" said Lee, looking inside. Jutting out from under a back seat there was a tablet.

"Is that your tablet? That'll do nicely. Get that out".

"Look, that tablet is my son's. He plays his games on that".

"Does it look like I care? You'll get it back when you pay up".

"Look, no, it's not mine". Lee sighed and stepped across, he blocked the shop doorway and pointed at the car.

"Get. Me. That. Fucking. Tablet".

"Look...I..I.." then Harvey's shoulders slumped, resigned to the fact that Lee was

going nowhere. He took the car keys from his pocket and went about getting the tablet. He handed it to Lee. Ray left the shop and came across.

"Tell Gary I'll pay as soon as I can," said Harvey. "Scorpio wants me to pay up as well".

Ray glanced at him, frowning.

"What?" said Lee, "anyway, don't make me come back here and take more stuff from your shop. Your boss will be fucking easy compared to me, okay?". Ray and Lee walked away.

"We're actually not too far from home," Lee said, "Let me drop this off, then I'll call Blotto for the next job".

Lee called Blotto and was soon in his van driving to the job. Ray stayed behind, trying to fathom out his phone.

Shane made his way across the car-park, surprised at how he felt after having a new drink in his local pub. 'Nucleic acid' was on trial offer and it was rather potent, but his years of drinking had created a barrier to inebriation, one that melted the more he drank, and this acid melted it down more so than other drinks. He could down pint after pint and only feel twinges of drunkenness, but this speeded up the process. Although he was only slightly intoxicated, he was sober enough to walk home telling himself to be careful with that new drink.

He made his way inside and up to the corridor where he heard coughing coming from Victor's flat, and decided to go in.

"Vic," he said, "The pub have got this new drink..."

Victor was on his knees in the bathroom. Blood was dotted on the floor and around his mouth. He also was clutching a green scouring pad and was rubbing his chest, trying to remove the crab, but to no avail. His skin was red raw.

"It won't come off. It won't fucking come off," he said as he coughed up more blood. His face was ashen, and he was breathing heavily, continuing to scrub his chest.

"You alright?" Shane asked, just looking at him. He didn't receive an answer, but then left and went to find Ray or Lee.

He found Ray sitting on his sofa frowning at the new phone. He showed Shane, who stepped forward and looked at the screen.



"It's got loads of stuff on it," said Ray, "there's even a torch," Ray put the torch on and shone it at Shane who scrunched his eyes. He switched it off.

"I think something's wrong with Vic", he said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder.

"He's trying to get that crab off his chest and he's coughing blood". Ray just nodded, still looking at the phone.

"It's got internet as well," he said, gradually getting to his feet.

"Has it?" said Shane, and they slowly made their way into Victor's flat, both looking at the phone.

Victor was still scrubbing away. Rivulets of blood running from parts of his chest.

"Ray," he said, looking up, breathing as though he had just finished exercising. He pointed to his chest.

"Still got my crab. Isn't it great?" He pressed his hand on it as if for protection. Shane looked confused, even in his stupor.

"Thought you wanted to get rid of it," he said.

"No!" he shouted, "It's mine. I like it. I want to keep it". He threw down the scourer and coughed up more blood.

"I think he's sick" Shane said. Ray stared at him for a while.

"I reckon he needs a doctor or hospital," said Ray. More blood streamed from Victor's mouth and he collapsed to the side, shivering as though he was cold.

"Think I'll call an ambulance," Ray said. "I'll use my new phone". Ray called and was told an ambulance was on its way.

"Hang on," said Shane, "what if they go in Lee's flat? They might find his weapons and money and all that. 'Cos they'll tell the police won't they?"

"Yes, but why would they go in there? It's Victor they're coming for".

"But don't sometimes the police come with ambulances?" Ray looked slightly concerned.

"Er, I don't know. Possibly. Anyway, it's too late, I can hear sirens".

The Ferrari 360 Modena gleamed bright red, parked outside an office-block

sandwiched between shops. The block held various businesses, and at the top of the five-storey glass eyesore, there was one small office for Keith Matthews, mortgage advisor.

"Beats me why people like this borrow money," said Lee. He was standing with Blotto on the other side of the road, who had parked the van around the corner because he didn't want Keith to know it belonged to him. It was just a white van parked up. Could be anyones. He was intending to drive the Ferrari back to Gary, but first he had to get the keys.

"So you're not going to just smash the window and hotwire it and drive off?" Lee asked.

"Fuck Lee," said Blotto, "how long were you inside for? I'm not scratching that. If it doesn't get claimed back I might have to try and persuade Gary if I can use it. Anyway, come on". They crossed the road and entered the building and took the lift to the fifth floor. They soon found the office with a make-shift sign in the window: ' Keith Matthews - mortgage advisor'. Blotto knocked hard on the door.

A few minutes later, him and Lee both had their arms folded, utilising their patience which was fairly shallow, Keith placing a flame beneath it as it burned away.

It was a fairly small office, probably the cheapest place to rent in the whole block, but the windows were large and sunlight slanted through them into the bland office with its coffee-stained carpet and sparse furnishings.

Keith looked like a banker, or a doctor, or somebody you could call a businessman. Somebody for whom their whole life revolved around their job. They seemed lost and alone when stepped outside of their work, and couldn't wait to step back in again. He was short and squat, probably early sixties but looked older, work taking its toll on him. White shirt black trousers, tufts of grey hair above his ears with a bald head that was slowly becoming more shiny as perspiration gathered as happened when his pulse quickened and his fear came out in the form of anger. His face was flushed red. He was pointing angrily at Blotto.

"...and can't Gary get it into his stupid head? I'll pay up. He knows I will. He doesn't need to send around his mindless thugs to remind me. Tell him he'll get his money".

"How many times have I heard that before? I'll pay I'll pay I'll pay," said Blotto. "Some people have poor memories though, and forget they have debts. We're just here for your car. If you want it back you'll have to pay what you owe. If not, it ours and that's all there is to it".

"Why would you want to borrow money anyway?" asked Lee. "Surely people like you are rich as fuck".

"Why spend your own when you can spend other people's?" put in Blotto. "It's cash in hand. No questions asked".

"Bloody right it's no questions asked," said Keith, "It's none of your business what I spend it on. Gary doesn't ask. He doesn't care, so I'm certainly not going to tell his thugs. Tell him he'll have his money soon".

"What the fuck is 'soon'?" asked Blotto. "Soon could next month for all I know".

"Just give us the keys to the car and we'll be out of here," said Lee.

"That's my company car, you can't have that".

"Better hurry up and pay what's owed," said Blotto, "The sooner you pay up, the sooner you can have it back. In fact I'd rather you didn't pay because I want it". He turned and stepped over to the coat hanging up behind the door. He started going through the pockets.

"Are the keys in here?" Keith stood up and angrily stormed across to stop Blotto.

"Stop tha..." but Blotto turned and shoved Keith back against the wall.

"Give me those fucking keys. I'm not leaving without them. I'll tear this place apart, then I'll start on you".

"Look I need tha..!"

"How much does it look like we care?" put in Lee. "Give us the keys and we'll fuck off". Blotto gripped Keith's throat and started to squeeze.

"Keys".

"O...kay". Blotto let him go, and Keith rummaged in his coat for the keys and then opened the door and threw them into the corridor like a child in a tantrum. Blotto just smiled and shook his head.

"Like I said. Pay what you owe. It's fucking simple. It's business. You should know that".

"Get out! pair of bloody thugs". Blotto shrugged and him and Lee left, the door slamming an inch behind Lee.

A few minutes later, Blotto was inserting the key into the ignition and revving the

engine. He smiled. Lee sat next to him admiring the interior.

"Think I hope he doesn't pay up as well," he said. They pulled away from the kerb and were soon at red lights.

"What do you think he wants a grand for?" Lee asked.

"Rich businessman who could probably afford several cars like this, doesn't want suspicious activity in his bank, so comes to us for cash in hand. It's probably for some kinky shit. Escorts or something. He's probably one of those gimps that likes dressing up in rubber and locking himself in cages then getting humiliated. Spat at and slapped. That kind of thing".

"People pay money for that?" Blotto nodded.

"I've just spent two years locked up and it did fuck-all for me". Blotto smiled. The lights turned green.

For the first time in years, Lee felt something he had not known for a long time. Apprehension, or slight fear. Even the post-office job after two years created less anxiety. At least he knew where he was with that. As for talking to a member of the opposite sex, well that was where you tread into the unknown. Especially if that person was a stranger.

When Lee had returned, he had decided to get the others to go to the pub, but then the thought of ringing Sandie and asking her instead was of more appeal. He could only but try, and stood in the kitchen of his flat with the number Ray had given him, phone in hand.

He tapped out the number and pressed the green call button. Only to be greeted with a computerised voice:

'Sorry this number is not recognised...sorry this number is not recognised...sorry thi', Lee cut the call and felt that fear turn to frustration.

Fucking Ray, he thought, giving me a false number. He felt like marching into Ray's and confronting him, which he intended to do, but his frustration subsided slightly. He went into his bedroom and lifted the mattress and retrieved the shotgun. He went to leave, but then remembered there were still bullets in it.

Nearly would have took Ray's head off, he thought, emptying the chambers. He walked out and found Ray and Shane watching television in Shane's flat. He strode in and pressed the gun against Ray's head.

"Lee what the fuck..?" shouted Ray. Shane jumped up quickly and backed away.

"You gave me a false number for Sandie you cunt," He pulled the trigger, then laughed.

"I don't think any brains would have come out then. Your head will just be fucking empty. What the fuck Ray..?"

"She's got a boyfriend, she's got a boyfriend. Caroline said she's got a boyfriend".

"Why didn't you tell me that?"

"I forgot okay. I forgot, my head was all over the place". Lee smiled.

"Was it? well, don't let it fucking happen again" he said, and Ray knew he meant it.

"Victor's in hospital," Shane put in.

"What for?"

"He felt sick and he was trying to get that crab off his chest. He was bleeding and everything. So we called an ambulance".

"An ambulance? You brought fucking paramedics in here. So close to my gear. Couldn't you all have walked there?"

"No, he'd collapsed and..."

"You could have carried him. The hospitals only down the road. Or got a taxi. Honestly, why do I put up with you fuckwits?"

"They're keeping him in for tests," said Ray.

"What, like exams and that. He'll be fine. He's a fucking trooper is Vic. Come on then, you comin?"

"What, to see him?"

"No, down the boozier". Shane and Ray both looked at each other and nodded. Lee put his shotgun back and they all left for their local.

## Chapter 21

"I mentioned Blackpool but he just pulled a face," said Sandie on the phone to Caroline, taking a break from her part-time work in Caldway Equestrian Centre where they would organise horse-rides around the fields and pathways on the outskirts of the town.

"I think I'm inclined to agree with him there. I want something quieter. Blackpool would be hectic". They had not yet finalised the hen-night. All suggested ideas, and Caroline, although had final choice, had yet to pick one. She was tempted by Leanne's idea of strippers, but then that would be a night akin to one in Blackpool, and if they were going to do that then they might as well go there.

Maybe one stripper, she thought, who didn't go all the way.

"What about strippers?" Sandie said.

"That's a possibility. Maybe one. I can't organise my own though," she thought. "It's like buying your own birthday cake".

"Well somebody will have to arrange it," Sandie said, "What about a silent disco?"

"What on earth's that?"

"We go on some sort of tour around the town with headphones dancing to music, so I believe".

"Could be, er, fun," said Caroline. "Not sure Declan would approve. What's his idea of fun? A picnic in the park, or would that be too much for him?"

"Honestly," said Sandie, "he gets worse. I don't know what happened to the man I fell in love with all those years ago. He could bore for England. Last night I fancied a bit of nookie, but all he wanted to do was watch golf. I grabbed the remote and turned it off and threw the covers back and he was flaccid. I mean he always is. The last time we had sex was last week, and even then he was knackered. He's quickly turning into an old man..."

"Hang on Sandie, my work phone is going, and I can hear voices outside my office. I can't be caught taking personal phonecalls. I'll ring you tonight". Sandie nodded.

"Ok, bye," Two brown cob horses trotted past with riders all geared up. Sandie recognised one of them but not the other. She nodded in acknowledgement and made her way back to the stable.

It was half tempting to carry on straight out, get a taxi, head for the airport, get on the next flight to somewhere sunny, where she could dance to her heart's content, meet a handsome man who will make her feel like a diamond princess, and enjoy the good times she had missed out on during her teenage years and twenties, where hedonistic behaviour is a kind of rite of passage. It's the thing to be seen doing at that age. Although downing shot after shot and dancing till all hours and throwing up in a swimming pool wasn't her idea of fun, it was nonetheless, fun if you cut out the excess drinking, the fighting, the feeling sick. Instead focus on the music, the moderate drinking. Having a good time with good friends. 'That' was her idea of fun. Not sitting in night after night with her boyfriend of twelve years Declan, to whom she had born one child, Toby.

Declan was content with his job at a bank as a customer service advisor. It was practically all he had known since leaving college. He went from there to work experience in a charity shop before finding work in the bank, and he knew he had found his niche. Throughout the years he had had a chance to work elsewhere for the same company and even be promoted, but he was settled and happy in his full-time role. Sandie worked eighteen hours around school times and after school activities. Toby was nine years old. Declan also had a fixation on new technology, and was always reading up on the latest new fangled hot-off-the-press laptops, phones, tablets. He changed his phone every few months to buy the latest version and tried to, but not always would upgrade the car because it had some new piece of kit that he just had to have. She was slowly losing him to social media. He would spend hours scrolling through his tablet and phone. Not stopping to do much or anything of any significance. He would focus on something for maybe a minute, then it would be scroll scroll scroll...

Although she did not feel 'trapped' in her relationship, she felt she wanted more. Usually whatever Declan wanted she would just agree to. He wasn't aggressive or violent, just very passive and quiescent. An office get-together was as wild as he got, and they never reached the height of being called a 'party'.

Things like dancing, or staying out late, or any kind of raucous behaviour, Declan would take no part in, and when he found himself in such occasions, he would sit looking bored until usually after ten pm he would say: 'Come on it's getting late, time to go'. Sandie would stretch the leaving time out as far as she could, but usually cracked about half an hour later, and would feel something akin to guilt as she and Declan walked out with their coats on while the party went on around them.

Why are you with such a bore? her friends would ask, and Sandie found herself defending him. He's not that bad really. He's nice.

Until her own conscience finally got through to her. He's boring, and you know it. There was something in him she fell in love with. The thing was, that same love had become affection, fondness. She knew it was the same for him. There were no more flowers. No more chocolates like he used to buy for her. There was no real romance left in their relationship, and if there was, then it was a faint ghostly mist.

She had told herself a thousand times she needs to enhance their relationship, and at one point gave serious consideration to buying sexy lingerie. She could see him now, her leaning against the bedroom doorframe in new racy underwear. Him looking up from his tablet, rolling his eyes, and going back to social media.

'What did that cost?' she could hear him ask.

'How much does your new bloody phone contract cost?' she would retort, and they would bicker, and any passion in the room would go cold, and not for the first time, they would sleep with their backs to each other.

Something emerged into her memory then. 'Spice up your love-life' but she couldn't think where she remembered it from.

As she headed towards the stable complex, her phone rang again.

It was Declan. He never said Hi, or made any sort of greeting when on the phone. He just spoke as if he was halfway through a conversation.

"When are you gonna make up with your Mum and Dad?" he asked. "They're still trying to get through to you. Just unblock their number and speak to them. Anyway, they rang me to ask you if you'd like us all to go to the Leighton Transport Museum on the weekend. I said I'd love to I haven't been there in months. What do you say?" Another memory reached her mind. 'Avoid the transport'.

'Avoid the transport. Spice up your love life'. Where had she heard that before? Then she remembered.

The Oracle from the funfair.

"No," she said. It was clear that Declan was expecting yes. He was used to hearing her say that to him over the years, but occasionally she would refuse, then be persuaded, or on rare occasions say no, and that would be that.

There was silence on his end.

"What?" he asked.

"No, I'm still not speaking to them. So no, I'm not going".



"Come on, it'll be good for all of us". Sandie never needed much persuading to come round, but this time she still said no.

"Fine!" Declan said loudly, and hung up.

Sandie sought out her coat and bag. The oracle card was still in there somewhere and she fished it out and read: 'Avoid the transport and spice up your love life'.

Okay, she thought, when she knocked off at midday, it was time to go shopping.

The town was fairly ordinary, with ordinary shops, but there was one clothes shop practically in the centre that did good business. Sandie had wandered the town for the last ten minutes trying to fathom what the word 'spice' could mean regarding a relationship. For some couples it could mean a chippy night on the weekend. Staying up past midnight. Three sugars in a coffee. However, at the back of Sandie's mind, was the real answer.

It had not yet been brought forth to her consciousness, but she knew it was there, and had to acknowledge it at some point. Now seemed like a good time. It told her exactly what spice could mean, and when she saw the shop, it was like a visual form of the answer.

She stood outside 'Kiss 'n' tell', a shop that specialised in erotic lingerie and other items of a sensual and sexual nature.

Sandie found herself entering the shop, and was soon surrounded by knickers and stockings.

It seemed quite overwhelming, and her eye caught a poster nearby of a woman in a black choker neck dress with a feather tickler whip.

A woman of around sixty-plus was talking to a cashier when she saw Sandie looking at the poster. She walked across and asked if she needed any help.

"Yes," Sandie said, "I think I do".

Later that evening, Declan had been giving her the silent treatment, which she found worse than arguing it out. She always knew they would make up, but getting there was a strain. Sometimes it would be days before he decided to speak. There was usually no way to get to the make-up part other than to wait it out. However, she knew what she was going to do was a gamble, but couldn't see him walking out. Maybe disappointed.

Maybe confused. 'I thought I knew you', but their relationship would survive. She believed that much, because if tonight went as she hoped, then their union beyond that would be much tighter. The affection or 'love' would be stronger.

It was also a good night to try it out because Toby, twice a week slept elsewhere. Saturday night at 'Nannas', and random nights at his friends where he would 'camp' out in their back garden. Tonight was camp-out night.

Declan was two years older than Sandie. His thin hair was greying, and he had a short designer beard that he struggled to maintain.

Still moping like a sulky teen, Declan made his way to bed, and when he did, adrenalin fired through Sandie. Alright, she thought. Let's do this.

She had hidden the wares she had bought from 'Kiss 'n' tells' beneath the coats under the stairs where all sorts of bags and paraphernalia were kept.

When she knew he had settled in bed with his tablet, she made her way up the stairs and into the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, the adrenalin in her had morphed into confidence, and she felt good. Looking in the mirror, she smiled, and Mistress Sandie smiled back.

Declan didn't look up from his tablet when she appeared in the doorway. He knew it was just Sandie coming to bed. He didn't even look up when she just stood there, not coming in. He just sat in his side of the bed, scrolling away at nothing.

"Put that fucking tablet down," Sandie said, and Declan frowned and looked up, his eyes widening, the tablet losing the battle for his attention.

"Whaa...?" he said. Sandie was stood there in a black wet-look body-suit with seamed stockings and black leather studded sandals. She held a leather crop, and slowly came in to the room.

"Put the tablet down and submit to your mistress". She stood by him, and he noticed the bodysuit was crotchless. She also wore black faux-leather gloves.

Putting the crop beneath his jaw, he looked up at her.

"Sandie what are y..?" he said, and found himself breathing more heavily, adrenalin coursing through him.

"You're going to do exactly as your mistress tells you". Declan simply looked at her, not knowing what to say.

"Isn't that right?" she said, and slapped him lightly across the face.

"Isn't that right?" she repeated louder. Declan's face flushed red.

"Yes...miss," he said. She pulled back the sheet covering him to reveal he had a raging erection.

"Ooh, now, what are we going to do with that?" she said, tapping it with the crop.

"If you've been good, then you can lick my pussy, but you haven't been good have you? You don't deserve it". She smacked his penis with the crop. Declan breathed harder, the adrenalin flowing.

"Promise I've been good miss. I've been good," he said.

"No you fucking haven't. Say I'm sorry mistress it won't happen again". He didn't hesitate to say it.

"Again, louder". He did. She then gripped the hair at the back of his head and forced him into her crotch.

"Lick my pussy," she said, and he did, slowly masturbating while doing so. He almost felt close to climax.

She pulled him further and he fell off the bed. She walked slowly backwards.

"Come on," she gestured, and he crawled towards her, stopping near the foot of the bed. Declan looked up.

"What a pathetic sight you look. Lean over the bed. Do what Mistress tells you". Declan obeyed, and he knelt over the bed. Sandie smacked his buttocks with the crop, over and over again.

"Naughty boys deserve to be punished".

"Yes miss...sorry miss". Declan was breathing as though exercising.

"Get on the bed and turn over," she commanded. Declan could do nothing but obey. She tapped his erection again, hard with the crop, then climbed over him, straddling his chest. She twisted around to hit his penis with the crop. It was close to climax.

Sandie slapped his face, hard this time.

"What Mistress wants, Mistress gets". Declan nodded emphatically.

"Yes...please yes," he gasped.

## Chapter 22

"...then I had the most mind blowing sex I've ever had. He shot his load three times. I mean, is that like a record or something? Men can't do that, can they?" Sandie told Caroline as they sat in a cafe near the garden centre. Caroline had just finished work and Sandie had called her to explain what had happened but Caroline had been genuinely busy and arranged instead to meet her at a nearby cafe, wondering why Sandie insisted on sitting away from people and almost whispering.

"Tell you what Caroline when I put the suit on I felt so much more...confident. It was great. I became Mistress Sandie and Declan bloody loved it. I bought a cock-ring as well and told him to wear it to work today. I didn't ask him, I told him".

"Well well," Caroline said, looking at her Latte. "That's great. You've both found something you're really into". Sandie nodded.

A text came through to Caroline from an unknown number and she read it aloud:

'Hi Caroline its ray have u fergoven me yet can i com 2 wedding, sorry it wont happen agen'.

"Ray," she said, "trying to get back in my good books. You know he sent round that maniac Lee to warn off Wayne".

"Did he?" said Sandie, wide-eyed.

"So I could leave Wayne and get a better man".

"I'd bloody kill him".

"What can he do to get me to forgive him?" she asked.

"Nothing whatsoever".

"I think I've planned most of the wedding. What else...?"

"Do you still need a photographer?" Sandie asked, sipping her Mocha Cortado. Caroline nodded and composed a reply.

'Find me a photographer and I might forgive you. But your mates are still not invited. Just you'. Send.

Shane never seemed to be one hundred percent sober. There was always an alcoholic

molecule streaming around his bloodstream and landing in his brain, but it always varied as to how much it seemed he wasn't affected and could get away with. He could get away with seeming as though he was sober, because sometimes he was inches away from it.

Apparently twelve hours from a person's last drink is when sobriety comes. So a hangover would usually last this long until eleven hours and fifty nine minutes if another drink is downed and the inebriation continues, which is the state Shane found himself in, except he was probably around the eight-hour mark.

In the morning, Ray had asked Shane for a favour. Can you go out and find me a wedding photographer? Without really thinking, he agreed, and now found himself wandering through the streets, not knowing what to look for, but appreciating going for a stroll out in the air.

After twenty minutes of walking around the shopping area, he didn't come across anything he could tell Ray, and decided he would have a rest on a low wall bordering a small playing field which kind of looked out of place in the urban environment. It was big enough for a decent size football pitch but not much more.

As it was still early, there were two talking dog-walkers on the far side of the area with two bored looking dogs at their feet, but not far from where he sat, were a man and woman exercising. The man was talking to her, egging her on, and getting her to copy him in stretching exercises. Shane realised it was a personal trainer.

He watched them for a while. They were too engrossed in what they were doing and he was too far away to be noticed.

That should have been me, he thought. It could have, back when exercising and fitness were at the forefront of his mind, when he had dreams of competitions, of holding aloft trophies for weight-lifting, athletics, anything he put his mind to, until his mind was slowly but surely coaxed away by temptations, but when he put those dreams on hold for a while, he turned his attention to joinery, and thought of becoming a furniture-maker, so entered college who paired him with a joiner at a woodworking studio. However, the man found that Shane took a lot of smoking breaks and fell behind on his work. He was soon sent packing back to college who let him go.

When his aspirations of making good quality, shiny new furniture faded away, it was replaced by desires to be a taxi-driver. That didn't look hard. Driving people around and getting paid. Easy. One small detail though. Driving licence. He took lessons but found that he thought the instructor was holding him back, deciding he was good enough, but the instructor thought otherwise, and fell away from paying for lessons, and it petered

out.

Shane was constantly at the beginning, always basic, amateur, and always fell away into temptation, fell behind on the work needed, but his aspirations were still there, and one of those dreams from his past had reignited itself.

I'm gonna be a personal trainer, he thought, and made his way home. I think I'm still fit enough, and decided to prove it by running back to the flats.

However, he just managed two minutes before having to stop and breath heavily against a lamp-post. Back the gym, he thought. Back the gym and I'll be fine.

Ten minutes later he was back in his flat. Ray was there on the sofa with his feet up watching television. Shane sat beside him, then noticed on the table a cocaine wrap he had forgotten about.

He leaned forward and tapped it into an inch line, and sniffed what he could without a tube. He leaned back on the sofa.

"Did you find one?" Ray asked.

"What?"

"A wedding photographer".

"Erm..no, but I've decided I'm gonna go into business. I wanna be a personal trainer. It's just tellin' people how to exercise, advice and that. So I'm gonna get meself down the gym, then I'll set meself up. They can make like fifty quid a session". Ray looked at him.

"Really?" Shane nodded, put his head back and closed his eyes.

"Easy money," he said. He never opened his eyes when Lee walked in, dressed to go out.

"Right I'm off to see my probation officer". Ray just nodded and Lee left.

He's going to ask me to go on that fucking Blossom programme Lee thought, so decided it might not be a bad idea to quickly ring Gary. Although Gary's profession could be deemed suspect if you peeled it back. On the surface it seemed like a legitimate business, which he proposed himself as.

Gary answered.

"Hi, Gary it's Lee. I don't suppose you could do me a favour. I'm about to see my probation officer and he's going to insist that I go on some shitty rehab course, but if I tell him I've got a job, then it might get him off my case. If he needs to ring you can you tell him I'm your employee?" He heard Gary laugh.

"I've done that before you know," he said, "but you'll be right, you are my employee. If he starts asking questions put him on to me. I've had dealings with those types before. Yes, that'll be fine, and when you finish, give me a ring anyway I want to discuss jobs for you". Lee nodded.

"Alright," he said, and hung up.

"Why do we always have to meet here?" Lee said, getting into the back of Billy Price's car.

"It's my mobile office. Works for me". Papers were strewn everywhere. They had been made into some poor structure of order. There was a large pile on the passenger seat, papers and envelopes along the dashboard and beneath the back window, and some beneath both seats. Lee and Billy had to sit rather squeezed in.

"...now, we were discussing the Blossom programme," said Billy.

"I've got a job," Lee put in. Billy looked surprised and smiled.

"Really? That's good that you're getting yourself out there, back into the community. And that's what I encourage you to do. Involve and better yourself...but you really should have consulted me before you took it. As per your licence agreement under section E you will need my approval. So, before you start, I will need your employer's details. I'll need to speak to them to understand the job and make sure it's right for you. Make sure it fulfils legal requirements before I give the go-ahead. But that's great Lee well done. How d'you feel?" I feel like punching your stupid fucking face in you patronising little twat, Lee thought. If Lee had brought a weapon, he guessed he would probably have used it.

"So what is it? come on, tell me".

"It's a loan company. I'll be a debt recovery agent".

"That's great. Interesting, okay but get me those employer details and hopefully you'll be good to go," Billy said, writing something down in his note-pad. "Now, when you go on the Blossom programme, you will have to work around..."

"What? hang on. You mean I still have to go on this programme?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so, as per your requirements, but you'll love it. We'll work with your new boss to come to some arrangements once everything is in order".

"So that means I've still got to come to these appointments?". Billy nodded, still smiling.

"Yes, for the rest of your sentence. If the job turns out to be legitimate then you can tell others about your success. You recently left prison and found a job. They would love to hear that".

"Really?" Lee muttered, folding his arms and leaning back.

"Well done," Billy repeated, "I'm proud of you".

## Chapter 23

Shane had fallen into some sort of stupor. Him and Ray were in the same position when Lee had left, and now Lee entered and just looked at him, shaking his head.

"It's visiting time at the hospital, shall we go and see the old fucker?"

"Yes alright," said Ray, switching the television off with the remote.

"Hey Lee," Shane muttered, "Did I tell you I'm going into business?"

"No, you didn't, but tell me all about it" he said, sarcastically.

"I'm gonna be a personal trainer..." he closed his eyes again.

"Really?" Ray and Lee walked out, and Lee stopped at the top of the stairs. For a moment he seemed confused, looking down at the floor. He put one hand to the side of his head.

"You okay?" Ray asked. Lee nodded.

"Yes," he said, "just give me a minute," and he wandered across into his flat, emerging moments later, smiling.

"Come on, then" he said, slapping Ray on the arm. They walked to the hospital which was almost two miles away.



"If he starts becoming a crack-head then I'm kicking his arse out," Lee said, "I don't care how long I've known him. I'll have to lock my money up safe, which I'm gonna do anyway, but when fucking druggies come sniffing round then you've got to nail everything down".

"Yes," Ray agreed. "He's always had the odd line but lately he's doing it more often. We'll just have to keep our eye on him".

"Honestly, you fucks have barely changed," Lee said, as they crossed a road. "You were drinking and smoking back then and everything's exactly the same, so says Cancer".

"What?" Lee slowed down and looked confused for a second.

"Why did I say that?" he muttered to himself. They passed a row of shops and a cricket and bowling club, then they were in the hospital grounds. People milled to and fro. Smokers thrust outside puffed away on drips, in wheelchairs, and in night-gowns. It seemed a fairly typical day, and soon Ray was following Lee to reception, and were soon walking along the corridors, past wards and clinics and eventually found the Oncology ward.

A nurse at the small reception was surprised when they said who they had come to see.

"Victor, yes, the freak of nature". She was small and looked to be close to retirement age.

"The what?" Lee asked, but she walked away, looking over her shoulder for them to follow, and they did, into a section containing two small rooms, each containing one bed. The other one was empty, but the nurse gestured inside, and walked away.

They walked in to find Victor lying on a bed, attached to an intravenous drip pump machine, with standing workstation carts on either side of him and diagnostic monitors and ultrasound scanner systems. Above him there was a radiographic x-ray machine from an extension arm. He looked at them when they came in and smiled. He was in pyjamas with his top open. The crab was still prominent and looked like it was glowing red having been attempted at removal. The nurses had tried and failed. He looked gaunt and drained.

"Fellas," he said, his voice croaking.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Lee asked.

"I've got cancers. All of them. Liver cancer, stomach cancer, breast cancer, and

fuckin' vaginal cancer. How did I get that? I've got the lot. Doctor's want to do tests on me and everything".

"That nurse said you were a freak of nature," Ray said.

"I am, but look Ray, I've still got my crab," he said, pointing to it. Ray didn't know what to say. "Those nurses are not taking it away".

"What the fu..?" said Lee. Victor looked at him.

"Did you bring it?" he asked, and Lee nodded, reaching into his inside pocket to pull out his Sig Sauer P365 handgun. He handed it to Victor.

"Lee what the fuck?" said Ray, wide-eyed. "You can't bring a gun to a hospital".

Victor, using what little energy he had, sat himself up.

"I'm putting him out of his misery," Lee put in.

"What like a fucking dog?" said Ray, pacing around, red faced, wringing his hands, looking out to see if anybody was watching but could see no-one. He saw the bed had a curtain and pulled it around.

"Vic what the fuck are you doing?" Lee shouted, looking at the gun, coming to realisation and confusion.

"Ray, I hope you'll crack, you'll come to believe, and Lee, you can fuck-off you nutter". Then Victor slid the gun barrel into his mouth and pulled the trigger. The top of his head exploded in skull, blood, brain, splattering the wall behind, all within a split-second.

"Fuck!" shouted Lee, and Ray stepped back, his hands to his head. They could do nothing but stare at Victor.

"What are we goin..?" Lee said, but the curtain was pulled back and the nurse stood there, looking at the scene. Ray and Lee stared at her.

"So you put him out of his misery. Take your gun and leave," she said, looking at Lee, who gathered his bearings and took the weapon from Victor's hand and tucked it into his pocket. The nurse nodded to the exit.

"No-one heard the gunshot, so you can walk out. Don't worry about the cameras, or police. In five minutes two porters will come and take his body down to the morgue, and from there attendants will see to it that the body is disposed of. You will not be suspected or questioned".

"...but how..?" said Ray. Lee and Ray slowly did as she said, and with red, guilty faces they walked along the corridors and found their way out into the foyer, then made their way back home.

"I don't get it," said Lee, "why the fuck would I bring my gun? I don't remember picking it up".

"You said you were putting him out of his misery," Ray said.

"Did I? I don't remember saying that, and I didn't even know what was wrong with him. Vic was just in hospital and we went to visit. I don't get why I would bring my gun...fuck man, poor old Vic.."

"and that nurse," Ray said, "she saved us".

"Fuckin right she did. My ass wouldn't have got out the hospital. I'd be straight back in the nick".

"But how could she say the camera and police won't come after us? How can she organise that?" Ray asked.

Outside a row of shops along the pavement there were several decrepit benches. All of them were unoccupied.

"Hold on," said Lee, "I just need to sit down for a sec". They both sat, feeling as though they had been exercising.

"She couldn't organise the cameras and police surely," said Ray, "I mean how could she do that?"

"I don't know Ray, I don't know. I absent mindedly picked up my..." he looked around him and saw several shoppers within earshot, so he lowered his voice and leaned a little closer to Ray.

"I absent mindedly picked up my gun, maybe 'cos I was worried about him or because of my fucking probation officer then we gets to hospital and Vic sees the gun in my pocket and decides to shoot himself 'cos he's got all the cancers. Like what you said, I'm putting him out of his misery. Then he kills himself, and the nurse walks in and sees that it's suicide and isn't surprised or nothing 'cos she's a nurse and probably sees stuff like that all the time, but knew it wasn't murder and she lets us go because of all the shit we would get from the police". Ray nodded in agreement.

"Yes," he said, "that's probably it". Lee made an exasperated gesture.

"What else could it be?" Ray agreed.

"Nothing. That's got to be it. Let's get back 'cos you've still got the gun". Lee nodded, and stood up. They continued home.

"Anyway, cheeky bastard called me a nutter didn't he before he shot himself?"

Lee complained about that the rest of the way home, and when he got to the top of the stairs went to his own flat.

"...I mean who does he think he is?" Ray entered his own place. Poor Vic, he thought, and went to make himself a cup of tea, and saw the pile of zodiac cards on the counter. As he waited for the kettle to boil, he spread them out and scanned through them.

He saw the Cancer card "Will victory be declared when the bullet is bitten?" Lee appeared over his shoulder.

"What's that?"

"Zodiac cards. Look at that. Will victory be declared when the bullet is bitten?"

"Oh, right, you don't believe in this shit do you?"

"No, no, but it's on the cancer card".

"Load of airy-fairy nonsense," Lee said, "Coincidence. Nothing more". Ray agreed.

"Yes, coincidence". Lee nodded to the kettle as it headed for boiling point.

"You makin' a cuppa? let's drink to the old cunt instead. Even though he did call me a nutter, he was our mate". Ray went across to the fridge and opened it to see it mostly taken up by bottles and cans of lager.

"Fuck, who's going to clean the flats now?" Lee asked. "Grab one for crack-head and let's drink to Victor". When Ray closed the fridge with three cans in hand, his gaze lingered for a few seconds on the cards on the kitchen counter.

"Coincidence," he muttered, and left the flat.

## Chapter 24

As Mandy left the nursery and headed across the road to her car, she was getting her keys out of her pocket when a shadow fell over her and then hands grasped her waist.

"Guess who's back?" was said loudly down her ear. She struggled and turned and saw Carl standing there with a huge grin on his face.

"Carl," she muttered with no enthusiasm whatsoever, "what a surprise". With a brown stripy polo shirt and knee length shorts he wore in most weathers, and a short side-parted hairstyle, he stood with all the expectancy of someone who wanted to be greeted with warmth, as he had done plenty of times before, and he had got it as well, but over the years her affection for seeing him return had dampened, and now it was gone altogether.

"You left me remember," she said, opening the car door. "Now you just expect me to let you back in as if nothing's happened".

"How's Ralph and Effie? I missed them". He walked around to the other car door.

"Don't even think about getting in the car," she said, "I've had it with you. Your mountaineering didn't work out then? I'm so shocked". He looked genuinely offended, as he always did when one of his pipe-dreams didn't work out and Mandy belittled him for it.

"I could have come back and got with another girl, but you know what? I chose you. I came back to you".

"I'm so honoured," she muttered.

"Didn't even get a hug," he said.

"Well maybe that's because I'm not with you anymore. I don't hug people who are not my boyfriend".

"Boyfriend? what are we teenagers? We're a couple. Come on we're a family".

"Yes, we we're a family until you broke it up," she said, getting into the drivers seat and closing the door. Carl got into the passenger seat.

"Did I say you could get in the car?" She folded her arms, defiantly going nowhere.

"I'm not driving anywhere until you get out".

"Aww, come on, babes...don't make me go back to my Dad's".

"Well you're not coming back to mine, so if you're not going to leave this car, I'll walk home and call the police".

"No you won't. Come on, just let's go home".

"You're not coming back to my home, and I will call the police". She made a show of taking out her phone and holding it aloft, then lowering it.

"Come on I'm hungry. Let's stop off at the chippy". 'Do not be a doormat' came to mind, and she refrained from starting the engine.

"Nope," she said, "we're not together, and that's your fault".

"Babes come on," and he could see she meant it.

A heavy silence permeated the car.

"Out," she muttered, and Carl angrily opened the car door.

"Alright, fuckyer then. I'll just go and get another girl. One whose much better looking than you. One who isn't stupid. See ya fuckin' babe". He left the car and slammed the door, storming away.

Before he could get back in, as he very well just might and continue trying to wear her down, she drove away, and guessed that wasn't the last she had seen of him. He would badger away until she relented, and guessed he would come to the house and she would have to try and stop him coming in. That had happened several times before, where they would have a shouting match for all the neighbours to hear. Sometimes he stormed away, then came back, and they would have more curtains twitching, then if only to stop the embarrassment of being the subject of local gossip, which they sometimes were, she would let him in, and the arguments would continue, Carl using the children as weapons.

'I've got rights. I'll get custody of the kids...' even though he had little knowledge of the law, he just said whatever seemed to go in his favour, because he knew she didn't know much about parental rights either.

Later that night as she was watching a programme on castles, Effie came down the stairs and said:

"Dad's outside by the lamp-post again". A place across the road he had stood many times to look at the house. Mandy sighed, and Effie ran back upstairs.

Then came banging on the door, and the letter-box opened. Carl shouted through:

"Come on babes..." he shouted. "Let me in. I wanna see me kids". Mandy went and opened the door. Even with it being night-time there was enough light around to see he was red-faced and angry. He pointed an accusing finger at her.

"I wanna see me kids. You've got no right, now come on..." She stood back and opened the door wide. Carl was momentarily put out. He was expecting a slanging match, but the house beckoned, and he walked in, heading straight to the kitchen.

"The kids are upstairs," she shouted after him.

"I'm starving," he said.

That night, the light from the television was the only light in the living room, and it patterned over Carl and Mandy as they both sat on the sofa, Mandy with her head on his shoulder.

Carl took his place back again, and usually when he did he always liked to re-establish himself by working on the affection he knew she always had for him, so the following day he suggested going to a cafe, his expense. It was the kind of thing he always did when he returned. Mandy knew what he was doing, so it didn't matter where they went. It was Carl being Carl, nothing more.

So, on the outskirts of the town there was a nature reserve that bordered a small lake, part of which blended into marshland, attracting various rare wildlife and enthusiasts. Off the visitor centre there was a small cafe with outdoor seating, where Mandy and Carl sat. It was fairly sunny and there were a couple of people and children around. The other three tables were occupied.

"So are you going to look for work then?" she asked, sipping her black tea.

"Yes of course I am," Carl said, slouched in the seat and looking out across the marsh. She knew he would, he wasn't lazy, but just too much of a loose cannon to be able to stick with one thing, but she kind of hoped one of his aspirations came to fruition so that he would stick around. Everytime he came back, she convinced herself this time he was going to stay, be a father. Her conscience though, always told it like it was:

'He's a fucking loser and you just won't admit it. If you haven't got the strength to leave him, then you're stuck with him for life. This is your husband, a fucking yo-yo. Even if he puts a ring on your finger d'you think he won't run off with someone else the second he gets the sniff of a chance? Then it'll be worse with custody of the kids and the divorce. You'll be the talk of the town and people will point and whisper. There she is. Hasn't got the fucking balls to leave her loser 'husband'. Well maybe you're already there. A lot of people know what he's like and ask themselves the questions your mates already say to your face: 'Why the fuck are you still with him?' and you don't know the

answer do you? Beats the fuck out of me why you would say yes if he asked you marry him. What's wrong with you? That'll make things worse and you bloody well know it. Take the advice of that zodiac card and don't be a fucking doormat'.

She nodded at that, and Carl thought it was because of his answer.

"I'm just gonna try retail, you know, 'cos they're easy jobs to get. Shelf-stacking, cashiers, that sort of thing. I'll do something like that temporary. Then I'm thinking I'll train as a security guard. I'll go the gym and find a mixed martial arts class. Do all that and go into security. Or a bouncer. At least if I do that I can probably get a job in the same supermarket or something. It'll be easier to get work in there". Mandy nodded again, this time at what he said.

You actually believe that? asked her conscience. Maybe, said the rest of her brain. What if this time he does? At least he'll still be here. Her conscience sighed, and spoke no more for a while.

"Think I'll do mixed martial arts and boxing, then I'll..." Mandy's phone buzzed for a text, and she took it out of her bag and placed it on the table.

"Who's that?" Carl asked.

It was from an unknown number, but the profile picture showed a man smiling in sunglasses. It dawned on Mandy what it was, but Carl was already leaning forward like a curious bird watching a worm.

"Who's that?" he repeated, louder. She could do nothing but open the text.

'Hiya darling. Saw your pic. You look hot!!!'

"Who the fuck is that?" said Carl, causing a few heads to turn their way.

"Look I thought you were gone okay," she said, "so I joined a dating website".

"Right," Carl muttered, leaning back "I'm gone for five minutes and you're after other guys".

"I thought you weren't coming back. You split with me remember? What am I supposed to do, sit around crying when you're gone?" Mandy realised that that was what she did whenever he left. "How am I supposed to know if you're coming back?" she added. Carl shook his head and looked out at the marsh. A flock of birds were swooping out in the distance.

"I'm back now aren't I? So you can delete your profile. In fact why didn't you do it when I came back? You've had all night and all morning. How many dating sites are



you on?"

"Just the one".

"Well delete it then. I wanna see you do it. I'm back now. I'm gonna be a good dad. Like I said I'll do security".

"Don't bring the kids into this. You're a stranger to them. You've said nothing. I know they were in bed last night, but this morning for breakfast you could have come down at least".

"I was knackered".

"Anyway, I'll delete my profile if you delete all yours. You've probably got loads".

"Babes...that's not the point. I'm back now. I'm gonna be a proper dad, so delete your fucking profile".

"No, get your phone out and delete all yours, and let me see you do it. Or I'll reply to this guy on here," she said, gesturing to the phone.

"You're gonna reply to him?" he said, pointing at it, wide-eyed. She nodded.

"Well fuck you bitch. I'm done. I'm done". There were mutterings close-by as people looked in their direction. He stood up and pointed angrily at her.

"Now I'm definitely going. Fuck this," he then turned and stormed away, leaving Mandy staring at the phone, and the mutterings to fade away as people returned to normal.

Her emotions toiled inside her, and even though she'd been here before, it never got any easier, and while those emotions caused her to tremble slightly, she picked up the phone and texted Caroline.

'He's left me again'. She looked out to the marsh, and the first tears formed in her eyes, leaning forward on the table, one hand on her face to try and appear as normal as possible, to not attract attention. A reply came:

'I'll call you when I can. I'm just in a meeting. You told me before though'.

'He came back. Then left again'. Send. A reply came quickly.

'For Pete's sake Mandy'. She snivelled, and tears ran through her fingers and dripped to the table. In the phone case, jutting out slightly, she saw the corner of the zodiac card and took it out. She lay it on the table and read:

'...when your emotions threaten to overwhelm. Do not be a doormat'.

"Okay," she said very quietly, "I'm not a doormat. I'm really not a doormat. This time I mean it. Fuck him". She really did mean it, because then the tears stopped.

## Chapter 25

Ray and Lee were slightly intoxicated. It was Shane who was the most sober. He was sat on a bench in the park where the funfair had been. Lee and Ray lying on the grass as the sun had made an appearance. Ray was clearing a bottle of French brandy, Lee a bottle of mulled wine, and Shane nothing. He had decided to 'cut down' because of his ambition to be a personal trainer. So one bottle of miniature vodka this morning followed by some stretches, meant his usual clouded mind was clearer.

"...and do you remember when he robbed those bottles of wine from that store? He had about five bottles and just walked out with them. No-one stopped him," said Shane.

"Ye," said Lee, "or that time when he went missing for days. When he came back he said he'd been kidnapped, but talked his way out of being released. And he never said otherwise did he?"

"No," said Ray. Lee's phone went off and he sat up and answered.

"Hi Gary," he said, standing up. He listened mostly.

"Alright, see you in ten minutes". He ended the call. "Gotta go, Gary's wants to see me". He downed the last of his drink and hurled the bottle towards a bin near a lamp-post twenty metres away. It missed and smashed near parked cars. He walked away.

"And d'you remember when...?" said Shane.

Fifteen minutes later Lee was sat on the sofa in Gary's so-called office, Gary with a look of perplexion.

"Really..?" he said. Lee nodded.

"He put the gun in his mouth, and blew his brains out. Said he had every cancer. And the nurse. The nurse came in and saw it. I was like, oh fuck, but she could see it was suicide and let us go. Said the police and camera won't see us, and she'll make sure the

body is disposed of. There'll be no comeback on us".

"Fuck me," said Gary, "that nurse saved you. If she can sort out the police and dispose of bodies, I want her working for me. Anyway, I've got a few more jobs for you...hang on, that means there's a flat going at your place. I've been looking for other premises. A little expansion. Or storage for things that have been seized".

"Ye," Lee said. "Not sure how it works with the landlords or whatever, but I reckon you could take it".

"Well how about a viewing now? I'll tell you about the jobs on the way".

The red BMW M3 pulled up in the car-park and Gary and Lee left the vehicle. They were soon in the corridor and Gary saw that all four flat doors were open.

"So this is where you live. You leave all the doors open?" Lee nodded.

"We collared the first floor. It's like we share all the flats, but we kind of each have our own. We hardly ever lock the doors. We don't need to. The other residents don't bother us. I think they know it wouldn't be in their interests, anyway here's Vic's". Ray and Shane were still out, and Gary entered to find the sparse but clean place. He nodded, looking around.

"Not bad. Might actually use this as my base. My office. Keep my other place as a store room for seized stuff. In fact, if your other mates are up for it, maybe they want to earn a bit of money. Use their flats for other stuff". Gary walked back out into the corridor and pointed across to Ray's place.

"I've got a few friends who might be interested in premises for cannabis growing," he then pointed at Lee's flat.

"I've another friend who I could recommend could sell his weapons from there maybe".

"That's my place. I may sometimes get pigs knocking on my door. Actually I still need to get round to hiding my weapons properly so probably Shane's place would be better".

"What have you got?" Gary asked, and like an employee to a boss, Lee without hesitation told him. If another person had asked him the same thing he would have told them to mind their own fucking business.

"Guns, knives, knuckle-dusters, shotguns". He decided not to mention the post-office

job, or the money from it.

"Good," said Gary "'cos Mike's always looking for places to stash his guns as well. So if you can ask your mates if they don't mind earning a bit of cash, then..."

"Don't worry about them, they'll agree," said Lee, and shook Gary's hand.

"...then he put the gun in his mouth and killed himself". Ray was sat forward in the armchair, a mug of tea on the coffee table. Caroline was stood in front of the fireplace at the house.

"You're joking?" she said, "Poor Vic".

"Then the nurse came in. I thought, that's it we're in trouble, but no. She's probably seen that happen loads of times". Caroline shook her head.

"Doubt it," she said, but Ray simply continued:

"Well she said she would deal with the police and the cameras, and dispose of the body".

"What? you really are kidding Ray. I don't believe that. How can she deal with the police and make sure of..?" she could see in Ray's face that he was sincere. Despite over the years his falsehoods and deceptions, he did tell the truth a lot of the time, and she could see this was one of those times.

"Weird," she said, "would have thought something like someone having every cancer would be on the news". Suddenly the television that had been off came on, on a news channel. The reader had a picture of a hospital next to them.

"...had every cancer. Doctors wanted to do tests, but the body is missing. Meanwhile in other news..."

"That's a coincidence," she said. Ray just looked with curiosity at the television.

"Did you press the remote?" she asked, but then saw the remote was on the coffee table.

"...at Carsdale Zoo, a Lion named Leo has been let out into the town. Also, scorpions are strange little creatures arn't they?" A stock image of a scorpion appeared next to the reader.

"Their sting really hurts. So don't get stung. Are they insects? are they spiders? who knows? either way they're nasty little crawlers".

"How is this news?" asked Caroline. "Typical, trying to appeal to the youth".

"...like Scorpio, now that it's in Mars, will tend to hurt. In fact it will sting, like that fish. Is it a fish? Is it some sort of shark? The stingray...ha ha ha. The sting...ray. The sting...ra". The television suddenly went to a screen which said: 'We will resume shortly'.

"Looks like that reader's in trouble," Caroline said, and saw Ray looking with confusion at the screen. "Well it doesn't surprise me Lee's got weapons. Anyway Ray I've got something to tell you. Wayne is moving in". Ray was still staring at the television.

"Ray," she said, louder, "did you hear what I said?"

"Sorry...what?" he said looking up at her.

"You're still thinking of Vic aren't you? I said Wayne is moving in".

"No, really?" he said, disappointedly. "Didn't you think to tell me? I mean it's partly my decision as well. Half my house and that".

"I'm telling you now. He practically lives here anyway, so I've told Mum and Dad and they love the idea".

"They didn't say to ask Ray?" he said, "he might actually have an opinion".

"Are you going to go into detail about the whys and why nots of Wayne moving in. You didn't tell me you studied law. What's the big deal anyway?"

"You didn't consult me".

"I'm consulting you now".

"and what if I said I hate the idea? You know I could make loads of trouble 'cos this house is half mine, but you know I'm not going to".

"Yes, because you wouldn't know where to start. Walk into a solicitor's office and ask their opinion fine. Then get a bill just for talking to them".

"What about me when I need a place to kip? or if I just want to come round and watch telly". Caroline sighed.

"There's still nothing to stop you doing that".

"Well you might if Wayne's here".

"Give me a good enough reason to take the key off you. In fact I should have taken it off you when you sent that crackpot round to see Wayne". Ray sat back in the chair and folded his arms.

"Well..?" she asked.

"Well what?"

"Do I have your permission to move my future husband into this house?" Ray just shrugged. Caroline copied him.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means whatever".

"Whatever?"

"Yes!" Ray said loudly. "Yes alright move him in then. Move him in to my half of the house. Give him a bloody key".

"I ought to give him yours, and don't worry, I will". The television came back on to the news channel. It was normal programming. There was a report from the Antarctica.

Later when he was walking back along the streets, a pensioner waiting outside a butcher's shop called to him:

"Excuse me, what's your star-sign?" then laughed. "Yes, it's Pisces". Ray just frowned and walked on by, telling himself he was not a believer in the zodiac. Coincidence. It was a strong weight against belief.

When he got back to the grounds of the high-rise, he saw several vans in the car-park parked at odd angles. He usually recognised the vehicles there as being those belonging to the tenants, but these he had never seen before, and when entering heard voices coming from the first floor.

There were voices coming from his flat. Ones he did not recognise. He cautiously entered, and found 'stuff' laying around. Pipes, ventilation fans, garden cabinet boxes. Suddenly an arm enclosed his neck and pulled him in close. It was Lee.

"There you are Ray," he said, "I thought you wouldn't mind if some of Gary's mates set up a cannabis growing plant in your place. I said you would be fine about it 'cos you get paid, cut in with the profits, so I said Ray would be well up for that". With his arm still around his neck, he walked Ray into the living room and let him go. Two men

were in there setting up the equipment. They were simply normal looking 'blokes,' except ones that could be any age from twenty-five to fifty-five. They didn't acknowledge Ray, just went about their business.

"See. Uncle fucking Lee looks after his mates. Also, come and look at this". He left the flat and Ray followed him into Shane's, to find him standing around with his hands in his pockets looking kind of lost. In the living room a sheet had been laid out and on it were weapons of various kinds. Mostly guns. Handguns, machine-guns, rifles, fishing knives, kitchen knives, knuckle-duster knives, grenades.

"Are you preparing for a war?" Ray asked.

"They're paying us for use of our flats, and we get a slice of the profits".

"Yes, good isn't it?" said Shane with zero enthusiasm. Gary came out of Victor's flat looking for Lee and soon found him. It was clear to all that he was the big noise, or kingpin, even though his little empire had only carved out a fraction of a percentage of the criminal underworld, it was more than enough to see him driving expensive cars and having gold and diamond jewellery with a luxury house. He lived the job, if it could be called that, and his main area of interest and income was money-lending, but as with all gangster and mafia 'bosses', they wanted more. They want to expand, even though they are surrounded by riches. There is no cap. No roof where they do not wish to go beyond, and go as far as they can, slaves to their own riches, to their greed, where wealth was their ruler.

Even Lee deferred to him in his presence, and that didn't go unnoticed by Shane and Ray.

Later that night, the two men had set up the hydroponic equipment in Ray's flat and had got a couple of plants to start with. One of them left, but the other stuck around and it was clear he wanted to ask Ray something:

"Any chance I could kip on the sofa? Me bird's kicked me out. I can make sure the stuff's running fine".

Ray wanted to say no, get out, but found himself nodding.

"Great. What food have you got?"

Shane didn't feel comfortable with all the weapons in his flat. He had had a drink and it

enhanced his paranoia. What if a grenade explodes? What if one of the guns goes off? What if the police come smashing their way in? Lee had bought a small mechanical steel safe and kept his post-office money in the bottom of a cupboard. The weapons he had incorporated into those in Shane's. He thought it would be good to maybe make some money from them. Also all the flat doors were shut and locked that night, as they would be from now on, Gary had said, and those in charge of the goods and the selling would be getting keys to the flats. Shane and Ray had reluctantly given their keys to go and get cut, and now several strangers, as well as Gary, had access.

So now the flats were effectively shared with the dealers. Gary had decided to use Victor's flat as his new operations, constructing it in such a way as to seem like a cosy office. The customer would come into the living room and sit on a sofa, be offered a drink and Gary would be at a desk with a laptop. He had also brought filing cabinets and a large digital keypad steel safe. He could keep some of the seized goods he had in the other parts of the flat. Widescreen televisions, laptops, children's bikes, electric guitars.

That night Ray didn't get much sleep, mainly because there was a complete stranger on his couch, and also because he could feel something moving over his foot. Something crawling. His bare feet were sticking out at the bottom of the bed and it crawled over his ankle. Then it stung, and Ray cried awake slapping instinctively at the pain. In a sliver of moonlight, the little creature fell to the floor, and Ray for a second saw a scorpion, before it scuttled away beneath the door.

"Fuckin' little bastard!" he hissed, rubbing his foot, but tiredness overwhelmed the pain, and he lay back on the bed until sleep overtook him.

In the morning, he had a dull throbbing ache in his foot which told him the scorpion was real. He went into the living room to find the man sitting on the sofa, who looked up at Ray and said: "What's for brekkie?"

There was still more setting up to do, but by midday, the flats seemed to be open for business. Ray's place needed more time for the plants to grow, but the stranger and his friend who had brought cannabis in from elsewhere had seemed to settle in, and had even given Ray a shopping list of ordinary food to get while he was out. He had been given ten pounds, but the list would clearly come to more than that.



Ray left the flat and found Shane sitting on a low wall at the edge of the car-park. He sat next to him.

"Good, isn't it?" said Shane, "and we'll be getting money out of it as well". Ray nodded, but they both knew neither of them really meant it.

"Did Lee ask you?" Ray said. Shane shook his head, then added:

"Maybe we should move".

"Yes, but we'd need to tell Lee. He wouldn't be happy about that".

"No," Shane muttered, "but would we need to tell him? He's got his new mates and job and everything. Would he even notice if we left? Anyway, I'm going the boozier, you comin'?" He stood up.

"No," Ray said, "I've got a shopping list to get. Maybe later I'll join you". Shane wandered away, but Ray just sat there for a while, and saw people he had never seen before enter the high-rise. The front door had not been fixed in all the time they had been there, so anyone could wander in. Tenants or customers, Ray thought, then stood up and walked away.

## Chapter 26

As he walked to a mini-market two miles away, he never shopped at the place he worked at, even with a ten percent discount, he would feel too embarrassed, he gave serious thought to moving away. Maybe he could persuade Caroline to allow him to stay at the house, even though he knew he didn't really have to ask her permission. He felt he should. If she should say no, then he didn't know what he would do.

Maybe, just maybe, he thought it very unlikely, she would allow Shane to move in as well. No, she won't even want me. He would kind of feel like an unwanted guest if he did move into the house, if he exerted his right.

He would see how it went back at the flats. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad, and the thought of renting out his place for cannabis plants and earning profit made him feel slightly better, except for the fact he wasn't asked. Lee was similar to the man that went inside two years ago, but each of his traits had been enhanced, like he'd trained on them all inside, akin to when people go in that didn't exercise before, had pot-bellies and thin physiques. Came out of prison with muscles, with six-packs, because there wasn't much

else to do inside.

He entered the store and grabbed a basket. Now he felt pressured not just by Lee, but by Gary and his minions. In fact it seemed to be only Shane he seemed equal with.

He was surprised the shopping list didn't feature a lot of alcohol. Except at the bottom. 'Four-pack of Bacardi rum punch'. It featured normal foods. Apples, milk, tea-bags, butter, bottles of water, sugar, cereals...

How long am I going to be doing this for? he wondered. Buying food for strangers to eat at my flat? And how long am I going to be a stupid fucking mug? Yes I'll do it. I'd love nothing more than to go the shops for you lazy twats. Would you like me to cook as well? clean up? Just make yourself at home. He also hated the fact that Gary had had keys. He didn't know how many, or who had them. Ray was glad of the fact that there wasn't too much worth stealing in his place.

He was close to the fruit and veg section and headed for the apples. However there was an elderly couple in the way and he was about to reach across them when the man turned around and looked at him. He was taller than Ray, had white hair and a grey moustache. He held out one hand to halt Ray, then held out the other with a closed fist.

He slowly opened it, and as if it had been made of sponge, a live 2-inch striped bark scorpion appeared. Ray just stared at it, and the man threw it into the apples, and there was not just one, but several, crawling all over the fruit and veg.

"Security!" the man shouted, standing back and pointing at Ray. "That man threw Scorpions into the food". Other customers cried aloud when they saw the scorpions.

"This man threw Scorpions". The security guard, probably finally grateful at having something to do, came barrelling into the aisle and stopped, red-faced, not sure of the situation.

"I didn't..." Ray said, but then the security guard saw the scorpions.

"It was him," the man's wife shouted, pointing at Ray, and the guard grabbed Ray and marched him along the aisle to the back of the store.

"You can't be bringing in Scorpions to throw on the food fella".

"I didn't..."

One minute later, Ray was in a small security room at the back, and he insisted he watch back the CCTV footage to prove it wasn't him. The guard asked him for ID and for details, and the store manager came in. They eventually reeled back the footage and

found Ray was right.

"Go find me that couple," said the manager, and the security guard left, and soon found them.

Ray was let go, and as he neared the exit found the customers panicking and hurrying out.

The shop was crawling with scorpions.

Fucking strange that, he thought, out in the car-park. Another coincidence. He nodded at this. It could be nothing else, he convinced himself.

Maybe he would just have to shop in Ambroses, he thought, making his way the mile there. In a recreation ground, across a road were a few benches, and even though it wasn't the warmest of days, the sun was still out and bathed warmth across the town, which meant families, bikers and joggers in the large rectangular green, council-made space.

So Ray sat down. He was in no rush to go back to the flat, and relaxed, thinking of scorpions.

Until that was, people started to look in the same direction, and point, and talk. Ray followed their eye-line.

As it was quite far away, near the end of the area near where youths were playing three-and-in, using bags as goal-posts, it soon became clear what they were looking at.

It was a Lion.

The people closest to it didn't seem perturbed. However, one or two furthest away, near Ray, shouted something illegible, panicked and ran. It seemed those nearby, as if it was radiating a wide aura, seemed relaxed within it. One mother with a buggy picked up her two-year old and pointed at it, and when the Lion came by, stroked it.

Everybody stopped to watch. The Lion simply sauntered up the middle of the grass, some people stroking it, some talking and pointing. Some children running up to stroke it.

One father and son were close-by and the father looked down at his five-year old and said:

"What's the Lion's name?" The child beamed a smile.

"Leo," he said, as the beast walked on by.

Some people outside of the recreation ground saw it and rushed quickly away. The Lion walked close-by Ray, and if it was exerting a calming influence on those around it, it didn't work on him. Although he did not up and run away, his heart raced faster and he stared at it as it walked in front of him about ten metres away. It looked at him, then straight ahead, and carried on walking until it left the recreation ground, out of sight.

People now were panicking after the fact. Some walked aimlessly around. Some put their hands to their heads. Some just shouted barely legible babble.

"...d'you see that?" "...kin Lion". Ray was no different. He put his hand to his head and began to utter:

"Coincidence. Coincidence. Coincidence. Coincidence...what else could it be? What else could it be?"

Nothing, he thought. It could be nothing but coincidence. Yes. Nothing. He convinced himself after a few moments, breathing rather heavily, and stood up, curiously walking to the exit to see if he could see the Lion down the road, but it was not there.

He found his way back to Ambroses, and fulfilled the shopping list, claiming his ten percent, getting a few looks from those who recognised him, but he was in no mood to care, and slowly made his way back to the flat.

To find three men sitting on his sofa watching television. He went through into the kitchen, shaking his head and unloading the shopping. He opened the fridge and saw there were several bottles of water. When did they get there? he thought, and shrugged his shoulders.

The man who had stayed the previous night walked in.

"Did you get the water?" he asked.

'Chimp' had long black curly hair that touched his rounded shoulders, and he always looked towards the ground, walking with a lope. There was nothing much unique about him, except his penchant for hydroponics, his knowledge of cannabis growing. He seemed fairly trustworthy, but still was kind of imposed on Ray, but Ray had never voiced opposition, and if he seemed open to the idea of having a cannabis plant in the flat then they were going to come on in, and business had already begun.

Ray decided a bottle of cider was in order, but as he approached the fridge, he saw the stack of cards on the kitchen worktop near the kettle.

Fuckin' zodiac, he thought. So decided to grab the cards and leave the flat. He entered the lift and made his way to the top where at either end were cracked, unwashed windows. He walked to one and opened it, throwing the cards out. They fluttered in all directions, and were soon out of sight.

He decided to go and see Shane, and found he had to knock. The stocky balding man who was responsible for the weapons let him in, and he found Shane watching television, slouched with his arms folded. Ray joined him. When they spoke it was with hushed tones, even though what they were saying was no secret. It didn't matter if the dealer heard or not. He was in Shane's bedroom polishing the weapons, even though they didn't need it, kind of like a car enthusiast 'fixing' the car engine when it didn't need to be.

A knock came on the door and the dealer answered. Shane pressed mute on the remote. They listened to hear that it was a customer.

"...just having trouble with my neighbour, so I'd like to see the handguns please".

"Come in," the dealer said, and the customer followed him into the bedroom. Shane sighed, put the sound back on louder to the auction programme, and Ray decided to go back into own flat.

Chimp's friend Harry gave him an overview on how the equipment worked, cigarette curling smoke in one corner of his mouth, even though Ray didn't ask. It took up a lot of space. Four hydroponic pipes occupied a third of the living room, all jammed with cannabis plants, beneath which there was a water-pump, and above, hanging LED lamps with a pipe extractor leading to an open window.

That night, there were several taps on the door. Each time Chimp answered. The customers didn't need to come in. The deal was swift, and by midnight, he had a wad of notes, and there were even several customers throughout the night, with Harry answering. Chimp always seemed to have a bottle of water, and Ray never saw him smoke. Harry did, the kind of guy it was rare to see without a joint or cigarette between their fingers.

At one point during the night, because Harry had brought a sleeping bag and laid it out near the front door, he whispered loudly to Chimp who was lying on the couch.

"When shall we start with the coke?" Harry asked after closing the door on another customer.

"Soon as we can," Chimp replied. Ray didn't sleep well that night, longing for the couch at his and Caroline's house.

## Chapter 27

Out in a timber gazebo Caroline had bought from work for half-price, she sat with her bridesmaids around a table and chairs set she had also bartered for at the garden centre. They were all drinking. Mandy peppermint tea, Sandie lucozade, Caroline lemonade, Leanne pineapple juice and Vanessa iced coffee.

"...so yes, we've got this mistress-slave thing going on. We both love it. So anyway Vanessa who's this violin player you're seeing?" said Sandie. Vanessa blushed slightly, although it was clear she was itching to talk about him.

"His name is Franklin Perry. He plays with the London Symphony Orchestra and when he has time off likes to go around the country practising by playing in the streets, earning some money that he anonymously gives to charity. I know he's loaded. He just loves playing so much".

"Someone's in lurrve..." said Caroline. Vanessa looked away, said nothing but took a sip of her drink.

"What about this job of yours Leanne?" Mandy asked.

"Honestly," she said, "It's great. I'm a receptionist at the gym in town. So any of you pass by you'd better come in and say hi. My boss is an absolute pussycat. I think I can get away with anything. Everything's just so laid back and easy".

"So you're not going to pursue unfair dismissal for your other job?" asked Vanessa.

"Er..not quite. I think I'll drop that. I'll have a hard time convincing my parents though. If they think there's a case they're usually unrelenting. So, I'll just have to see how it goes...anyway Mandy, you daft fucking cow, why do you always take Carl back? Everyone here knows he's a loser, and if he was anyone else's boyfriend they would have kicked his arse out a long time ago". Mandy nodded, sipped her drink.

"I know, I know, you're right, but it's just, he's the kid's father, and being single again...I've known him for years".

"You're playing the same record," said Vanessa, "There's no way you can tell me there are no better men out there".

"There won't be many that are worse," said Sandie.

"...and muggins here knows he can just come straight back in anytime he likes. What did you say it was this time? mountaineering," said Leanne. They all laughed except

Mandy, then they realised they were effectively making fun of her. Vanessa put her hand on her shoulder.

"I think you fell out of love with him years ago," said Caroline, "but you just haven't the courage to boot his sorry backside out". Mandy sighed, nodded and sipped her drink.

"You're basically right Caroline. He's left me again, but I just know he's going to come back and make a show of me. We'll get back together, and we may be fine for a while. Then I'll do something to upset him".

"No Mandy," said Vanessa, "you do nothing to upset him. He just gets these bees in his bonnet. Thinking you've wronged him somehow".

"Should get one of your whips Sandie," said Leanne, "and beat him with it. I don't mean sexually either. Just beat fuck out of him. Or something harder. A baseball bat".

"Leanne.." Mandy muttered. "It's tempting though". Out of the corner of her eye, through the patio doors Mandy saw movement in the front room.

"Is that your Ray?" she asked. Ray emerged from the shadows and opened the patio doors.

"Girls," he acknowledged. They all nodded and two waved.

"Just...had to get out of the flats for a while. Lee's turned it into a shopping arcade".

"Lee," said Caroline, smiling, looking at Sandie. "Your real fella".

"No he is not. I wouldn't go near him. I spoke to him for five minutes and that was all I needed to see he was not a nice person".

"Well he asked for your number when he got released". Sandie's eyes widened. "Did he?"

"Thanks Caroline..." said Ray.

"Well it's true".

"I gave him a false number. He tried to ring you but, well he found out and he wasn't happy with me, but I told him you had a boyfriend and he was okay then". Sandie looked around at the girls as if they had answers to an unasked question.

"Just let him forget about me Ray," she said. "Do not mention me in front of him. I want nothing to do with him. He's a bloody nut-case from what I understand, so don't remind him of me". Ray just nodded.

"Can you talk some sense into Mandy," said Leanne, "her stupid boyfriend keeps coming back but she won't dump him even though she knows she really wants to".

"I think I remember something about him. Carl, is it? Just dump him and find someone new".

"Thanks Ray," Mandy said, sarcastically. "No-one's told me that before".

"Wise advice from the sage that is Ray," put in Vanessa.

"That reminds me," said Sandie, "I forgave my mum and dad for not giving me any of Grandad's money, and I'm so glad I did. I took the advice of that card from the zodiac Oracle when we went the fair and it turned out wonderful".

"Same here," said Vanessa.

"Mine came true as well..." said Leanne. Ray put his hands to his head.

"No. No more talk of the bloody zodiac...everywhere I go I'm reminded of star-signs, horoscopes...I saw a Lion the other day and some kid called it Leo".

"A Lion?" said Mandy.

"My boss cuts his wrist and says the blood drops are the Sagittarius constellation, and bloody, other things...my mate Vic had a crab on his chest..."

"Ohh, tell them what happened to him," said Caroline. Ray sighed.

"He shot himself in the hospital," he said quietly.

"No way!" said Leanne, the others looking wide-eyed at Ray.

"He caught every cancer".

"That's impossible," said Vanessa. Ray just shrugged.

"I can't explain it. And the nurse, she saw it and just let us go..."

"Really?" said Mandy. "Let me guess. Lee brought the gun in".

"Well..."

"Of course he did," said Vanessa, "Doesn't surprise me that Lee's into weapons. I'm guessing he's probably got loads more".

"Someone like that makes enemies though," said Caroline.

"Ye, so I'm always being reminded of the zodiac, and..."



"There's got to be something in it," put in Leanne.

"It's all got to be coincidences," Ray said, looking hopefully around the girls for agreement. He got it mostly.

"Yes," put in Caroline. "I can't take it seriously. It's just a series of coincidences..."

"Well," said Mandy, "there might be something in it".

"Yes," said Sandie, "I never gave it much thought before, but well, science can't answer everything, can it?"

"No," said Vanessa, "but it's more likely to have a scientific explanation. I think I agree with Ray".

"So do I," said Leanne.

"and me," said Caroline.

"What else could it be?" Ray said.

"Exactly," said Vanessa.

"Came to chill out and watch a bit of telly," Ray added as he turned and headed back to the patio doors.

"Oi!" said Caroline, "I still want my photographer".

When Ray had gone back inside, Sandie said:

"What did it say on your card Mandy? Has your, er, what's the word I'm looking for? prophecy, come true?"

"I can't remember most of it, but there's one line I do remember. It said: Do not be a doormat".

"There you go," Sandie said, "are you girls still sceptical?" Caroline, Mandy, Vanessa and Leanne all said nothing but sipped their drinks.

Ray made himself a tea, noticing things that were not there before. Vegan foods, flavoured waters in the fridge. He knew it was Wayne. Even if he wanted to stop him moving in, he felt he couldn't. It seemed to be too late, but deep down, deep in the embedded neurons in the middle of his brain, he was accepting it. It was fine. Caroline was happy, in love, and although the picture his mind conjured of the man she would

eventually marry was the exact opposite of him, her happiness was all that really mattered when it came down to brass tacks.

His acceptance was slowly taking over the fact that perhaps he wasn't so much 'losing' her, as letting her go. Maybe they might even move away to another part of the country, or abroad. That would be harder to accept, but accept it he knew he must. She was forming her own family. She had the husband, and the house, and maybe soon the addition of tiny feet, because with Wayne being two years younger, they were fast approaching forty, both of them knowing that they didn't want to be pensioners while their children were in school. 'Aww...is that your grandchild?', 'er...nope'.

If she was to get pregnant, that would push her further away, and Ray would feel like a spare part then. Looking in at her family, as he didn't have one of his own. All he had was Shane and Lee, and alcohol and cigarettes, and no respect from anybody whatsoever, except perhaps from Shane, or Lee, but neither of them had the mental structure to appreciate Ray. They were too wrapped up in their own lives to feel much for anyone else. If asked they would say Ray was a 'good mate', and that's about it.

Wrapped around those neurons deep in Ray's brain, there was the notion of jealousy. Caroline was getting on with her life. A marriage just around the corner, the rest of her life seemingly mapped out.

What about me? Ray would say. What have I got to show for anything? Two mates. One junkie whose head is always in the clouds and another who thinks he's a gangster. At least the drink and cigarettes will always be my friend. Even though that comfort is superficial, temporary. Yet, eventually, could be all consuming. Ray was nowhere near to becoming an alcoholic, or a chain-smoker, but he had the means, the equipment, and a brain that enjoyed them both, a brain, which if tipped in that direction, could send him spiraling down into the depths of addiction where he would be a slave to it. It would rule him, and when it demanded more, it got more. He knew he could easily become an addict, but was midway between being teetotal and an alcoholic, unlike Shane, whose brain demanded more. Cannabis. Cocaine. Alcohol. Nicotine. When one was satiated another took its place. 'Feed me feed me feed me...' his brain said most of the time, and when all of his addictions were satisfied, it was only a short window of time before his brain started flashing the red light. 'I want I want I want, and I want it now'.

Ray tried, and failed most of the time to smoke and drink in moderation. He'd been banned by Caroline from smoking in the house. If he wants to do that he would have to go in the garden no matter what the weather.

When Caroline was in conversation, not just with her friends, talk would usually come round to '...and how's your Ray?'.

What came into her mind, and what came out of her mouth were not the same. Her mind said:

'Same old Ray never changes. Still lazing around with his mates, smoking and drinking and collecting his dole. Going nowhere, just drifting', but her mouth would say: 'He's doing well, still enjoying his job and being with his friends'.

The jealousy inside Ray's mind would vary occasionally, and he would get to thinking of Caroline and how 'satisfied' she was with her lot in life so far, and he would feel low and humble, not depressed but sensitive to what he hadn't got. It was similar for Shelley. She seemed content in university, happily getting on with life.

Ray had only ever had four 'potential' relationships. Two of them came to the conclusion that he was a 'fucking loser'. One gave up on him and started dating somebody else. The other thought he couldn't bring much to a relationship and would have been embarrassed to show him to her friends.

'This is Ray. He's not all that attractive. He's on the dole. He's lazy. His mates are criminals and drug-takers, oh what a catch. Please girls no fighting over him...'

He was lying on the couch when the patio doors opened and he heard voices. He attempted to sit up and rest his arm on the side but it was too late. He lay back down as Mandy appeared. Caroline and her friends walked through the living room into the hallway, smiling and acknowledging Ray and saying good-bye. Ray just nodded and smiled sheepishly.

Caroline said her farewells and came back in and looked down at him.

"Quite comfy there? make yourself at home".

"Well, I suppose I am home," he said as his phone beeped for a text. It was Ambroses.

"I've got to be in work in an hour," he said. Caroline nodded.

"Fancy a cuppa," she asked.

"Don't mind if I do," Ray said, handing her his empty cup.

## Chapter 28

When Ray was at work, he heard gossip and rumours that the other local supermarket had closed because of scorpions. He chose not to say anything and tried to think of anything but, so with his stolen bag of drinks, he made his way reluctantly back to the flat, where he found Chimp, Harry and three customer strangers. He put the bag on the kitchen counter and Chimp appeared over his shoulder.

"Beer," he said. "Nah, don't want that". He opened the fridge and took out a bottle of water and began gulping away.

"Water, gotta have water".

"Honestly, you're a bloody fish Chimp," said a stranger taking a small bottle of whisky from Ray's bag and opening it.

"We all need water," he said as he downed the whole bottle.

Later on that evening, Ray was sat on the end of the couch. The stranger and Harry were out in the small hallway doing business. Cocaine and Cannabis. Customers were rather frequent. Up the stairs they would come. Tap-tap-tap on the door and get their fix. Some of the customers Harry and Chimp knew, so were invited in, and all the drinks Ray had stolen were drank that evening. None of it by him. At one point there were eight people in his flat. All strangers except for perhaps Harry and Chimp. All talking loudly, laughing, drinking, smoking, snorting cocaine.

They made enough noise for Gary, sat at his desk in the flat opposite, to look up and frown.

"...yes, the other kids have all got the latest gaming machines, and my Layton needs to keep up or he'll get skitted, so if you could just..." said the young mother sat on the couch in Gary's office-flat.

"Excuse me," he said, getting up and heading out into the hallway, to find another customer, a gaunt, scruffy individual appear at the top of the stairs and head to Ray's flat.

"Are you Chimp?" he asked, and didn't wait for an answer before he pulled out of his pocket several twenty-pound notes. "Gerrus three grams of coke". Gary simply pointed to Ray's flat.

The man headed there, and as he did, looked beyond Gary into his flat where he saw two widescreen televisions on the floor against the wall. Ray's door was ajar, and the man went in. There was loud talking and laughter, and what sounded like things being bumped into.

Gary sighed and nodded, then turned and headed back into the living room.

"..ye...so if you could.."

"Okay," Gary sighed, "that's fine". He opened the safe behind the desk and counted out five hundred pounds and handed it to her.

"Where do you live?" he asked, even though she had written it down. She gestured behind her.

"Just by the train station".

A young mother with five hundred pounds in cash, in an area where junkies are seemingly increasing due to a source opening up in the flat opposite, his conscience could do nothing else but tell him to offer her a lift.

"Can I give you a lift back?" The girl nodded, and they left to the sound of laughter and 'thumping'.

When Gary returned, there were three bikes in the foyer, and the talking and laughing seemed louder.

He entered Ray's and walked through the strangers smoking and drinking, seemingly not noticing him, and sought out Chimp who was sat on the other end of the couch to Ray who was sitting there almost frozen, staring at the television even though he couldn't hear it. Chimp was laughing and joking with Harry and another stranger.

Gary beckoned him.

"Come here," he said, and Chimp stood up. They both left and walked out into the corridor. Gary walked further down towards Lee and Shane's flats. He stopped and pointed at Ray's.

"What the fuck is that?" he said. "Are you selling coke now as well?"

"Yes, just expanding the busi..." he was cut short.

"When I invited you to set up shop here I didn't mean for you to turn it into a fucking crack-den. Now we've got junkies coming round like flies round shit, and you know

I've got money in the safe and lots of expensive equipment in my office. So I don't want crack-heads anywhere near this place. I meant for you to grow the stuff here, then go out and sell it on the streets. So get rid of the coke, okay?" Chimp was sullen and nodded, and took a sip of his bottled water.

"Alright.." he muttered, then walked back into Rays. Gary entered his office-flat, and closed the door behind him.

Blotto wielded the baseball bat as if he was about to hit for a crucial strike, as if it would win a game, but he held it before Larry Strickland who was being held around the throat by Lee.

They had found him out in the back garden of his bungalow sawing wood for a dog kennel for his aged springer spaniel who barked but did nothing as it didn't understand what was going on but was too scared to interfere. Larry was sixty-one and had taken early retirement from his self-employment as an osteopath. He was never good with money and even his accountant left him to his own devices when he failed to save and spent what he earned in maintaining a decent lifestyle. It was however, rather precarious, as he found himself taking out loan after loan, and with three grown-up children who had all moved away and a wife who had also given up on his spending when they 'couldn't afford it', he wanted to do something special for her sixtieth.

So he decided to take her on holiday for a weekend in Biarritz, and turned to Gary for part of the money which he spent on flights. However, upon his return, he found payments hard to keep up, and then kind of hoped Gary would 'forget', but Gary never forgot anyone who owed him so much as a penny, and it had been two months since his last payment.

"Think we'd just forget do you? Think we're fucking idiots". Larry was a thin, lithe figure, a man who'd never been in a fight and shook his head at fighting sports.

"Here's a reminder that you need to pay up, and you're still going to pay what you owe". Blotto swung the baseball bat and it cracked into his left knee, splitting the cartilage and dislodging the knee cap. The man screamed and Lee let him go. He fell to the floor holding his leg which was at an unnatural angle. The dog barked louder but did not come any closer.

Blotto pointed the baseball bat at his face.

"I don't want to have to come back here and wrap this around your fucking head, but I will, so pay up, okay?" Blotto and Lee left the garden and walked back to the white

van parked outside, and they were soon driving back. The job had taken them eleven miles out, and Lee wondered just how much of a reach Gary had.

"Sometimes I like it when they don't pay," said Blotto, "gets the old blood racing". Lee nodded in agreement.

"I know what you mean. I did a post-office when I came out. Little bit of aggro never hurt anyone", he said and they both laughed.

They eventually pulled into the high-rise car-park, and when they left the vehicle could hear voices from up in Ray's flat.

"Customers," said Blotto, "Never understood the appeal of crack or drugs or whatever. Fucks with your brain and makes people into bloody morons, and they pay for it as well. Fucking numpties".

"Ye," Lee agreed as they entered the building. "Took it sometime I must admit but it was expensive so I came off it and realised I could just end up like one of these crack-heads. I thought fuck that I not taking this anymore and it was easy to stop. Pure willpower".

They reached the top and Ray's door was wide open and wafts of smoke was coming out with laughter and no coherent voices.

They entered Gary's place to find him in the kitchen making a cheese and pickle sandwich.

"All good?" he asked Blotto.

"Yes, he'll be paying up, don't worry about that".

"Good, listen, another thing. I've asked Chimp to get rid of his coke, because, as you can no doubt hear, something like that attracts fucknuts. I meant for him to grow cannabis here and sell it out in the streets, but now he's selling crack and fuck knows what else, and I've got money in here and expensive stuff. So could you do me a favour and make sure he gets shut of it. I told him before but I think he's in there sulking, so..."

"I can do that. I've got my baseball bat in the van. I don't mind cracking a few heads". Gary shrugged.

"However you do it is up to you," he said, switching on the kettle.

"Come on," Blotto said to Lee, and when they were out in the corridor he pointed at

Shane's flat.

"Go and borrow some weapons. We might need them. Maybe just for show, or maybe not," he said as he walked down the stairs and out to his van.

As he approached the vehicle he slowed down, his head bowed and he stopped at the doors at the back, opening them up. There wasn't much in there except for a sheet of tarpaulin bunched up in the corner behind the passenger seat. Two empty cardboard boxes and a baseball bat.

He stood there for at least a minute, looking at the floor. Then when he heard footsteps on the steel floor of the van, he slowly looked up.

One of the complete strangers in Rays, smoking cannabis was looking out of the window, and saw Blotto standing at the back of the vehicle, but the van was parked horizontally so he could not see inside.

Then he saw what emerged. His eyes widened.

"What the fuck?" he said, looking at the joint in his hand, then back out. Am I seeing things? he asked himself, but he wasn't.

"Fellas", he said, looking at the others and gesturing to the window. "Come and look at this," but when a few came over, Blotto had come to the entrance and was out of view.

Then they heard footsteps. Not Blottos. Thudding steps on the stairs.

The chatter had stopped, and one went out into the corridor to see Blotto appear. He looked as though he was in some sort of trance.

Then a large Ram appeared, with light brown wool and strong-looking curled horns. It slowly made its way towards Ray's flat. The man who had come out dropped his joint.

"What the fuck is this?" he said as the beast reared up, a foot taller than him. It slammed down on his chest, hurling him back to the grimy window at the end of the corridor between opposite flats. The glass cracked, and some shards fell down onto the pavement below, but some jagged glass sunk into his skin as he sank down, keeping him from falling to the floor. He screamed and squirmed.

The Ram entered Ray's flat. Then went to work.

Some screamed and shouted, and the Ram attacked them and smashed the hydroponic equipment. They scrambled for the exit, the table and chairs cracked, the



doors split. Ray and Chimp and three others were huddled by the window, effectively trapped as the Ram attacked and destroyed.

The customers, and Harry had all left, some with fractures, broken bones, scrambling down the stairs trying to run away. Lee and Shane were stood in the corridor, unsure of what was happening. Lee with a machine-gun, Shane with a knife.

Gary came out of his office flat and saw Blotto in Ray's hallway, his back to a wall, staring at the floor.

"Blotto what's going on..?" he entered the flat as the Ram split a bedroom door. It reared up and slammed into Gary's chest hurling him back out into the corridor.

Then it stopped. The Ram walked into the living room where the five people were huddled by the window. Blotto came in and stood next to the beast and pointed to the three customers.

"You three, fuck off," he said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder. Even despite the cocaine and cannabis circulating around their systems, they did not need to be told twice, and scrambled out.

Blotto and the Ram just looked at Chimp and Ray. They were both unharmed. Then the beast turned and walked out. Gary had locked himself in his office-flat. The man impaled on the glass had broken free, jagged shards inside his skin. He had crawled down the stairs and had managed to get out into the car-park.

Ray and Chimp heard the animal go down the stairs and the main doors crash open. However, when they looked out to the car-park to see if they could see it, there was nothing there.

Blotto had put his hands to his head, then looked around at the carnage.

"Why?" he asked, "Where did I get that from?"

Gary precariously opened the door as the noise had stopped. His chest still ached, but no bones were broken, and he kept a hand there as though that would ease the sensation. He poked his head out, and Lee and Shane slowly approached.

"What the fuck was that?" Lee asked, but his question went unanswered. They entered Ray's flat and found Blotto stood amongst the shattered hydroponic equipment and the soil and cannabis plants. He was trembling.

"Blotto, when I said to make sure Chimp gets rid of the drugs, I didn't mean go and get a fucking Ram. I thought you were going to get your baseball bat". Blotto just

looked at him with tears forming in his eyes.

"I don't know Gary. I don't know. Where did I get a sheep from to do that? It just appeared in the van".

"Have you been taking all this shit?" Gary said, gesturing around. Amongst the soil and plants there was white powder and some pills. Everybody was looking at Blotto, waiting for an explanation, but he just muttered:

"I don't know...in the van..it appeared". Gary shrugged in an exasperated gesture and looked at Chimp.

"Chimp, clean this up. This is your mess". He turned and left. Lee followed. Blotto slowly shambled into Gary's place. Shane just looked at Chimp as if he had all the answers, but then he realised he wasn't going to get any. He left and made his way back to his flat. Ray just crunched his way across the debris and lay on his bed in a foetus position. Chimp made a start in cleaning up.

After around an hour, Chimp came into the bedroom and said:

"These yours?" He handed him the set of zodiac cards.

Someone must have rounded them up and brought them back, Ray thought. What else could it be? He lay on his back on the bed and looked through them. On the back of each card was a symbol of each zodiac sign, and there it was: Aries the Ram.

He curled back into the foetus position, and his non-believing brain strained, but held on. He wanted more reinforcement of his beliefs, so got up from the bed and sought out his phone. Chimp seemed to be enjoying the cleaning. Sweeping the living room floor and drinking bottled water.

Ray went and laid back on the bed and looked up astrology.

However, he only looked at the things which reinforced his belief. The arguments against, so scrolled past:

Astrology is supported by evidence...

Proof of astrology's legitimacy.

Non-believing sceptics cannot back-up their views.

...and instead, stopped to read:

'How can the planets affect a twelfth of the population of the world? With the constellation of stars light-years from each other, they cannot have an effect on a person's behaviour. Looked at from a different angle, the constellations do not represent the animals they purport to portray'.

Ray nodded in agreement.

'Science cannot prove that astrology is real. It has failed thousands of tests...'

'Some of the planets based on the zodiac were discovered after astrology came into being, so how can they be based in a constellation?'

Plus a plethora of nonsense...rubbish...fake...coincidence...

Yes, Ray thought. There were thousands, maybe millions of people out there who were non-believers. He smiled, his non-belief reinforced.

Blotto had been asked by Gary to stop Chimp selling cocaine, of which Ray was glad, and he went out and found a Ram from somewhere because that would probably threaten Chimp into obeying, but the animal just started smashing the place up, mostly the cannabis growing equipment. There was barely even anything resembling a coincidence here, and if it was then that was what it must have been. He put the cards on the untouched bedside table and went out happier, helping Chimp in the clean-up.

Even though Shane was never firing on all cylinders, having some sort of foreign body circulating around his system, he was entrusted enough to look after the weapons in his flat. There was another small safe that was crammed with notes in the bedroom cupboard. The dealer didn't trust him with the code.

The weapons were all laid out on the bed sheet on the floor in the living room, and he wished he could just get rid of them. Or when 'Nugget' came in, now he was given a key, blast him with the Snake charmer shotgun, or shoot him in the back of the head when he opened the safe. Now that this was practically Nugget's 'shop', he was one of those people who it was hard to get to know. The type of person you had nothing to say to if you were talkative and trapped in a lift. He wasn't necessarily quiet. He spoke to his friends on the phone a lot, and would have a fair few customers.

Usually Nugget knew if somebody was coming to view the weapons and would make sure he would be there, but there were those that appeared out of the blue, so he had kind of made this place a second home. Sometimes he would sit with Shane and watch television. Neither of them saying much other than small-talk. Nugget had

control of the remote, and had his phone nigh-on surgically attached. So even though Shane was in his company a lot, Nugget made no attempt to become Shane's friend, but Shane had tried slightly, offering him drinks and smokes. Nugget refused drinks but not smokes, and he also seemed to be the type of person who the second you crossed, you would have a knife in your back. He may become a surface friend. An acquaintance, but he would drop you like a stone, or put a bullet in your head without thinking twice. Not the type of person you kept as a true friend, or would want to get to know properly, or at all.

Shane leaned forward on the sofa, cigarette in mouth, looking around at the weapons for sale. Knuckle-duster knives. Hand grenades. Various daggers. Sub-machine guns. Handguns. Shotguns.

Business seemed to be going rather well. There was usually several customers a day. It seemed weaponry was an untapped market for Nugget and Gary. People wanted them for 'protection', to intimidate somebody, or to just plain attack them. Sometimes Shane wondered what the obsession was with weapons. He didn't really understand it. Perhaps it made them feel more 'masculine'. He nodded at that, and picked up a grenade and scrutinised it. A mini-fragmentation delay V40. There was around ten of them on the sheet, and he leaned back on the sofa.

I wonder if this will fit in my mouth, he thought, but didn't do it. No more Lee. No more Gary. No more stupid fucking gun-runner imposed on him, and when are we going to see money for this? he thought. I'm supposedly renting this place to him am I? or getting a cut of the profits.

He put the grenade back on the floor. I've seen nothing for any of this, and I reckon Ray has seen no money for his either. Might be time to go and ask, but not yet. He smoked his cigarette.

Was that apprehension? emerging inside him, at the prospect of asking blatant criminals for money. If they said I could be cut in, then I could be cut in right?

Right?

Me and Ray are owed money. Don't know how much, but it's about time we had something. Yet, the slowly roiling apprehension kept him seated until the cigarette was smoked, where the door opened and Nugget walked in talking to someone. A tall, thin man with long, wavy hair.

"Here we are," he said, "come in". He came into the living room, ignoring Shane and gesturing to the weapons. The customer nodded an acknowledgement to Shane, but that

was all.

"Good stuff," he said. "These will easily take care of the gang situations we've got going on around our area. Little fuckers on quad bikes, hanging round on corners and being bloody annoying".

"So are you going to use the weapons or threaten them?" Nugget asked, picking up a Glock .40 handgun.

"Possibly both, depends. We've just had enough in our neighbourhood. The police don't do nothing so I've been tasked with buying a load of stuff". Nugget lined the gun up to point at the window, then pointed it at Shane, who flinched as if a spotlight had just been turned on him.

"Only joking. I couldn't help it," said Nugget, pointing it at the wall.

"This will do serious damage," he said to the man. Shane stood up and muttered that he was off to the pub, and he wondered why he had said it at all. Neither of them would care, and neither of them acknowledged him as he left, continuing to look at the weapons.

## Chapter 29

Mandy had been posted to another nursery for three months. One she had been to before. It was slightly further out than her regular place, and this time she had to get the bus because her car had needed to go into a garage to fix a suspension shock absorber, so it was public transport for her for the time-being. The car had been in that garage several times, and they always did a decent job, but took their time over it. Not because they wanted to get it right, but Mandy thought simply through laziness, but it was convenient, and nearby, so she took it there.

Mandy and a colleague had taken several of the infants to the local park where there was a duck-pond. Having a surplus of out-of-date bread they had decided on a morning out for the children to feed the ducks and the moorhens and the swans that turned off their fear of humans when they saw food.

The children were babbling with excitement as they threw the bread into the water with the ducks taking it out of their hands, and harangued Miss Powell and Mandy for more bread.

"Don't forget to feed the ones at the back as well," said Mandy, and the children began throwing the bread further out.

As Miss Powell was handing out more slices, she noticed from the corner of her eye somebody approaching, looking at Mandy.

"Mandy, do you know him?" she said, and when she looked her shoulders slumped.

"Yes," she said, "It's Carl, my ex-fella".

"Hi Mandy," he said, as if everything was normal. "What you up to? Feeding the ducks".

Well arn't you bloody observant, Mandy thought. She put on a painted smile and walked back onto the pathway.

"Carl," she said, out of ear-shot of Miss Powell. "You can't come here, I'm at work, and how d'you know I was here anyway?"

"I went the nursery and they told me," he shrugged, "anyway, all I came to say was that I forgive you. I know you won't have replied to that guy on the website, so I thought I'll come back. The kids'll be missing me".

"No Carl, they're not. They haven't asked about you because they know you'll go running off again to some other bimbo who'll see through you and kick you out. We're not together anymore. You saw to that, and I'm happy with it, now go away I'm working. That's my boss".

"I'm just saying you're forgiven, that's all. See you tonight ye? I'll buy you a take-away".

"No Carl I..." but he turned and walked away, heading for the park exit. Mandy returned to the children.

"Okay?" asked Miss Powell. "He seems nice". Mandy gave a strained, humourless smile and threw bread to the birds.

She knew tonight he would come back. He would badger his way inside, back into her affections, take down her defences and install himself back inside her comfort zone, as he had countless times before, but something inside Mandy's brain said no. She had really had enough, and even if she remained single for the rest of her life, she would be happier.

Before even getting to the bus-stop, he appeared.

"Hi babes..." Carl said, behind her.

"Carl what are you doing? Have you been following me?" He shrugged.

"Just to know where you were, and anyway, aren't you grateful that I forgave you? We can be a family again". The word 'family', and a mental picture of them all together hit her defences hard, but they did not topple.

"Carl, we're finished, remember? How many times have I got to say it?"

"Come on babes..." he said, his voice raising, causing a few people to glance in their direction. She was grateful when the bus appeared around a corner ahead.

"I'm going home, but you're not coming back".

"Aww come on, I've got no bus-fare. We can go back and start over".

"How many times have we started over? You've had plenty of chances and you've blown them all. This is your fault Carl". When the bus pulled up, she allowed the others to get on, and when she put one foot on the bus, told him:

"...and I've got a new boyfriend," she said in the hope of him walking away, but wasn't surprised when his voice raised even higher, and people on the bus looked in his direction.

"Yer wha? What the fuck? Who is it?" The doors closed and the tyres turned to move.

"Who is it?" he shouted, banging on the window. "I've got rights to see me kids you fucking bitch!". The bus pulled away, Mandy's heart racing as she went upstairs where there were only a few others.

She rested her head against the window as the bus made its slow journey home. He would come to the house tonight, she was sure of it. Convinced, and then he would get to work on crashing down her defences.

The journey was one of those bus-rides that went half-way around the town before getting to where she needed to go, and along the way it passed a gym, and in the car-park she saw a man rummaging around in his car-boot. A body-builder. A man wearing a vest, tracksuit bottoms and white trainers. Even from this distance, she found him attractive. The bus was approaching a stop. Somebody had their hand out. Her mind

raced:

I need a boyfriend I need to show Carl I really have left him...

So she found herself getting up, and getting off the bus, nerves racing through her as she made her way onto the car-park to find the man still at his car boot.

What am I doing? she thought, but her feet walked her towards him, and she knew that once she had his attention, that was that, no going back. Mandy always found body-builders attractive, and knew they were not always that popular among women because of the 'unnatural' look. Muscles upon muscles upon muscles, but she did. There was something about them, a 'ripped' physique to the point where she didn't much care what he looked like. A gym bunny with short red hair. This man had everything she found attractive. Even his face looked 'chiselled'. If he was bone-white and struck a pose, he could easily be a statue.

It was clear he was going inside rather than leaving, so knew she had to collar him fast before she lost him, and even if she managed to find him inside it was not the ideal place to ask him what she was going to say. There was nobody in earshot, and a quick glance inside his car confirmed what she had hoped. He was on his own.

With his gym-bag and large towel, he closed the boot and Mandy's shadow fell over him and he turned and looked at her.

"Hi, er sorry to bother you, but...but I don't suppose you could do me a large favour". Mandy felt like a fan meeting her idol.

The man just stood there looking, seemingly unsure of what to say or do.

"Could you...well, pretend to be my boyfriend".

The man frowned, his mind racing through his friends who may have set him up, but he came up with no-one.

"I have money," she said, reaching into her handbag and taking out her purse. Then something clicked in the man's mind and he smiled, blushing.

"Oh, I see. Sorry, but..I don't do that kind of work. I'm technically still married". He held up his left hand to show his wedding ring. Mandy stared at it for a few moments, then realised what he thought and she blushed also.

"No...no, what I meant was. My ex is causing me bother, and I just want him to think I have a new man. Would you be him?" He contemplated for a few moments.

"Alright, but you don't need to pay me. If I take on your problems, then it means I



forget about my own for a while anyway. Okay, so what is it you're asking?"

Mandy was unsure where Carl was, or when he would turn up, so asked Ben if she could remain in his company, and instead of going back to his own house, he would go to Mandy's and spend time with her until Carl showed up.

She went into the gym with him while he did his workouts, went to a cafe for a tea and a glass of orange juice on the way back, and he drove back to her house.

She learned Ben was still married on paper. He was in the middle of a bitter divorce battle, plus wranglings over custody of three children. This was his second divorce, but Mandy didn't care. That evening they were in the kitchen chatting, with Ralph and Effie who had taken a liking to Ben, when there was a banging on the front door.

"Mandy you worthless slut, open the door, I wanna see me kids..." Carl shouted through the letter-box. Ben looked wide-eyed and hooked a thumb in the direction.

"Is that him?" Mandy nodded.

Ben answered the door, arms folded, and Carl just looked up wide-eyed at Ben, speechless for the moment.

"Is, er..Mandy there?". Mandy appeared at Ben's side and put her arm around his waist.

"Carl, this is my new man, Ben. Remember I told you we were finished and I've got a new boyfriend".

"Mandy...I thought we..what about me kids?"

"Only if I let you, and only if they want to see you". She shouted back into the room: "Kids, anyone want to see your Dad?"

"No," came the reply from them both in unison.

"They don't want to see you". Carl pointed an angry finger at her.

"You can't do this. I know my rights".

"No you don't, so go away, we're over".

"I'll take you to court..."

"And we'll be going to a lawyer," said Ben "you probably owe child maintenance.

The mother will be awarded custody so she will choose whether or not you see your kids, but if they don't want to see you, then tough. You'll pay for court fees and probably lose the case. Either come to an amicable agreement or do what she wants and fuck off'. Ben just stood there like a night-club bouncer.

Carl had nothing more to say, so turned and slinked away, knowing and believing it really was all over. He knew he could never go through with legal action, and instead made his way along the road, feeling like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. So much so it grew too heavy and he stopped in a derelict shop doorway and sat for a while, resting, eyes closed but not asleep and found a few coins on the floor in front of him when he opened his eyes and stood up. His mind was still roiling, and he continued slowly back to his father's house as if he was drunk, not walking in a straight line.

He eventually made it there, let himself in to find his father sat watching television, and collapsed on a grey two-seater sofa and cried.

Later on in the evening, Mandy was sat not watching television, even though it was on and bathing her and Ben in multicoloured hues. She had managed to convince him to stay, even though he didn't need much convincing. He was kind of hoping that maybe he could continue the pretence. Maybe Carl will be back and need his arm literally twisted.

Mandy was also hoping that he would stick around for perhaps the same reason. Maybe they had not seen the last of Carl, and possibly but unlikely, there could be legal wranglings on the way. Although he had his own divorce to deal with, Mandy was more than happy to help him out with that as best she could, forget about Carl and replace him with a sarky wife who was being difficult.

Strange and rather sad, she had thought, couples that are so loved-up for years, and have kids, break up and are then at each other's throats, practically 'hating' each other. It was a mystery to her.

Effie and Ralph had both gone around to her parents house where they stayed occasionally, inviting themselves around, and grandparents never said no. They had kind of hoped that this new man would perhaps stay around so had given them space for Mandy to maybe work on him in becoming a Carl replacement. Neither Mandy nor Ben had understood that this was what Effie and Ralph were hoping. Hoping to see their mother properly happy, in a secure family unit. They just thought they wanted to stay at their grandparents.

Mandy snuggled in closer to him, and Ben was unsure how to react, so he put his arm around her.

"You don't have to pretend anymore," she said, "to be my boyfriend". They smiled at each other. Then they kissed.

## Chapter 30

"Party," said Chimp. "Party tonight at Lee's". Shane nodded, sat the table in his flat with Ray. Ray's broken table and chairs were out the back by the bins, along with all the smashed hydroponic equipment and plants. The rest of the flat was surprisingly clean. Not too much evidence of damage. Nugget was sat watching television in the living room, eyeing the weapons with a cloth to hand, 'cleaning' the weapons which didn't need cleaning, such as it was when somebody had a keen hobby. Things would be cleaned and polished, checked, cleaned and polished, checked again, just to make sure it was fine, cleaned...

"So shall I go the pub and invite people?" Shane asked, lighting a cigarette. Chimp shook his head.

"No, it's just us".

"Not gonna be much of a party then is it?" Ray said, taking a cigarette from Shane who handed him one and lit it. "Will Lee want a party in his? I'm not sure he'd allow it".

"Don't worry about him. I'll get him to pay for the drinks as well".

"Chimp, you don't know Lee," said Ray. "He's not just going to hand you money for drinks". Chimp shrugged.

"We'll see," he said, and walked out of the flat and stood outside Lee's and knocked. Ray and Shane angled their ears to eavesdrop.

After a few moments Lee answered, looking quite tired.

"Chimp," he said.

"Party in your flat this evening. I need money for drinks, so I thought you could pay. I only need about thirty quid". Lee just stared at him for a few moments, then said:

"Yes, I'll give you money. Party tonight". Then he disappeared for a few moments and reappeared to hand Chimp £30.

"Right I'll go and buy the drinks". Chimp then left the building. Ray and Shane looked at each other, internalising questions they could not form properly, then Shane shrugged and smoked his cigarette.

Lee walked into his bedroom, rather confused. He saw the open cupboard, and the open safe in the corner.

Why is that open? he thought, locking it. Fuck, someone's been in the safe. He went out into Shane's flat.

"My safe was open, who the fuck's been at my money?" Shane and Ray just stared at him, smoke curling between them.

"You," said Shane, "you just gave Chimp thirty quid for drinks for a party in yours tonight".

"I just gave Chimp thirty-quid to have a party in mine, are you kidding? why would I do that?" There was no answer.

"Where's Chimp now?"

"He's gone to get drinks with the money".

"So Chimp's been in me fuckin' safe. I'll sort him out when he gets back. He is coming back isn't he? He's still staying at yours Ray?" Ray nodded.

"Yes, yes he is. He'll probably be back soon".

"He'd fucking better be," then he turned and stormed out.

Ray and Shane were quiet for a while, until the silence was broken by footsteps coming up the stairs into the corridor. They couldn't make out what was being said, but knew it was Gary and Blotto. They went into the flat and shut the door.

"D'you think it's time we got some of the money they said we would get? A cut of the profits for the use of our flats. I'm sure I remember something like that," Shane said. Ray nodded.

"Ye. It'll probably be Gary we have to see". They smoked their cigarettes until they were at the filters.

"Shall we go and see him?" Shane said quietly.

"Alright," said Ray. They slowly got up and made their way to the flat and Shane tapped on the door.

Gary answered.

"Fellas?"

"We were wondering whether we could get some of the money we were promised for the use of our flats and we was told we could get a cut of the profits," Shane said. Gary opened the door wider. He nodded for them to come inside, then went in to sit at his desk. Blotto was sat on the sofa, his arms folded, a confused look on his face.

"Nevermind him. He's still going on about that Ram".

"I just don't know...where..".

Gary went into professional mode, as if Ray and Shane were customers.

"Okay guys, basically it's all about commission, so when I reach a certain level you will be able to profit from it when I procure certain assets which then balance out my accounts. I can ensure profit from the policy I have written up which means expenses that can be appropriated from alternate revenues..."

Gary went on with his practiced spiel for around five minutes, Ray and Shane looking at him blankly.

"...which means that at some point you receive commission, however, at this moment in time I am not in a position to give you any money, but when I do I'll certainly let you know".

Shane nodded, then turned and walked to the exit.

"Sorry guys," Gary said, and shrugged. Ray followed Shane out and they went back into the flat.

"Well that sounded like a load of bollocks," Shane said, walking into the kitchen.

"Yes," Ray agreed. "I only wanted him to bung us a couple of notes".

"Tea or beer," Shane said.

"We've got Chimp's party later".

"Beer then," he said, opening the fridge.

A taxi pulled up in the car-park and Chimp got out. He went up and told Shane and Ray to come and help him with the drinks.

The taxi was heavy with bottles of water.

"Chimp, you've bought water. Where's the ale?" asked Shane.

"Water party," said Chimp picking up a twelve-pack and heading to the entrance.

"Can't have a party without beer," Ray said, just staring at the taxi interior. The driver was saying nothing but frowning at them both as if to say 'hurry up and take it out'.

Chimp banged on Lee's flat with his foot. Lee angrily opened the door.

"Who the f..? Chimp...you've been in my fucking safe".

"No. You went in your safe and gave me money for the water for the party". Chimp walked past him and into the living room where he put the water down by the hi-fi.

"Party. Why would I do that? Let you muppets have a party in here. Why not in Shane or Ray's?"

"Because you've got the hi-fi. The tunes". Chimp walked back out. Lee just put his hand to his head, confused.

Ray, Shane and Chimp all came back up with packs of water and put them by the hi-fi. After another trip, Chimp procured a knife from the kitchen and set about taking off the plastic wrapping. When he did he just threw it to the side.

Lee just looked at him and shook his head and said:

"Right, well while you lot are having a shit party, I'm gonna count my money again". He walked into the bedroom.

Chimp was effectively surrounded by water bottles. He threw the last of the wrapping to the side and stood up.

"Ray, go and get Gary and Blotto, I can't wait, I want the party right now". Ray slowly but surely made his way out of the flat and along to Gary's.

Shane sat on the sofa. Lee brought out his money and placed it all on the table. He sat down and started counting.

Blotto, Gary and Ray came in.

"Here we are," said Chimp, "it's party-time". He turned and switched on the hi-fi, fiddling with the tuner until he found classical music.

"What the fuck is this?" said Gary, hands on hips.

"A shit party," said Lee, not looking up from the money.

"Ah," said Chimp, "Pachelbel's Canon". He highered the volume and turned and picked up a bottle in each hand.

"I'm the water-bearer," he said, and threw a bottle to everyone. Gary caught his and put it on Lee's table, then turned and walked out. Ray sat next to Shane and Blotto just stood close to the table.

"Ah, feel the music," said Chimp, swaying to the composition. He then began drinking, and downed a whole bottle in one. When he finished he threw the bottle aside and opened another, and drank that one as well. He threw that bottle aside, then opened another, and drank, and drank, and drank...

All the while Ray, Shane, Blotto and Lee just watched as he opened another bottle and drank.

The effects of hyponatremia gradually took over. The water entered his bloodstream and he collapsed to his knees, pressure building in his skull as his brain swelled. His eyes red and bulging, but still he drank. Everybody pointed and laughed as he downed more.

Everybody except Ray.

"Look at him," said Lee, smiling.

"He drinks like a fish," said Shane, opening his bottle. Blotto and Lee howled with laughter and opened up their bottles. Ray just frowned at them, then looked back at Chimp who continued to drink even though water and vomit clogged his throat as the pressure on his skull mounted.

"Someone should do someth..." Ray said, knowing he would get nowhere with his friends. He stood up and approached Chimp, looking back at the others as if they would come to their senses, but they were convulsing with laughter and trying to drink at the same time, pointing at Chimp.

"Fellas, I think we..." but the cerebral edema in Chimp's brain was too much, and he couldn't breathe, vomit and water spilling over his lip, down his chest and spattering the floor. Ray looked at him, and Chimp gave him full eye-contact. He grinned, winked,

then collapsed forward, dead.

The laughter and music continued as if nothing had happened.

"Did you see him collapse?" said Blotto.

"He nearly burst," said Lee.

"Fellas!" Ray shouted, and they all stopped. Including the music. The hi-fi switched itself off.

"What is going on in here?" said Gary, entering the living room. Shane, Blotto and Lee just stared at Chimp. There was no more laughter, and they put down their bottles and all stood up, looking at each other for answers.

"What the fuck?" Lee muttered as he looked at the body.

"Really lads, for fuck's sake," said Gary, "I know Chimp was a tool, but what happened?"

"He drank himself to death," said Blotto.

"He what?"

"He just kept drinking and drinking water, and we just let him". Gary simply looked at Blotto as though he was waiting for a real explanation, but none came. He looked down at the body, then at the others.

"Well this is all on you fuckwits. So get rid of the body. I don't want no pigs coming round here. I've got gear and Nugget's got his guns, so no police, understand? You should do. Blotto, you've got rid of bodies before. Do it again. No leads back here okay". He looked at Chimp again and shrugged in exasperation, then walked out.

## Chapter 31

Ray had to leave. He needed to get out into the fresh air, and walked around the town, trying to clear his head. He intended to end up at Caroline's, maybe for one or two nights. If she moaned then he would put his foot down. I'm staying and that's it.

If he had any money he would have perhaps ended up in a pub, but he didn't, and couldn't even afford one pint. His bank card was back at the flat and he had no intention



of going to get it.

For around an hour he wandered aimlessly, thinking of poor Chimp. That was some serious water addiction he had.

Perhaps if the police did come knocking, he thought, that might not be so bad. It'll probably get rid of Gary and Nugget.

Maybe Lee. Yet, Gary portrayed himself as a legitimate businessman, and would probably wrap the police around his little finger.

He found himself in an area he did not recognise. A place where there were more fields and woods. A pathway cut between two empty fields and ended up winding beneath trees. There was nobody around, and after sauntering for around a mile, one side of the path sloped down into a stagnant pond a little bigger than the size of the car-park outside his high-rise. There were clusters of flies amongst the reeds and water boatmen skimming along the surface. Bushes and trees bordered most of it.

He stood for a while near the edge, on a patch of grass that wasn't too muddy, staring into the depths of the dark brown water.

Poor old Chimp, he thought. He wasn't that bad really, but deep down somewhere in his mind, he was glad to get the flat to himself again.

Something stirred where he was looking, something emerging from the depths but not the surface. It looked like it could be the body of a snake, or an eel, the circumference of an average size tree. A large tail-fin appeared, and it headed to the middle of the pond, disappearing from his view. Towards the back of the water, there were ripples, and very slowly, a head emerged.

A goat's head.

It stopped at the neck and stared at him around thirty metres away.

That's a goat, he thought. A goat in the water. I didn't know they could swim. He looked at it for a while and it looked at him, then gradually it came forwards towards the centre of the pond where he could make it out more clearly. The fur was dark brown, its horns curved back. The animal did not look in trouble, in fact looked quite serene, content out there in the water. It stopped in the centre, then around three metres away from it, like a whale out in the sea the tail-fin emerged from the water and crashed back down, the head sunk with it.

Ray waited for a while to see if it emerged again. The ripples died away and the surface became calm.

After five minutes nothing came out. He turned and continued along his path. I'm not going in to try and save a goat, he thought, if it's in trouble. Can they hold their breath that long? They must be able to swim.

It must have come from a nearby farm to enjoy a swim in the pond. Probably something it's done plenty of times before, and I don't know what kind of fish that was, but it was pretty big. A fisherman would be down here in a flash trying to catch it, he thought, if they knew.

Soon his thoughts returned to Chimp, and to Blotto, and the police. He emerged from the path and found himself on a narrow lane. He wasn't completely lost and guessed that if he walked to the left there would be a place he recognised.

He was right, but took another half hour to walk to the house.

He felt he was imposing but didn't care. Wayne agreed to him staying the night, even though Ray knew he didn't want to, and Caroline pussyfooted around but eventually agreed to let him stay, though Ray insisted that he could anyway, and Caroline knew it.

They were all sat out the back at the gazebo. Ray with a weak tea and Wayne with lemon flavoured water. He felt he couldn't keep what happened to himself and had to unload it.

"That's a serious water addiction," said Wayne. Ray neglected to mention that the body would be dumped, instead told him Chimp's family would deal with it. There was silence for a few moments, Ray almost feeling lighter for having got it off his chest, then said to Wayne:

"You'll probably know. Can goats swim?" Wayne just stared at him for a few seconds, as if he thought it was a trick question.

"It's just that I was walking through some woods earlier, and there was one in a pond. Seemed quite happy". Wayne thought about it for a few moments, but Caroline answered.

"I think they can," Wayne nodded.

"Yes, I'm sure they can too," he said.

"Then it went underwater and I waited for what must have been about five minutes.

It never came up. Can they hold their breath for ages?" he asked as if they both knew exactly.

"Have you found me a photographer yet?" Caroline asked, knowing full well what the answer was.

It was a cold, crisp morning, and even though Caroline and Wayne were still in bed, he made a hearty breakfast from their food and left before they got up. He kind of felt he was getting under their feet, losing his already paltry grip on the house which was being wrested away by Wayne.

He made his way gradually back to the flat, and a schoolgirl being led by her mother to a nearby school pointed and shouted at Ray.

"That man's a Pisces," she said, her mother frowning at her. Ray just looked across and carried on home.

Nope, I don't believe, Ray thought, convincing himself.

He ended up in Lee's flat, on the sofa with Shane, Lee in the armchair. Chimp's body was gone, as was the empty bottles. Blotto had driven him over fifty miles away to put in a river.

They were all smoking, Lee and Shane cannabis, and not saying much, smoke curling into the already stale air.

"So we shouldn't get the police round here?" asked Shane.

"We might," said Lee, "can't rule it out, but Blotto dumped the body in the river at night. It'll float for miles probably, and it's bloated with water anyway so it'll just look like he fell in and drowned or a suicide. Shouldn't get linked back to us or anything". There was silence for a while longer.

"Question for both of you," said Ray, "can goats swim?" Lee and Shane just looked at him.

"No," said Lee, "I don't think so. Can't say I've ever seen one".

"Nor me," said Shane.

"I saw one yesterday in a pond in the woods,"

"Really," said Shane, pulling on his joint. "You wouldn't think they would be able to would you?"

They heard a car pull up outside, doors slamming, voices, footsteps. It was Gary, Blotto and Nugget. Shane heard his flat door being opened and closed.

"I suppose I'd better go and see what work Gary's got for me, then I've got to go and see me fuckin' muppet probation officer," Lee said, standing up and leaving the flat.

Shane and Ray lit up more cigarettes, Shane reluctant to go into his own flat.

Take your weapons and fuck right off, was what Shane wished he could say to Nugget, but he would simply have to put up with thinking it. Perhaps it might not be so bad if Nugget was a friend, or a nice man, but he was just one of Gary's 'bone-heads', whose only intellect was for money and weapons and not much else. A person 'consumed' by business, by making money.

Soon afterwards Ray had a text from Ambroses. They wanted him in in an hour. So Shane reluctantly went back to his own place.

## Chapter 32

Billy Price had been 'persuaded' out of his car-office by his superiors and into the probation offices behind the local police station. It wasn't his own personal office but he'd still managed to make a mess of the sparsely furnished room, mainly by spreading papers around the place. He was rather disorganised, but then many of his fellow workers were the same. There was paperwork on top of paperwork on top of paperwork, and keeping track of it all was a talent in itself, especially when it came to managing the computer database as well.

Lee was sat opposite, slouched, arms tightly folded looking for all the world like he would literally rather be anywhere else, trying his best not to look at Billy.

"I've been so mad busy lately I haven't had time to check on this job you want, but I will don't worry. What was it, a debt agency?" Billy said, stacking papers. Lee shrugged.

"Debt advisor. People who borrow money who can't or won't pay it back, I go and offer them advice. Money management. Help them balance their books. Recover assets". Billy nodded.

"That's great. Once I've checked up and approved it, you'll be making good old-fashioned spondoolica in no time" he said, rubbing his fingers together in a money

gesture. "It's good to see you're rehabilitating well before you go into the Blossom programme. I would like you to go back into the prison to give a little talk on how you're finding it outside. How you've found work. An inspirational boost for the prisoners will help in going towards them not re-offending. I think they would enjoy it".

"Would they?" Lee muttered. "Do I have to?" Billy just nodded, writing in his notepad.

"I'll arrange that for next week. Keep your phone on". Lee wished he could just leap across the table and pound his face in. He could probably do some serious damage before anybody could intervene.

Perhaps for a second, the consequences would be worth it. I may be locked up forever in solitary confinement, but at least I got to beat fuck out of the snotty little cunt.

Lee however, just played his part to the least of his ability what Billy wanted to hear, what should probably keep him at bay, as far away as possible.

"Yes I'd love to do that," he said. "It would be nice to see some friends I made inside who are still there. I'll tell them there's hope". Billy put down his pen and nodded emphatically.

"Yes, yes, that would be amazing," He made a fist and gave it a little pump, "Give them great motivation". Lee reigned in his growing temptation to leap across and snap his neck, but he just smiled and said:

"I'll start work on my talk as soon as I go home".

"Good, okay, now the Blossom programme will be starting in about a fortnight. Also let me remind you about your options with regards helping with your finances, plus where we're up to with your benefits applications". Lee made an exaggerated sigh and sank further into his chair which went unnoticed by Billy as he sifted through the papers.

Ray was kept busy at work. Two families had decided to go shopping with their young children which resulted in a lot of running around, screaming, fights, and spilled cartons of milk and juice in the aisles. One of the parents caused a scene as well when another customer dared suggest that the children were out of control.

'How dare you tell me how to look after me kids..!' and soon the parents and some of

the customers became embroiled in a shouting match.

'...kids are more mature than you..'

'...don't you speak to me like that..'

'...go and get the fuckin' manager then...' However, the manager could see on the CCTV what was happening, and decided to let security handle it. This kind of activity didn't happen often, but neither was it rare.

Some of the staff were embroiled in light brawling with the families, but soon it dispersed to the tune of:

'I'm never comin' here again...' but some of the staff recognised them, and knew full well they would return, maybe not as a family, but when it was time to go shopping, and they would shop as meekly as possible.

Ray hung around until they were gone, and mopped up the spillages. An elderly couple walked nearby and the wife said, rather too loudly to her husband so Ray could hear:

"Did you hear about those Scorpios?"

"What?" her husband said. "What do you mean?" but she never answered, and they continued, leaving Ray to slowly mop up chocolate milk.

It was a long day for him. He'd cleaned most of the time and returned stray trolleys in the car-park, and had a meeting with other workers for a reminder of health and safety policy with potential updates.

Still he managed to pilfer alcohol and cigarettes, and decided to sit off and drink a small whisky in a bus-stop on his way home. His system had taken a hammering over the years and a small whisky had lessening effects. However, after five minutes and half of the bottle, it still blurred his vision and slowed his movements slightly, so much so that across the main road standing at the roadside, it took a few moments to notice a man watching him.

A man that looked like his mirror image.

A man who walked across the road. Ray could see that he kept his focus on him, and not the traffic. The road was busy, but somehow the vehicles seemed to avoid the doppelganger.

He didn't approach Ray, but stepped onto the pavement and stood about twenty metres away.

He really looks like me, Ray thought, through his hazy observation. Then the man turned and walked down a side-road, out of his sight.

He was curious enough to stand up and go and see if he could have a closer look, maybe follow him, but when he entered the road he saw the man in the distance simply standing there, looking at Ray, who stopped and looked around like he'd been caught out, but the man continued walking.

It was almost as if he wanted Ray to follow, which he did.

The man kept looking around to see if Ray was following who by now was not pretending. He tried to catch up to him but he just walked faster. After around ten minutes, he entered the car-park of the high-rise.

Ray was not far behind. He saw the man enter the building.

"Sorry Lee but that's not my problem. It would be more trouble than it's worth," said Gary in his office, Lee looking hopeful at him stood near his desk. Blotto was sat on the sofa drinking coffee.

"He keeps banging on about this fucking Blossom project or whatever and I don't want to do it. I just need someone to sort him out, get him off my case. Someone from outside of town..."

Ray's doppelganger walked in holding a phone.

"Hi Ray," said Lee.

"Gary, you need to pay me and Shane what you owe you fucking shark or I'll call the police and get you shut down". The man held the phone to his ear.

"I'll call them. Pay the fuck up," then he threw the phone at Gary and it hit him above the left eye. He turned around and stormed away, kicking a television, breaking its screen.

"Ray what the fuck!" Lee shouted and ran after him. He saw him at the top of the stairs grinning at him, then he ran down, but had disappeared into thin air by the time Lee reached the top step.

He dashed down and burst through the door to find Ray outside about to enter.

"Ray you fucking cunt!" he shouted, and proceeded to punch and kick him. He fell to the ground, the bag of bottles and cigarettes breaking and sprawling away.

"Lee what..?" but he just saw red, and kicked and stamped on Ray, who, despite his slight intoxication tried to protect himself to barely any avail.

Gary walked out and saw Ray being beaten. He pushed Lee to the side who stopped.

"What the fuck were you thinking Ray you fucking idiot!" said Lee. Ray lay there, battered and bruised, and Gary said nothing, then stamped on his face.

He wasn't unconscious, but Lee and Blotto carried him up the stairs and into his flat. They threw him down on the living room floor.

"Lee...why...?" he managed to mutter.

"Looks like he can just about comprehend what I say," said Gary, walking in behind.

"Blotto, go the DIY shop or wherever and get something to keep this door locked. I don't want this fucker going anywhere. I can't trust him not to call the police. He could bring the pigs to our doorstep and I'm keeping him here until I decide what to do with him," Gary then knelt beside him.

"Who the fuck do you think you are you little bastard? threatening me with the police. Do you have any idea what I can have done to you? I'll get someone to cut off your face and choke you on it. String you up from a tree with a fish-hook through your tongue. I've had them done before to non-payers, so a little cunt who threatens me with the police might just get far worse". He stood and walked out onto the landing, waiting for Lee.

"And you threaten my job and might have me thrown back in jail," Lee said, kicking him in the ribs and leaning down to spit in his face which was already streaked with rivulets of blood. He turned and left the flat.

"Make sure he goes nowhere until Blotto gets back," Gary said, "and destroy his phone. I've got to decide what I'm gonna do with him". Gary then walked into his flat, and Lee went back inside Ray's and began over-hauling the place searching for his phone. He checked his pockets and everywhere he could think of where it could be hidden, until he found it in plain sight on his bedside table.

He heard Blotto's van pull up, and after Lee had stamped the phone into annihilation and disposed of it, they were soon screwing shelf brackets into the front door of the flat, locking Ray in.

That night, Ray had managed to muster enough strength to lie on the bed, but even with the effects of the whiskey still flowing through his system, and the fact he was very tired, he could find no sleep. His vision was even more blurry, and after a few



hours at around 2am, with everything black as pitch, a faint blue light appeared in the doorway.

It's the glow from the television, he thought. The telly's come on. There was no sound though.

After a few moments, he managed to sit up and aching walked into the living room where he collapsed on the sofa and watched through blurry vision the television. He could see it was the surface of a lake, a lake with a goat's head looking out at him.

After a few seconds the camera sank into the water to reveal the body of the goat which merged into the lower half of a fish, its fin slowly undulating.

Ray's tiredness, aches and pains and intoxication finally caused him to sink to the side on the couch where consciousness faded away into sleep. However, just before he closed his eyes, he could hear the sound of hooves walking on the floor, and dripping water.

Nine hours later he emerged from sleep, still slightly aching, sober, with memories of everything. Lee bursting through the door and beating him up. Gary threatening him. The goat on the television.

...and the man who looked like him.

Obviously there had been some misunderstanding, because the other man must have done something to cause Lee and Gary to react that way.

What did he do though? If he lives in this high-rise, then maybe it wouldn't be too difficult to find him and explain the situation, but Gary had locked him in, so he must have done something serious.

Shane would vouch for me, he thought, but Lee was enraged, and Gary threatened me with torture.

What the fuck did that man do?

Apprehension and fear surged through him. Not so much of Lee, but Gary and his network of psychopaths who he can call on to do his dirty work.

He noticed that throughout the flat there was drops of water, and some in the shape of what looked like hoof prints. There was more water on the floor around the television. He didn't know what to think, but told himself there was always a rational explanation.

He tried to open the flat door, but it was jammed tight. He sighed and went to make a cup of tea, noticing the pile of face-down cards on the counter. Who put them there? he thought, staring at them for a few seconds. He spread them out, looking at all the zodiac symbols with trepidation. No, he thought. No..! picking them up and taking them into the living room and opening the window.

He threw them out and they fluttered down into the car-park where there was another man standing looking at him.

It wasn't his doppelganger, but looked like a normal working man on his way to the office. Long raincoat and plastic-bag with some shopping. He dropped the bag and spread his arms out, palms up. His right arm went down, his left up. Left arm down, right up, as though he was showing some unimpressed children an aeroplane. He balanced straight, then said loudly:

"The scales of justice are not balanced in your favour". He then picked up his bag, and Ray could see even from this distance he looked confused, then carried on walking.

He stood at the window for a while, as there wasn't much else to do when trapped.

There's always a rational explanation, he reminded himself, because astrology wasn't real. He told himself this over and over again.

## Chapter 33

Fuck this, Shane thought as he staggered his way back from the pub towards the high-rise. He was intoxicated, and had had enough.

Perhaps it was because of Ray locked in his flat. Lee had told him he wasn't to speak to anyone so don't even try and talk to him through the door. The day went on as normal, but Gary was apprehensive when loan customers came around in-case Ray banged on the door shouting for help. He thought if that should happen he would tell the customer he would deal with it. He's always locking himself in. I've had to rescue him countless times, always losing his keys, don't worry about it he'll be fine...

Or worst-case-scenario: If you tell anyone I'll have you and your family shot.

However, there was silence from Ray's flat.

The weapons-dealer had good business as well, enough to put beside the safe

because that was full of notes.

Poor Ray, he thought, looking up at the windows, and seeing only darkness. What had he done to piss Gary off? Gary was not the sort of person you crossed. Not that I would cross anyone, he thought. I wouldn't cross my own father, and he was a fuckwit.

So he had spent most of the day on a kind of pub crawl, meeting his other regular friends until they all went their separate ways and he decided not to get a drink from the off-licence on the way back, but get a portion of chips which he ate half of, dumping the packet in somebody's front garden.

With heavy feet, he staggered up the stairs, fumbled with his keys and fell into his flat. He slapped on the hall light and went into the living room and slapped on that light as well, tripping and staggering over some of the guns.

"What the fuck!" said Nugget, "Don't kick the guns".

"Nugget. What you doin' here?"

"I'm sleeping here what the fuck does it look like?" He lay on the couch in a sleeping bag. Strange how alcohol can lower inhibitions and make people speak their true feelings. Shane said:

"Can't you go? Can't you just take your guns and go? This is my flat. I never asked you to move in. You and Gary can just leave," he gave a little kick to a knife. Nugget got up quickly. He was wearing tracksuit bottoms and a vest.

"Don't kick the fuckin'!" he shoved Shane who fell against the wall. Shane then stood on some of the knives purposefully.

"Fuckin' get off them!" Nugget shouted, shoving him away harder, and Shane saw red and lashed out, punching Nugget above an ear.

Nugget saw red also, and they grappled like schoolboys in a play-ground. Flailing punches, head-locks, kicks, shoving, falling around the room slamming into walls. Crashing down, getting to their feet.

"...kin' bastard.!"

"Get out my flat..!"

"...just get out..take...weapons..!". A punch to Shane's face caused him to crash near the shotguns, and Nugget grabbed his throat and picked up a nearby knife and pressed it against his left temple.

"If I wanna stay here, I'll stay here. Just let me go about my business selling the weapons. Stay out of my way. I'll stay out of yours. Got it?" Shane tried to nod.

"Now fuck off and don't wake me again," he stood up and sat on the sofa, keeping hold of the knife and waited for Shane to meekly make his way to the bedroom, turning off the lights.

He woke early, and as he usually did of a morning, reach for a bottle of whisky and have one sip as a little pick-me-up, and remembered he had to tread on eggshells around Nugget. Maybe, he wondered, he would just go out all day and spend time in the pubs again.

Nugget was fast asleep, snoring. Even if one of the grenades exploded it would perhaps not wake him, and Shane stood there for a few moments, and braved picking up a Smith and Wesson .40 handgun and pointed it at his head.

So tempting, he thought. Pull the trigger. One dead Nugget.

Or grab one of the knives and slit his throat. At least then he would know he was dying.

He carefully placed the gun back and went to make breakfast. He heard somebody outside knocking on Lee's door, then voices, then a banging on his door.

Shane answered and found it to be Gary and Blotto.

"Come here a minute I need to tell you something. Go and get Nugget. He told me he had moved in".

After a few minutes, they were stood in the living room in Lee's flat, looking at Gary expectantly.

"I won't fuck about. I'll say it straight. I've made a decision on Ray. I can't trust him not to call the police and grass us all up. So I want him shot. Blotto, or you Nugget, do the honours. Blotto you can dump the body like last time, alright?" Gary's underdog nodded, then him and Gary walked back out into the corridor.

Nugget laughed at Shane, then walked back out.

Lee just shrugged, but didn't look happy.

"Got to be done Shane. He threatened to bring the police here for Gary and Nugget, and it could have meant me going back to jail as well, so he brought it on himself". Lee

walked into the kitchen, leaving Shane to stand there, his emotions welling up, but not enough to bring forth into the open.

He slowly made his way outside and saw Blotto scrolling through his phone outside Ray's flat.

"Can I see him one more time?" he asked, but Blotto just shook his head and went back to the phone.

Walking back inside his own place he found Nugget standing looking at the weapons.

"Think I'll ask to do it," he said, "What gun d'you think I should use to blow your mates head off?"

"Fuck off!" Shane spat.

"Don't tell me to fuck off. What gun do you think I should use? Maybe a shotgun. That'll do the business". Shane walked into the kitchen and stood leaning against the counter, breathing heavily. Nugget came up behind him.

"I asked you a question, and you just walk away, and you tell me to fuck off, cheeky cunt".

Shane turned and walked back out. Nugget followed and laughed.

"Your poor mate's gonna get blown away, oh well". Shane just went to the window and looked out. Nugget came behind him.

"Fuck off," Shane said, and walked back into the kitchen. Nugget followed.

"Tell me to fuck off one more time and your head will be getting blown off as well. And if I ask you a question next time, don't fucking ignore me okay? I will gladly. Gladly! put a bullet in your mates head," he then walked out, and Shane sat at the kitchen table.

The atmosphere in the flat was thick. He stayed there a while, flicking through an old community free magazine that had never been thrown out, barely concentrating on any of it. Nugget came back in at one point to make himself breakfast but completely ignored Shane.

When he had left, Shane made himself some toasted potato cakes, but could barely stomach them.

Fuck it, he thought. This was one of those points in life where you had two options. Either of them meant the rest of your life was totally different.

Do you chat the girl up at the bar? End up married with children living in another country.

Or not chat her up, and she leaves the bar and you never see her again sending your life along another path.

Shane's brain was demanding alcohol. Demanding whisky, but as he had been telling himself for years, I'll give up soon, I'll give up soon. He overrode the desire for drink, telling himself he would go cold-turkey. That he's had his last drink. Time to shape up and ship out.

Perhaps Nugget and Gary did him a favour. Perhaps Lee had as well. It seemed he had new friends now, and didn't associate as much with me and Ray anymore, he thought.

He came to the conclusion. He didn't care about Lee.

So much so, he scrabbled together a piece of paper and a pen and began writing a note.

A customer knocked, and soon he was hearing voices in the living room.

"...got bad grades. My tutor did it on purpose, so I just need something to end his career..."

"...yes...take your pick..maybe a dagger as well..."

Half an hour later, Shane was stood in the hallway ready to go out, bag and coat, money, keys. He had deliberately switched his phone off and left it in the kitchen drawer.

He left the flat quietly, and saw the corridor was empty. He wondered if he could risk knocking on Ray's, but saw that Gary's flat door was ajar and could hear talking but not make out what was being said.

If he tried to speak to Ray, Blotto would probably come out and stop him.

That would be no way to say farewell, so he slipped the note beneath the door, and left the building.

## Chapter 34

Ray was dozing in the foetus position on the sofa. Unkempt, unshaven. A man who seemed intoxicated, even though he was sober.

Throughout the previous day whenever he had been stood at the window, other people had looked up at him and had straightened out their arms in the T position to say: 'The scales of justice are not in your favour'. Also occasionally, the television would change channel to a courtroom drama, and he would not be able to turn it over or off. Someone on the programme would say at one point: 'The scales of justice are not balanced in their favour', then it would change back to the channel he was watching.

Several times he had to remind himself that it seemed a lot of people didn't believe in the zodiac. There was always a rational explanation. A coincidence. If they didn't believe that then neither do I, he had thought, convincing himself. His lack of belief reinforced but only moderately.

He had also found the Libra card on the kitchen counter, telling himself he must have missed it before. That then went out of the window.

He scrabbled together what breakfast he could, the fear of Gary still surging through him, and he soon found himself in the hallway, and saw the piece of paper under the door.

He picked it up and read it:

Dear Ray,

Cant take this any more ray. gary has desided to kill you becos you thretened to grass them up. I wish you woud have. Id do it myself but they would hunt after me. I've desided Im going up north to try and make a go of this personel trainer thing. I've gone cold turky on the drink and the ciggies and coke. I hope somthing happens and they deside not to shoot you, sorry I cant save you. I think gary has made his mind up. Glad to have known you ray.

Goodbye mate. Shane.

He walked slowly back into the living room and sat on the sofa, re-reading it. He put a hand to his head, trembling.

Then he heard voices outside the flat, and a loud bang on the door. Something heavy crashed into it. Again, and again, until it swung open, and Blotto stood there with a sledgehammer. Gary was there with his arms folded behind. Lee nearby, hands in

pockets, eyes downcast. Gary nodded to someone out of sight, and then Nugget came in grinning with a CZ 97B handgun.

Gary, Blotto and Lee closed their eyes and walked backwards into Gary's place, Blotto and Lee sitting on the sofa, Gary at the desk.

Nugget was pointing the gun at Ray.

"Now it seems that the scales of justice are balanced in your favour," he said, and pressed the gun to the side of his own head and pulled the trigger. The bullet powered through, splattering blood, brains and cranium across the wall and linoleum floor. He collapsed, Ray staring at him wide-eyed.

For the next few minutes Ray just wandered aimlessly around the flat. Wondering why Blotto and Gary were not in here finishing him off. He saw through the door the flat opposite. He couldn't see either of them from his vantage point, but came to realise now would perhaps be a good time to leave.

So he left, and ran as quickly as he could away into the streets.

Gary, Lee and Blotto opened their eyes.

"Alright," said Gary, "let's go and shoot Ray. Do you want to do it or Nugget?" he said to Blotto.

"Let Nugget do it, but I need a sledgehammer. I'll have to go and buy one".

"Fuck's sake Blotto, hurry up. I've got someone coming in an hour". Blotto stood up and left the flat, only to see the door had already been smashed open. He tentatively walked inside, and it wasn't long before he was looking at Nugget's body.

"Gary!" he shouted, and moments later, they were all stood in the flat.

"Fucking bastard!" shouted Gary, and jabbed an angry finger at Lee and Blotto.

"You two, find him. I want him alive. I'll skin the cunt. Fucking find him!" he then stormed out, and Lee and Blotto just stood there like two chastised children.

"Must have fought Nugget and then shot him, then put the gun in his hand to make it look like suicide," said Blotto. Lee just nodded.

"Looks like it," he admitted, "but I think I know where he's going. His sisters".



## Chapter 35

Ray wandered through the streets like a drug addict in need of a fix, like a hobo searching for a drink. He didn't know where he was headed, except away from the high-rise as far as possible, as he knew Gary, Blotto, and probably Lee would be gunning for him.

He bumped into a few people and a couple of cars had to screech to a halt when he wandered into traffic, but soon he was wavering down a road with terraced houses, with mirror image houses opposite, and the door to one of them opened up ahead and a woman stepped out and looked at him. She was around his height, maybe slightly older, curly blonde with a yellow polka dot dress.

"Hey," she said, as he came near, "you are gorgeous". She looked him up and down and nodded approvingly.

"Fancy coming in for a shower and something to eat?". Before Ray could comprehend, he found himself walking inside the small house. It was one of those places where you stepped straight into the living room. There was a man sitting in an armchair, smiling at him.

"My name's Virginia," said the woman, closing the door, "and that's Adrian".

"Are you gonna take her cherry?" Adrian asked, smiling.

"What? I don't kn..."

"You look hungry. Adrian, make us a meal," said Virginia, and the man got up and headed to the small kitchen at the back.

"While that's cooking, come upstairs and take a shower".

What the fuck's going on? thought Ray. Virginia made her way up the stairs and Ray followed. She led him into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

"There's a towel here, you can shave or whatever. Just treat everything like it's yours. And come through into the bedroom where you can choose any of Adrian's clothes and shoes".

"Are you serious? This doesn't happen to me...I mean..." Steam billowed in the bathroom from the shower and Virginia just smiled at him and said:

"When you're finished come down and the food should be ready". She closed the

door and went downstairs into the kitchen where she sat at a little table wedged into the corner while Adrian cooked. She lowered her head and closed her eyes.

Ten minutes later, having showered and shaved, Ray was stood in the bedroom looking in the cupboard. He took advantage of her offer and was soon dressed in Adrian's jeans, jumper, jacket and boots. They were however, slightly too big, and he made his way down the stairs.

Virginia opened her eyes and walked out to greet him in the living room.

"There you are, well look at you," Adrian came out, smiling at him.

"They're a bit too big, but I'll take them".

"There not too big," said Virginia, "they're a perfect fit". Ray looked again, only to find the clothes were the right size. He frowned, confused, and still confused that a woman, stranger had invited him in off the street for a shower and food.

"All done," said Adrian, putting a plate of steaming food on the table. Ray walked into the kitchen and found it was what he would have eaten anyway. Onion rings, peas, chips and spaghetti. There was also a cup of tea.

"Tuck in," said Virginia, "then maybe you can tuck into me". Ray just stared at her as if to say: Okay, where's the catch for all this? but he cautiously walked over to the table, sat down and began eating. Adrian went back to his armchair and Virginia stood near him, out of Ray's sight, stock still, staring at the wall.

When he ate his last forkful and drank the tea, Virginia became animated again and looked at Ray as he appeared in the doorway.

"Well thanks for all this," he said, but Virginia just smiled and said:

"How about we go upstairs and you can fuck me". Ray was speechless, and didn't know how to answer.

"She's a virgin you know," said Adrian, "won't let me touch her".

"But you," she said at Ray, "you look like you know what you're doing. A red-hot blooded man that would be loving and passionate in the bedroom".

"Hang on," said Adrian, "if he takes your cherry. That means you won't be a virgin anymore".

Virginia looked surprised, as if realising that for the first time.

"Oh," she said, "you're right. I'll no longer be a virgin. I won't be pure". She crossed to the door and opened it.

"Sorry Ray," she said, and nodded to the road.

I knew it was too good to be true, thought Ray. Still, meal and clothes. He thanked them both, and then left.

"Who was that?" asked Adrian. The woman looked confused.

"I don't know" she said.

Ray's thoughts from wondering why a woman stranger would offer him food and sex morphed back into Lee, into Gary, and his henchman, and the adrenalin of fear came back into his system.

He was heading for Caroline's, and believed he could persuade her to let him stay a while, but there was also the fact that the psychopaths could not track him. He had no phone. They had a whole town to search so they would probably revert to option two.

Where would he go? Lee would perhaps guess where he would head to, and knew where she lived. Would they be psychotic enough to threaten Caroline?

Of course they fucking would, he thought, and hurried in that direction.

As he passed by, some women turned their heads approvingly.

"...lovely...gorgeous..fine.." he heard as he passed by, with a couple of wolf whistles, but as he neared the house they faded, and he was soon heading up the pathway.

To see the door already open.

## Chapter 36

The lock had been damaged and the wood around it dented. He slowly walked inside, as he knew he had to, where Lee grabbed him from behind the door and threw him down.

"Here he fucking is, about time". He was dragged into the living room where Blotto was sitting on the sofa, the sledgehammer leaning next to him.

"Finally". Ray lay beside the coffee table in front of the blank television. Blotto leaned forward.

"Do you know how long we've been here? Two hours. Two fucking hours. That's highly inconsiderate and disrespectful, making us wait like that". Blotto stood up, stepped across and kicked Ray hard in the ribs.

"We came here expecting to find you, and we were kind of hoping to find your sister and what's-his-name? but instead we find an empty house".

"They'll..be...at work," Ray muttered.

"Well that means we'll have to wait won't we. We'll all just have to wait until they both get back, so you can watch me slash her face up, and then she's gonna watch me carve you open". He kicked him again, then took from his pocket a Stanley knife. He slid out the blade and knelt down, showing Ray.

"Say hello Stanley". Ray said nothing. "This is my friend Stanley. Show him some respect". Ray again said nothing, and Blotto pressed the blade into his fore-head. He flinched back. A rivulet of blood coursed down onto the carpet.

"I said say hello".

"H..hello" Ray managed.

"That's better," he said, standing up.

"Are we really waiting until they get back?" Lee asked. Blotto nodded.

"Somebody needs to be taught a lesson that we are not to be fucked with," he said, looking down at Ray. "So we wait. I'll slash them a few times, then they can watch what I do to him. Maybe they won't want to get married if I turn them both into a pair of ugly bastards," Blotto said, laughing. Lee smiled, then stamped on Ray's head several times.

"What the fuck Ray?" he said, when he stopped. "Why did you do it?"

"...didn't do nothing.." Ray managed. Blotto kicked him again, then sat back on the sofa.

"How long are they gonna be?" Blotto asked.

"...don't know.."

"Lee, go the kitchen and rustle up some food". Lee did so, and Ray simply lay there in the foetus position, Blotto saying nothing but putting his hands behind his head and

leaning back.

Lee came back through.

"There was a load of vegan shite, but I made these crab paste sandwiches". He and Blotto just ate for a while.

Lee stood above Ray and tried to ask him again. "Why Ray? Why did you threaten Gary? You should know not to threaten someone like him with the police. You could have sent me back to prison".

"I didn't...wasn't me.."

"Stop fucking lying Ray it was you I was there you fucking cunt," he stamped on his head again, then stepped back.

"What's happened Ray? What's happened to the little runt I used to know?" Lee put his hands to his head for a few moments, pacing back and forth. Then he stopped and looked at Blotto who had a mouthful of sandwich. He held out his hand.

"Pass me the Stanley". Blotto swallowed and smiled, handing him the knife.

"What are you gonna do?" he asked. Lee stepped around the coffee table to stand before Blotto.

"The scales of justice will be balanced. Caroline and Wayne have their futures mapped out. They will get married and have two children, Dawn, and Nicholas. She is on half-day today and is six minutes away with Wayne," Lee slashed Blotto's face, blood splattering the cream leather sofa. Blotto cried out and tried to protect himself, but Lee continued to slash at Gary's underdog who rolled to the side and then onto the floor. His back was hacked, but Blotto had the strength to get to his feet and head for the exit, dripping blood as he went.

Lee stepped across to Ray.

"Tell her you lost your key and had a nose-bleed. She'll believe you and be very pissed off, but she won't kick you out". He then kicked Ray hard in the face, cracking his nose. He cried aloud and blood spilled onto the carpet.

Lee left, following the trail of blood. Blotto was staggering along the pavement, heading for a row of shops. Lee just walked, Stanley knife in hand. Blotto looked back, knowing he wasn't going to outrun him, so held his bloodied hands up in an appeasement gesture.

"Lee!..why?" but Lee just continued slashing Blotto's face and chest, skin ripping,

making his white shirt soaking red. Blotto again found strength and turned and headed out onto the main road.

People shouted and yelled and backed away as they watched Lee walk after the bloodied man staggering and getting his back slashed, where he collapsed heavily onto his shoulder and then onto his back. Cars came to a halt and there were a few horns beeping.

Blotto made a futile attempt to stop his face being hacked, but he grew weaker and Lee knelt beside him, becoming more frenzied as his focus went to the neck. The blade ripped open the flesh easily and blood gouted out onto the road, but still he hacked and slashed until the neck was a ragged, bloody mess.

Blotto didn't move. He was dead. Lee stopped, and stabbed the Stanley knife three inches into the left eye. He let it go, then stood up and walked onto the pavement, where he collapsed to his knees, breathing heavily.

Sirens punctuated the air, and police cars screeched to a halt.

"Ray!" shouted Caroline, stood with her hands on hips in the doorway of the living room, looking at the prone figure of her brother lying before the television. Behind her Wayne was looking at the splintered door. He saw an ambulance speed by, sirens wailing.

Caroline saw the sledge-hammer.

"Ray, what the fuck?"

"Caroline!" said Wayne, "that's the first time I've heard you swear". They both entered the living room. She pointed down at Ray.

"Sometimes I do, and it's always his fault". Ray rolled onto his back, holding his bloodied nose.

"I lost my key and got a nose-bleed," he managed to say.

Ten minutes later he was on the sofa, a dish-cloth over his nose. Even Wayne was annoyed with him. Him and Caroline were out back, finding things to do rather than be in Ray's presence.

He wondered perhaps if Lee and Blotto had been sent. Gary could have sent them

after him, and they headed straight for the house where they knew he would be.

However, he saw that Lee attacked Blotto, and then chased him outside, so perhaps neither of them would be returning here to finish the job. He didn't know why Lee flipped out over Blotto, but knew that if he could appease Gary, then he could call them both off, and Caroline and Wayne would be out of danger.

A danger they wouldn't have to know they were in.

He could hear them talking out the back, and decided to quietly slip out and head for the high-rise. The way he normally would have went was blocked by police tape, vehicles and an ambulance. Could be Blotto, he thought. Lee was slashing him up. It must be, which means Lee will be either caught or on the run. Either way, neither of them should be coming back to the house. Or it may be something else entirely. Blotto shouldn't be thinking about coming back because he'll be bleeding, and if Lee came back he shouldn't harm Caroline, but then Ray didn't know. Lee may be angered enough to do something, but he had Blotto in mind at the moment, but as to why he attacked him, he had no idea. Their attentions should not be on Ray, or Caroline and Wayne at the moment, at least not for a while.

He cut through another route, and as he did, the total realisation of what he was about to do began to sink in.

Gary would probably kill him.

He walked with trepidation as the fact weighed heavily on his mind, that perhaps this was suicide.

Just get Gary to not target Caroline. Here I am, just get it over with. I mean who's going to miss me? Who gives a flying fuck about poor old Ray? he thought.

I'll tell you who. No-one. Well maybe Caroline, Shelley and his parents. Even though he knew they were disappointed with him. Shane has fucked off and now all I'm left with is Lee who doesn't care about me anyway. Ray's a soft touch, he'll say yes to anything.

Ray who's just a lower class doleite who likes a smoke and a drink, going nowhere in life other than the pub to meet others like me because I genuinely have nothing better to do in my life than to stare at the bottom of a fucking pint glass, watching Caroline who is 'happy'. She loves that hippy fucker and wants to spend the rest of her life with him. She's got prospects, will probably have kids, and then there's me.

Poor old fucking Ray, staring through the window on a cold, rainy Christmas night,

watching her family eating and drinking and laughing in front of a cosy fire. Just the black sheep, the son no-one really wanted. The abject failure. The fucking loser who people don't care about, like the beggars outside shops looking up at people who walk on by as if they were not there.

That's me, Ray thought. No-one knows or cares I am here, and when Gary kills me, how long before anyone notices me missing? Perhaps his parents, Caroline and Shelley will make it their business to seek out Gary and thank him for doing them a favour.

Finally someone got rid of him, they would say, and throw a party where everyone would be happy now that Ray is not here to annoy them just by being present.

'You know what Gary,' he envisioned his father saying. 'I wish you were my son instead of Ray. You're a successful businessman and you're expanding'.

Instead of scummy fucking Ray. No prospects whatsoever. Just another face in the crowd. If I could have foreseen what you would become I would have had you aborted. He wondered how many prospective fathers would do the same if they knew how their offsprings would turn out, and realised that barely no child on Earth throughout the history of evolution will have ever satisfied their parents one-hundred percent.

If you don't become a doctor, then you're a failure. You may be rich and famous, but you're not a doctor.

If people tried to please their parents their whole lives, then, Ray guessed, society is fucked.

However, he hoped it would simply be a bullet in the head. Painless. Out like a light. Not torture. The fact he had given himself up may go in his favour, but he didn't really know Gary. He came across as a straight businessman, but then he had ordered torture before.

It seemed he had plenty of nutjobs on his payroll, those who would take pleasure from pain who would love nothing more than to slowly gouge out his eyes and wrench out his teeth.

Still, if that was how it was to be then that was how it was to be. He had to stop them targeting Caroline. Call off the fucking dogs, so when the high-rise entered his vision he didn't feel as much fear as he had because he had come to terms with it.

No-one is going to miss me, and if that was the price to pay for Caroline's future then it was a no-brainer. Anything to stop them being a target, and if he had to be tortured and killed.



So be it.

He slowly entered the building, only to find it strangely quiet. All the doors were open, Gary's slightly ajar, and he decided to enter without knocking, and when he did, found Gary sitting on the sofa sorting through papers, who looked up with wide eyes when he appeared.

"Fuck me you've got some bollocks coming here," he said, putting the papers aside and getting to his feet.

"I'm giving myself up. Please don't go after Caroline".

"Who the fuck's Caroline?"

"My sister and her fiancé. Blotto and Lee were in the house when I got there, threatening her". Gary frowned.

"Blotto was threatening her?"

"She wasn't there, but he was gonna knife her when she came back and then stab me. Something like that". Gary was quiet for a moment, unsure as to whether to go work on Ray and attack him, or keep a level head and deal with him in a measured way. He just ran a hand through his hair.

"It's not usually in my game to threaten families. That is an absolute last resort, but I will do it, and I will follow through what I say. I've only had cause to do it once, but your Caroline, I did not send Blotto after her. Blotto does his own thing and enjoys that. He's fucked in the head, but he gets the job done, and his methods are his methods and I don't interfere. Now, you threatened me with the police and threw a phone at me".

"I didn't..." Gary held up his hand.

"Don't take me for a mug Ray. Even now you deny it when there were witnesses and I've still got a bruise from where the phone hit me". He pointed to above his eyebrow where there was a distinctive mark.

"So, yes Ray. I am going to kill you. You can't be trusted. Clearly those other two fucks didn't manage it, so I'll have to do it myself. I'll just put a bullet in your head, but not here".

Ray's shoulders slumped and he resigned himself.

"Promise you'll leave Caroline alone and not send anyone after her". Gary just

shrugged.

"Okay, once you're lying dead somewhere. Now come on, I'll drive you out into the fields and do it there. I'll leave your body in the grass where it probably won't be discovered for a while".

Gary grabbed his coat and keys and they both left the flat, and were soon driving in his red BMW M3 through the streets.

The journey was silent, the atmosphere thick, and after around twenty minutes, there were more trees in the surroundings, and more fields came into view, and they drove out past a woodland where Gary turned into a small lane.

There were wheatfields on either side and Gary drove to a halt.

"Okay, get out, go into that field and pick where you want to lay". He reached into the glove compartment and took out a Glock 19 pistol.

"I think Lee might have killed Blotto".

"What?" Gary said, frowning.

"Lee started slashing Blotto with a knife and chased him out, and when I left the house there was police and ambulances in the road". Gary shook his head.

"Really? Lee just decided to kill Blotto. Even now you're spinning me with fucking lies. You know what, I've changed my mind. Get out of the car and go and kneel down on the path".

"What? no it's the tru..."

"I said get out of the fucking car and kneel down on the path". Gary left the vehicle and went and opened the boot. Ray slowly got out and walked onto the path ahead of the car, kneeling down, head bowed.

Gary appeared with a can of petrol and began dousing him.

"Gary, no...please".

"Don't worry I'll still leave Caroline alone," he said as the fluid splashed over Ray, soaking him.

The path ahead vanished into woods, and although his vision was blurred because he was squinting, Ray could see something emerging.

When the petrol can was empty Gary threw it aside and took out a chrome zippo

lighter as he occasionally indulged in cigarillos, and noticed also, something heading their way. Ray saw that it was a horse, and a person, but somehow they looked fused together.

"What the fuck is that?" said Gary, as the beast gradually emerged into more clarity. A muscular upper half of a man where a horse's head should be.

"Is that...is that...what the fuck?" The beast was around sixty metres away and neither of them could make it out too clearly, but it looked exactly like a half-man half-horse. A man with long black, thick wavy hair, who was carrying a bow and arrow.

A bow and arrow they raised in their direction as they came closer. Gary was just staring at it, even when the arrow was fired. Even when the arrow slammed into his forehead and out the back of his head propelling him to crash back onto the bonnet of the car where blood spilled out of the wound and onto the windscreen.

As it came closer, Ray saw it gradually morph into a horse and rider. A police-horse.

It was just a police-rider he thought. That really looked like they were one creature.

He was relieved, not simply because he saw it was a horse and rider, but because they had dealt with Gary.

Clearly they must have seen the situation. Gary about to burn Ray, and made an instant judgement. With a bow and arrow!

The police-woman on the horse was smiling at Ray as she trotted to a halt beside him. Ray just looked up at her and said nothing. The fumes of the petrol clogged his nostrils, but he managed to say:

"Than..thank-you".

"Come on, get on. I'll take you home," she said. Ten minutes later, the horse was trotting through the streets, people looking and pointing, with a petrol soaked Ray slumped on the back, leaning against the rider. He tried to hold back tears but he couldn't as his head leaned between her shoulder-blades in her high-vis jacket.

She looked around occasionally, smiling, and it wasn't too long before the horse trotted into the car-park. She twisted to grab Ray by the shoulder and pushed him off.

"Go on," she said with a sigh, and he crashed to the ground, the horse then galloping away, out of sight.

After five minutes, Ray, still with tears in his eyes, and trying to fathom how she knew where he lived, managed to climb up the stairs and go to his flat. When he pushed

open the door he saw the body of Nugget and turned and went along to Shane's, but saw that Lee's door was open, and went inside.

To find Lee sitting there on the sofa staring into space. He looked up when he saw Ray, who slumped in the armchair.

After nearly five minutes, they were sat at the table, each with a mug of tea before them.

"I don't know what happened," Lee said, "I just flipped and killed Blotto. I've never been so...furious. I just slashed and slashed him, but I don't know why. I had no reason to kill him but I just went mental. I've never done anything like that before, and you'd think it would be a one-way ticket straight back to jail, but the police. They took me into custody...I mean..I just murdered a man in cold-blood in front of everybody, and the police, they just...let me go. They said they're letting me go so you can carry on annoying Ray. Tell him the scales of justice are balanced in his favour. Then that was it. I could go, but I don't get it. Why would the police just let me walk out? I've had plenty of dealings with them and to just let me go...Now I might get recognised as being that psycho that murdered someone in the street. There were plenty of witnesses and someone probably filmed it, so it might be on the internet, but, to just let me go...and to flip out on Blotto. I've never killed anyone before. I just got totally raged but I don't know why".

"Gary's dead," Ray put in. "He was gonna set me on fire. A police-woman on a horse shot him in the head with a bow and arrow". Lee looked even more confused.

"What, a bow and arrow, seriously?" Ray nodded. Lee stood up.

"What is going on? I just don't...I'm going for a walk. If I get recognised then fuck it, and you reek of petrol". He left the flat, leaving Ray to watch the steam curl into the air before him.

## Chapter 37

"That's great," said Caroline, as the locksmith twisted the key in the new lock on the door. He tested it again, and once more, handing her the keys. She gave him his money with an extra five-pound note tip and he thanked her in a flurry of hand waves as he backed his way out to the van.

"Than..you..tha..you...thank you". He put away his tools, waved again as he pulled into the road.

Caroline waved also, then tested the lock, went outside, closed it, locked it, unlocked it went inside, and Wayne appeared, and tested it as well.

"That'll keep Ray out," she said, "he's not getting a key, and if he thinks he can bash his way in again then I'm going to the police".

"Yes," Wayne said, "he must have been really desperate to get in". She looked at the bottom of the stairs where the sledgehammer had been propped. She could only nod.

"Does seem rather strange," she mused, "to go out of his way to get a sledgehammer, and come down here to bash his way in. Then not stay very long. That's not like Ray at all. I've never known him to do anything like it".

"Could he have been getting chased? Hiding from someone".

"Possible, but I don't think even he is stupid enough to come here to hide, if one of his gangster mates is after him. He wouldn't put us in danger like that. Would he?" she asked Wayne as if he would know. Wayne answered as if he did:

"Yes. He is stupid enough. He comes to you because he gets a free lunch. Knows he can rely on you. Free food and a sofa. If he thinks they won't come looking here, or don't know where you live. Yes, Ray is stupid enough. He'll think this will be a good hiding place...Caroline will put me up...Caroline never says no to me..."

"He didn't stick around though. So no-one must have been after him. He left soon without taking his sledgehammer, so he can't really have been in any danger. Nobody's knocked to ask where he is...so, I don't know".

"Is he still barred from the wedding?"

"Yes, absolutely he is. Has his mate threaten you, then bashes in the front door. He'll be paying for the new lock as well". Wayne just nodded, and they both looked at the shiny new lock. Wayne stepped forward to Caroline and brushed her hair behind her ear.

"I don't know him that well," he said, "but one thing I do know is that he loves his sister".

Ray wanted to walk to Caroline's and move in. He would even put up with Wayne, but with Lee's fuse burnt out, and those who had 'invaded' their flats, and Gary off the scene, it was still a roof, a place to stay, but the dragon-lady would burn him before he

set foot on the pathway, so he had to let her calm down, then he would show his face, and he would do exactly as she wished. He would apologise. Sorry I bashed your door in, and I did that because..?

He hadn't thought of an excuse, but knew he would have to come up with something before he showed up again. Or maybe just go with the lost key. I just needed to get in, lost my key, and that's it.

May not be a bad idea to buy a new lock. I suppose I should pay for it.

The flats were quiet. Shane's and Gary's were closed. He cautiously made his way back to his own, the stench of decay already entering his nostrils. He wondered how badly it would stink the place out. Can it go through walls? Will it permeate up through the other flats where they would get complaints and then found out? He closed the cracked front door as best he could, as left alone anyway it always swung back halfway, and it did the same here, so he left it. He closed the inner door of the living room and that blocked out any nosy eyes who could peer in from outside.

One-quarter of the side of Nugget's head had disintegrated. A hole gaped where his left ear should be. Blood was deep, thick red around the wound and on the floor. He still held the gun.

No police, no forensics, thought Ray. I'll have to have a word with Lee to see what will happen with the body, which meant he could prise the gun from his cold hand. He didn't know what to do with it and went and put it in the bathroom sink.

He tried to ignore the body as best he could, and even stopped smelling the stench. He didn't have anything to cover him with so just left him there, reluctant to go near him.

He bathed and changed clothes, and scraped together a hearty meal, all the while with the notion: 'There's a fucking dead body in the living room' at the back of his mind.

When night fell, he tried to watch television, the body only a few feet away, and he couldn't concentrate properly, so had an early night, with that notion shouting louder in his mind, but being able to do nothing about it.

At one point he heard the main high-rise door open, footsteps, then a door closing. Lee was back. I'll ask him in the morning what we can do about Nugget, he thought.

However, it wasn't long before he was hearing another noise. A movement. A low shuffling.

Coming from inside his flat.

Feet being dragged. Getting closer to the bedroom door where they stopped.

Was that breathing? Can I hear breathing Ray's mind asked? Even though he was fully conscious, tucked up in bed in the pitch darkness, he tried to convince himself that he must be dreaming, or was it alcohol having a long-term side-effect? That was it, he thought. Bloody alcohol. Or dreams... nope, alcohol.

Then whispering came: "The scales of justice are balanced in your favour," then the shuffling began again, away from the door, back into the living room, where he heard a slump, and then silence.

He remained frozen for a while, then sleep took its hold over him.

In the morning, him and Lee were staring at the body which was lying on the sofa.

"Sorry Ray, I didn't put the body there".

"Then who? Did I do it in my sleep? or someone from the other flats might have came in and.." Lee stared at him.

"Did you really just say that? Someone came in in the middle of the night and put the body on the sofa. While they were at it they may as well have tidied up".

"But it was on the floor just there," he pointed to where there was blood.

"Shall I just ring forensics and ask them? Can bodies get up and move around?" Ray just stared, confused, remembered last night, but the notion of alcohol clung on by its fingernails and convinced him.

"You need to get rid of it soon before it stinks the place out, then the other residents are gonna start asking questions, and now that Gary's gone I think I might want to take over, so when clients come in I don't want them coming here choking, so get rid of it". He turned and headed for the door.

"Oh come on Lee I can't do this by myself. I don't know what to do with it". Lee sighed.

"Alright, I'll think of something, but lock it away in the back somewhere until we decide...oh and go back to your Carolines and get the sledgehammer. I'm gonna need to get into Garys. And what's happened to Shane?"

It's too early, he thought, she'll still be mad with me, so he slowly made his way along the roads until he could do nothing but walk up the path. He was tempted to pace up and down, build up courage, but realised that would look suspicious to nosy neighbours. He saw the shiny new lock and rapped on the small window in the middle of the door.

I only want the sledgehammer, he thought.  
Justthesledgehammerjustthesledgehammerjustthesledgehammer...nothing else, but when the door opened, and she stood there with a face like thunder, the realisation of what happened, and what could have happened overwhelmed his mind.

She was in danger and could have been slashed up. Her and Wayne, and I would have been tortured and killed.

...but Blotto was dead, as was Gary, and Lee didn't pose a threat to her now. She was blissfully unaware.

She was safe.

Ray stepped in and hugged her, tears welling in his eyes. Caroline's eyes widened, and he stepped back, composing himself, face reddening. She was speechless for a few seconds.

"Ray," she said, "giving me a hug isn't going to make me forgive you. And what's got into you anyway? breaking down doors to get in and giving me a hug. You've not done that in years".

"I've come for the sledgehammer," he said.

It took three strikes and Gary's door crashed open. Lee handed the sledgehammer to Ray and nodded to Shane's flat.

"Might as well open Shane's". Ray went down to the flat and took seven strikes to open it, then realised he could have looked in Nugget's pocket for the key.

"Fuck," said Lee, entering, looking at all the electrical equipment, and in the living room the phones on his desk with a plethora of missed calls. He sat down on the swivel chair, putting his hands behind his head.

"Where do I start?"



The array of weapons was spread before Ray in the living room, and he just stared at them as though he'd never seen anything like it before. He wound up in the bedroom looking at the safe in the bottom of the cupboard, and the money around it because it wouldn't fit inside. Bundles of notes, some loose.

He wondered if Lee knows about it, he thought. Maybe he could get away with pocketing some. Or perhaps all.

A knock came on the door and Ray frowned. Did he really just hear someone knocking on the front door? Another one told him the answer. Whoever was there could probably see all the weapons laid out. He walked out to see a pensioner standing there.

"Hi," he said, "Do you have any daggers?"

That night Ray decided to sleep in Shane's bed. He didn't like the idea of sharing a flat with a dead body, and wedged a chair against the broken door and settled down to sleep in the inky blackness. When silence descended it didn't last long, because out there, in the corridor, there was shuffling. Walking without feet leaving the floor, and breathing. Breathing that stopped outside the flat. There was the click of a lock. Not his, but Lee's, and more shuffling.

Ray closed his eyes tight, and his mind managed to convince itself in a last vestige attempt to believe that somehow it had something to do with alcohol, some normal explanation. His mind succeeded.

"Ray!" came a cry from Lee's flat in the morning, "Ray get the fuck in here!" He threw on yesterday's clothes and hurried inside. Lee wasn't in the living room, but he found him in the bathroom.

Nugget's body was in the bath, his face looking towards the door, the gaping wound facing the ceiling.

"Ray, why would you do that? Some sort of fucking joke".

"It wasn't me,"

"Oh it wasn't you. Just like it wasn't you who threatened Gary and threw a phone at him,"

"No Lee it wasn't! I didn't do any of that. And I didn't drag Nugget's fucking body and put it in your bath!" he said, red-faced.

Lee just stared at him. "Fine," he said, then out of the corner of his eye, saw movement in the bath.

"What the fuck is that?" he said, as something moved around the wound. He stepped cautiously closer, as did Ray.

"Crabs," said Ray. Small pink and yellow pea crabs the size of one pence coins crawled out in the hair and over the face.

"Crabs!" said Lee, "Where the fuck did they come from?" Ray stared. He had no answer. Lee continued:

"Isn't it usually maggots or something? But crabs. What the fuck?"

"That body needs to go," said Ray.

"Fucking right it does," said Lee, "but how...hang on...I've got it, but we need to wait until tonight. We'll take it to the roof, or the highest floor, dump it out of a window. Oh and by the way, I found these in my pocket. They're yours". He handed Ray the zodiac cards. "I'm not staying in here today. I'll be in Gary's trying to work out what the fuck to do to take over". He walked out, Ray looking at the cards. Lee must have gathered them together and brought them back, he thought, convincing himself.

There was beer in Shane's fridge, and temptation threatened to overwhelm Ray, but he refused and opted for a cup of good old-fashioned tea instead, and sat at the table where he spread the cards out and began to read parts of them:

The Libra card...you may put on a brave face, but that is as far as your mettle takes you...sometimes the scales of justice will be balanced in your favour... all you need to do is believe...

The Gemini card...Beware of your maniac friend, the one who returns...you are a dog amongst wolves...redeemable, but a challenge.

The Virgo card...your penchant for cigarettes and alcohol...there will be no taking of the cherry, because there would be no purity...when you believe in horoscopes, things will be more endearing and humble.

The Taurus card....stop smoking and drinking and try to be happy...be happy for your sister. I know you are jealous of her...It's fine to be realistic, but it's also fine to believe.

The Aries card...there is potential...Rams don't like apes that like botany...you can

come to understand the wisdom of the planets.

The Pisces card...Pisces understands your negati...Fuck it, Ray thought, standing up, his lack of belief attacked but not down and out. It's all coincidence. It's all coincidence.

What else could it be?

He made his way out and into Garys flat where Lee was looking puzzled over papers on the desk.

"Lee," he said, "I need a phone". He didn't look up, frowning at numbers on a page.

"What?"

"Can I have one of the phones?" Lee looked around. There were phones around the place.

"Take your pick. Some of them are screen-locked though. You'll need a pass number. Those on the window ledge I've found you can get straight in. Take one of them," and Ray did, walking back into Shane's flat, fiddling around with it.

It wasn't long before he was on the internet, reinforcing his belief by sceptics who didn't believe in astrology.

Absolute nonsense...Anyone who believes in it wants their head testing...  
Pseudoscience...preposterous...

Ray was surprised at the vehemence of some of the sceptics. Almost as if they 'knew' it wasn't real. Sceptics that would say that they do not know, but then proceed to speak as if they did know, and anyone that didn't agree with them was an idiot. It seems they had all the answers, when even Ray knew they didn't. It was their opinion or nothing, and covered their ears with their hands to opposing views. My opinion is the only one that matters, because I 'know' the truth.

Even Ray's sceptical non-belief didn't go that deep. Although his mind wasn't closed 100%, probably 99.8%, the door was unlocked.

If astrology was scientifically proven to be real, then he would have no choice but to accept it. Yet, he guessed, the hardened sceptics wouldn't, and would keep their hands over their ears.

Like them, he would find it very hard to deal with. Years of non-belief embedded in the mind would take an astronomical shift in mind-set. Yet it was doable, and in some people probably impossible, but Ray was not as hostile to people who believed in it. He called them airy-fairy nonces with their heads in the clouds, but beyond that he had not

given it much thought. He didn't laugh at them like some sceptics, didn't poke fun at them. If they believed in it then fine. To Ray it was 'all a load of bollocks', and he wanted to believe it still was, the weight of other people's scepticism and their arguments against and his own reasoning that it was coincidence and fallacy, all served to reinforce his astrological non-belief.

Sometimes, however, he did feel it cracking. The door in his mind sometimes opened very slightly, only a fraction, enough to let in a sliver of light, to then close again. The key to locking it though, was long lost.

He gathered the cards and put them in the kitchen drawer, finding that Shane had left his phone behind. He also gathered all the weapons and put them in the bedroom, in the drawers and cupboards, some he had to leave on the floor.

Shane, he thought. You can come back now.

I'll have to find out my new number, he thought, and give it in to Ambroses, and Caroline, but Caroline could wait, she was still probably annoyed with him.

After five minutes of confusion with the phone, he discovered his number, wrote it down on a piece of paper and closed the door as best he could to make it look locked. It opened by around two inches, but he guessed nobody would really notice, and even if they did it wasn't an invitation to just walk in.

He walked down to Ambroses and found Allan Chandler, still with a bandage on his wrist, and handed him his new phone number.

"Ah, Ray, new phone number...any chance you could do a few hours now?"

## Chapter 38

How on Earth did Gary do it? Lee thought, juggle every pie he had his finger in. Some of the phones had been ringing, and he had answered to find people asking for more time to pay back what they owed, and some had an excuse as to why, but Lee found himself telling them to take as long as they liked. They treated that with suspicion.

"You sure Gary? really?" but Lee knew that to simply step into Gary's shoes was something he could not do so easily, knowing that in such a situation, in order to get

there on his own merit, he would need to pare down Gary's operations, and keep it simple.

He'd heard that many times. Keep it simple. The answer to many things in life, he'd heard, because once you start introducing rules upon rules upon rules...well, that way lies Fucksville.

So he decided to write a lot of Gary's debts off. Fuck it, they can keep the money, and he would start by keeping a few whose addresses were in a note-book he'd found with the latest debts and addresses. There were also five phones he could access. Whatever business came through them and the note-book, that was it, and for him it was a decent beginning.

There were also appointments today, but most of the money was in a locked safe and he could find no combination. He couldn't get into any of the four laptops he had without a password. All the papers he thought could be binned and had scanned them all for passwords and codes but found nothing.

He didn't care what it all meant. Just bin the lot and start over again. Nevermind what any of it means, because it meant nothing to Lee.

There was a few hundred pounds in cash lying around, so he went to his own flat and retrieved money from his safe. At least he had the post-office money as well, and maybe Nugget had some notes. So had a good nest-egg to start with, and wondered if one of the contacts on one of those phones was any good at safe-cracking. Maybe leave them alone, whoever they were. Other 'enforcers' on the payroll. He would deal with them in due course if they complained about not getting paid. Fuck 'em, just send them a text to say Gary's dead then block their numbers.

He was staring at the safe when there was a knock on the door. He answered and found it to be a girl who must have been in her twenties. An 'emo' with one side of her hair shaved and green eye-shadow on one eye.

"Are you Gary?" she asked, "bloody stinks out here. Like there's a dead body or something. I've got an appointment to see you". Lee was desensitised to the smell, but now that he concentrated on it, it was apparent, clawing its way into his nostrils.

"Yes," he said nodding inside.

After ten minutes of hearing why she wanted seven hundred pounds, Lee had almost talked her out of it, until deciding business was business, and if she wanted liposuction, then she could have it.

"I don't think you need it, you're not fat". She had stood up and pinched her stomach.

"I am, I need to lose some round here".

"Have you tried exercise?"

"Yes, but...it'll be easier and quicker this way". Lee had just shrugged, and handed her the money. Giving her three months to pay it back, and when he had taken down her details, realised she could have said anything. He should have rang her phone there and then in the flat to make sure the number was correct, but she had left with a smile on her face seven hundred pounds richer.

He realised he needed help. He needed a Blotto, so maybe those contacts might come in handy.

A cup of coffee was in order so he stood up to go to the kitchen, only to hear a distant knocking. He entered the hallway and heard it again. Someone was knocking on another flat.

Sounds like mine, he said, his hackles rising, and he edged to the door and opened it ajar to see somebody knocking on his flat.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he whispered, and opened the door. He'd forgotten his probation officer said he may make unannounced calls, let alone think he would actually do it.

"Billy," Lee called. He had a look of sourness on his face.

"Lee, something smells around here, you should see the landlord or something. I can get onto them if you like," he said, walking along the corridor. "What are you doing in this flat anyway?"

Lee spun him a yarn that had Billy looking pleased.

'Your own business...that's great...certainly going up in the world...I'm really pleased for you...but first I'm going to need to check its legitimacy, just to make sure it meets all the legal requirements as you'll be paying national insurance and doing tax returns. Also, after I've made sure everything is fine and given you the go-ahead, I'll help you apply for financial support...honestly Lee you're doing wonderful'.

He stayed an hour, but it wasn't all plain sailing, as the legitimacy of the business began to creep into Billy's mind, but Lee would rescue it.

'This is just temporary premises until I get myself off the ground'.

'That is great,' Billy had said, and once again, the temptation to attack the probation officer surged through Lee, but he reigned it in, and Billy left happy, if slightly confused, but there was nothing to bring up. On the surface, Lee looked like a normal businessman, a 'Loan specialist officer' he'd thought up on the spot, and Billy didn't question it. He pointed out the smashed screen of the television in the hallway, and Lee had said it was awkward and heavy to carry up the stairs, and the other guy had dropped it, and now owes for damages, but Billy probed no further and seemed relieved to be going, reminding him of his talk at the prison, and putting the Blossom project on hold incase permission for business go-ahead was denied.

When he waved him goodbye with a painted smile, the stench emanating from his own flat entering his nostrils, he knew that the body had to be dealt with as soon as.

Where was Ray? he thought. Maybe he could fill in for Blotto for the time being, even though Lee knew he would be utterly useless at what he wanted him to do.

Ray had fairly enjoyed his day at work, as far as enjoyment could go cleaning and clearing. Perhaps it was what he needed, a slight bit of therapy, away from being imprisoned and attacked, although twice throughout he had been told that he was a Pisces, and one toddler had thrown a toy Lion at him. 'Sorry,' the man pushing the pram had said, as Ray handed the toy back. 'Don't be throwing Leo at the man'.

As he entered the building, the smell hit him and he walked up slower and slower, and soon entered Shane's flat, but no sooner had he closed over the door than Lee came out of Gary's.

"Ray, that you?" He came out.

"That body fuckin' reeks" said Ray.

"No does it really?" Lee said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder for him to go into Gary's.

Ray sat on the sofa, Lee at the desk.

"Not tonight, but tomorrow sometime, I need you to do me a favour," Lee said, ripping out a piece of paper from his note-pad and pushing it across the desk.

"I need you to go to this address, and remind her, that's all you need to do, remind her she owes money". Ray looked fearful.

"I'm not breaking anyone's legs".

"No Ray, I'm not asking you to do that. I'm asking you to remind her to pay up. She's

a few days behind on her payments. That's all". Ray looked at the piece of paper with distain. He nodded meekly.

Later on that night when night covered the town, and there were few pinpricks of stars, Lee decided it was time to deal with Nugget, and knocked on Shane's flat door.

Ray answered, guessing what was on his mind.

"Time to deal with Nugget," he said. Lee nodded. They stepped across to the flat, the stench palpable in their nostrils.

There was only small bulbs which came on at night to illuminate the lift, corridors and stairway, and Lee nodded towards the lift.

"Go and make sure we've got a clear pathway. Lift to the top and the window is open". Ray hurried across and was soon entering the lift.

Lee opened the door and stepped inside, the odour almost making him sick. He turned on the hall light, and stood outside the bathroom door, reluctant to open it.

Gloves, he thought, we're gonna need gloves. He remembered black leather ones he had used on post-office jobs that he had in the back of a drawer and went and retrieved them, pulling them on.

Ray came back, the stench making him recoil.

"You'll need gloves, not just for handling him but for DNA and all that so you'd better find something" Lee said. Ray thought for a moment.

"No, not in my flat, but I'll just check Shanes," he went back inside, and emerged a few minutes later with grey lambswool gloves he had found in the pocket of a coat Shane had left behind. Lee nodded, took a deep breath of decay, and opened the door, turning on the light.

The first thing he noticed was the peas crabs. Hundreds crawling over the walls, floor and ceiling, and Nuggets body, white and gaunt. The crabs were crawling from the ragged exit wound where an ear used to be.

"What the fuck?" Lee said, and Ray saw them, trying to comprehend what he was looking at. Apprehension gripped him, anxiety, and he looked at Lee as if to say: 'What now?'

"Fucks sake," Lee muttered.



"If we leave it it'll be here another whole day rotting," Ray said.

"I know!" Lee hissed. "Come on lets do it," he walked across to the bath, crabs crunching like corn-flakes underfoot. Ray followed, trying not to stand on any and failing. Lee gripped Nugget under the arms and lifted him.

"Fuck..! he's stiff, fucking rigor motis". Ray reluctantly grabbed the calves and helped lift Nugget from the bath, crabs falling away.

He had to strengthen his resolve not to drop him when the crabs started crawling up his arms.

"They're crawling on me!" Ray said, as if Lee would stop what he was doing and help him clear them off.

"So...just get him to the lift he's a heavy cunt". So they bumped and staggered their way through and out into the corridor, crabs still emerging from the wound, some dropping to the floor, and after a few minutes of exertion they entered the lift and lowered the body to the floor, Lee banging the button for floor ten.

"That's weird," he said, as they ascended, "the crabs only crawled on you". Ray was stood there picking them off. They were soon carrying him along the corridor to the window Ray had opened. With one awkward lift and shove, he was being pushed out into the cold. Crabs still dropped to the floor and outside, drifting down. Nuggets feet narrowly missed Ray as they swung out and into the night he fell, the crabs like snow around him.

They heard him hit the ground, and Lee closed the window.

"Forensics are going to love that," he said as they made their way back to the lift. Ray looked worried.

"I know we had to get rid of him, but can forensics detect that it was us?"

"Relax," Lee said, "you haven't got a criminal record have you? You've been a good boy. We'll probably get questioned by police, but it'll just be normal enquiries, shit like that. Don't worry. Trust old Uncle fucking Lee and you'll be alright".

They said nothing as they went back down, Ray picking off what he hoped was the last crab from his shoe. When the lift doors opened there was another resident, waiting, an older man in a food-stained coat. They nodded to him as he passed.

"The scales of justice weren't balanced in his favour were they?" the resident said as the doors closed.

"What?" Lee said, "what did he mean by that?" Ray shook his head.

"Don't know," he muttered.

"There's a crab on your collar," Lee said. Ray angrily wrenched off the gloves and threw them to the floor, then swiped it off forcefully and stormed into Shane's flat, slamming the door. Lee just looked in that direction for a few moments, then picked up the gloves and reluctantly entered his place, turning on all the lights and throwing the gloves on the sofa. There were a few crabs slowly crawling around.

Fuck it, he thought. I'm moving into Gary's flat.

The following day, they were woken by sirens. Lee decided he would go out and visit clients before anybody came knocking, which he guessed they would, and Ray knew he was to visit another debtor and took Lee's advice to go as soon as possible before police and forensics set up shop around the corner.

The weather had dropped in temperature and Ray wore a jacket he had not worn in a while, and found he had to take a long bus journey to the house of Georgeanne Benton. He was apprehensive because he didn't know the reaction she would give. Would she scratch his eyes out the second he mentioned debt? or would she burst into tears and plead for more time? What then? what if she wanted more time to pay it back? He told himself he's only there to remind her. That's all.

When he approached the door of the Victorian building where Georgeanne lived in a ground floor flat, he heard voices behind the door. It then opened, and he saw an Indian mother and child leaving. The child looked to be around four years old. Ray guessed she was taking him to nursery.

The child though, was in fancy dress. Dressed as a Lion. He looked at Ray.

"Mummy, it's the debt reminder guy".

"What?" she said, and looked in the direction of a nervous Ray, looking suspicious as if he was casing the building to burgle later.

"Er, hi," he said, "are you Georgeanne? I'm just here to remind you that you still have...arrears to pay". She continued on her way to school.

"Do you know how much it is to look after a child?" she asked, and Ray reluctantly followed.

"...because if you had kids then you would know. I'll pay that money back but only when my kids are secure in the..."

"Yes, I know, but I'm just..." For the next five minutes, Ray could barely get a word in, as she told him of her hardships and the need for extra income. The child smiling up at him occasionally. They approached the infant school.

"...whatever it takes to put food in my kids mouth..." she stopped as she saw the other children. Some of the other parents were standing around looking confused. A teacher came across to Georgeanne. Ray looked through the railings at the play area. He looked with wide eyes.

"I don't get it," the teacher said. "We said the children can come in fancy dress, so I don't understand why every child has come as a Lion".

"We're all Leo," said Georgeanne's little boy, and ran into the play area to join the others who, in one way or another were dressed, or had masks on, had something to denote that they were a Lion. They were running around, roaring, scratching the air, laughing, some looking at Ray.

Another parent said: "What are the chances of that happening? Every child deciding to come as Leo the Lion. It's got to be a coincidence". Ray slinked away, and told himself the same thing. It's got to be a coincidence, because there's nothing else it could be. His fragile mind clung to that.

He decided to walk back, and thought perhaps he would carry on walking to Caroline's. Either that or go back to the flat with commotion going on outside.

Or go to a pub and relax with a pint.

In the Green Castle it was fairly quiet, and Ray approached the bar to find Danielle, twenty years bar-maid.

"Hi Dani," he said, "just a pint of lager please". She took a pint glass and filled it with water and handed it to him.

"I'm a water-bearer," she said, then looked confused.

"Erm...pint of lager," Ray repeated, and Danielle frowned and pulled him a normal pint.

"Not sure why I did that," she muttered more to herself. Ray paid her and sat down at a seat he frequented often, near the entrance at the window. He relaxed, and enjoyed his

drink.

After around an hour, he left, noticing that Danielle had not moved the pint of water from the bar.

He was in no rush to go back the flat, so went a long way round which took him along a pathway through a small park.

In the distance, he saw what looked like a horse, heading in the opposite direction.

A horse with the upper torso of a man.

As it got closer he could see it was holding a bow and arrow. A bow and arrow they levelled at Ray who stopped and held up his hands in supplication.

As the creature approached, it morphed into a police-horse and rider, but still with a bow and arrow they kept levelled at Ray. It wasn't the same police officer who had given him a ride, but a man who grinned as he approached, then laughed. He put the weapon away, laughed louder and trotted past, Ray staring and frowning after him.

"Fuck..." he muttered, and decided to head straight to the flat, where he found soundless blue flashing lights in the area around Nugget, and the high-rise cordoned off. He could see forensics in their white paper suits slowly stepping around, and a few bored looking police at the cordons.

One of them saw him lifting the tape and going into the flat.

"Excuse me sir, do you live here? Can I have a word?"

Half an hour later, the policeman left Shane's flat, and Ray breathed the biggest sigh of relief in his life. Grateful that the man didn't ask to use the toilet, and see weapons in there, guns and blades in the bath. It was simply general enquiries as to whether or not he knew a Nathan Northrop. Also known as Nugget.

"Why what's happened?" Ray feigned.

Lee came back later on and was subjected to the same, albeit more intense questioning.

"I don't know no bloody Nugget!"

When they had left him alone, he heard another tap on the door an hour later, to find another policeman stood there, curiously looking at a pea crab on the door-frame.

"Mr Lee Sherwin? I would just like to ask you a few questions".

"Oh for fucks sake I answered loads already. What do you want to know now? How big my cock is?" The policeman was silent for a few seconds.

"I'd like to ask you about a George Brigham".

"George who..?"

"Some people called him Chimp".

"Tell you what Ray, I don't know why the police insist on fucking around so much. I mean there's Nugget's body, no-one knows fuck-all, so what's their problem? Why do they have to cordon off half a fuckin' town around a body, then spend ages interviewing people who might have seen him. Why so much detail it's pointless?" He was stood in his living room pacing around, Ray sat on the sofa, arms folded.

Being in the vicinity of police made them both anxious. At the window the blue lights still flashed.

"It's time for them to go," Ray said, "Oh fuck! there's a gun in my sink, and the front door hasn't been fixed".

"Better go and deal with it then," Lee said. Ray apprehensively left the flat and made his way along to his place. He knew there were police on some of the floors, especially the top, with forensics studying potential evidence.

He entered his flat and found the gun, and left to sneak back to Lees, but coming down the stairs was a burly police officer who spied the weapon. Ray stopped in his tracks. Caught red-handed.

"Best hide that," he said, "the scales of justice are balanced in your favour," he then carried on down the stairs and outside. Ray nervously went back to Lees.

"...I just need them to go," Lee said as soon as Ray stepped inside, as if he'd never left. He looked at the gun.

"It's tempting to grab that and go and put a bullet in all of their heads. It's all very well killing enemies, but I'd love to kill a copper. I'm sure it would feel sweet". Ray put the gun on the table.

"It's all yours," he said, and Lee continued pacing around.

"I just wish they'd all fuck off," he said.

"Maybe we should have dumped the body somewhere else," Ray put in.

"Blotto's gone. I don't know anyone else who could do it, and I can't just go down to the hospital to ask that nurse who sorted out Victor, and I wasn't going to carry the fucker around the town away from here. What else could we have done?" Ray had no answer but said:

"We'll just have to wait it out. Sooner or later they'll go". Lee agreed, and seemed to be calming down slightly.

"I suppose that's all we can do, just wait them out," he said. "Do us a favour, make us a coffee, I'm too anxious at the moment". Ray had no sooner sat down, than was heading to the kitchen.

## Chapter 39

It had to done, he knew. He would have to face her wrath.

He thought perhaps she had had time to calm down now, but still could think of nothing to say regarding why he had supposedly broke down the door, so would have to go with the 'I lost my key' excuse which held little water.

As he passed by a group of teenage girls, the one nearest him squirted Ray with her bottle of water and laughed.

"I'm the water-bearer," she said, and continued, her friends confused as to why she just did that. Ray just wiped his face and looked back at the laughing girl as she walked away, shook his head and carried on to the house.

He cautiously walked along the path and knocked on the door. It was Wayne who answered.

"Hi Ray, Caroline's gone to the shops, she'll be back soon". He opened the door to allow him in, and when he walked into the living room found three of Wayne's friends sitting there looking up at him.

"This is Ray," said Wayne, "Caroline's sister". They all acknowledged him, and Ray

said he would wait out back, maybe make himself toast.

Ten minutes later, Caroline came back and stood at the kitchen door.

"Decided to show yourself," she said.

"Yes," he said sheepishly, "I thought I would come and see if you were...alright and that everything was going well".

"Oh really, nothing to do with the fact that you want to still come back here for freebies, and the sofa if your mates kick you out".

"No...no, I just..." Caroline could see he was sincere, and didn't want to be cut off, despite his recent actions, not that Caroline would cut him off, just have a pair of scissors to hand, ready for when the time comes to do it if need be, but in the meantime wave them in his face when he got out of hand.

"Look Ray, I don't know what you've been up to, or who with or why. It's nothing to do with me. You can be so annoying at times. I don't even think I want to know why you broke the door in. You lost your key. Fine. I'm not just going to hand you a new key. You've got to earn it. If you don't want me to be mad at you, then help me out. Get involved. Find me a photographer, and get to know Wayne," she looked back towards the living room.

"Wayne and his mates are going into town soon. He's taking his shoes back because he changed his mind. He's exchanging them for another pair. Go with them". Ray pulled a look of anguish.

"Go with them," he said, "a bunch of hipp..." Caroline put her hands on her hips and metaphorically waved the scissors in his face. He sighed and nodded reluctantly.

He felt like a spare-part, like he did when he visited the funfair with Caroline and her friends. With his hands jammed in his pockets walking behind them, Wayne did his best to involve him. His friends Alistair, Darren and Banjo also tried to talk to him occasionally, but only on the surface level. 'Safe' topics that strangers talk to strangers about, weather, holidays, where you're from...etc.

It was obvious Banjo was the talker of the group. The type who liked to air his opinions and views and emotions whether you wanted to hear about them or not, and it didn't matter who was in earshot. Darren and Alistair also liked to talk, but it was Banjo who led the pack, and Wayne also joined in. It was clear they had known each other for years, relaxed as they were in each others company, where the topics could leave the

confines of being 'safe' so most other topics could be spoken about.

Ray also tried to interject sometimes, to show willing, to perhaps show Wayne that he was trying. He would report back and say how he was.

'Ray was useless and hated my friends'. Or 'Ray really tried and he liked my friends'. Ray really did try. He only had Lee as his friend now, and even he wasn't 'friend' material, but he didn't want to integrate himself with Wayne as he would find that too embarrassing.

'I've got no friends, so can I join yours?' He would feel too much like a spare-part. The friend who only goes on holiday with others because they felt obliged to ask him. Please don't bring your brother. But he'll feel left out if I don't. My Mum won't be happy.

He's an ugly miseryguts and never talks or joins in. He'll hold us back. Oh for fuck's sake invite him then...

He guessed they would not allow him into the fold anyway. Ray, you're just a beer drinker and smoker with no hobbies or interests. Your mates are the same. We know you look down on us, but guess what? we look down on you and your kind as well. All groups and cultures and gangs think they're at the top of the tree. You think we're a bunch of head-the-ball hippies and look down your nose at us because you're so much better, well we think the same. If all you can do is sit in pubs all day drinking beer, reading and believing tabloid newspapers, watching sport and complaining about the state of the world and how the world 'should' be, then we look down on you. It's just how it is. We're all ego-driven. Like attracts like.

You're just one of those people whose opinion is formed by those around you. The people you look up to. Their opinion is your opinion because you don't really give much thought to these things, and when you do, you seek what they think because then you just agree. You're not one to go against the grain are you Ray? You are simply a follower. Nothing more. We don't hate you Ray, and we know you don't really hate us. You just shake your head and maybe call us freaks and weirdos, think that Caroline can do better, but we don't care for your opinion of us. It means nothing. So sit in the corner of the pub with your pint, with your tabloid newspaper on the table and the rolling news on the television, and put the world to rights, as long as we can't hear you.

He was a few feet behind them as they chatted as old friends, and Wayne looked back frequently. Ray stepped up faster to try and somehow join in, but they were all just



talking amongst themselves, and he felt slightly better when Alistair moved to the side and he found himself sandwiched next to Darren, but still the talk became awkward and stilted.

"So Ray, have you ever tasted garlic mushrooms?"

"No, sounds delicious though. I must try some".

"Have you ever been to Europe?"

"No,"

"Would you ever do a parachute jump?"

"Nah,"

"What's Pisces your star-sign? What's your star-sign Pisces? What's your pisc.." Darren frowned, looking confused.

"What are you on about?" asked Banjo.

"I don't know. Got a bit confused there". Ray just sighed and ran a hand over his hair, falling back again slightly as they talked amongst themselves all the way to the department store.

They entered and immediately attracted the attention of the security guard who eyed them with suspicion as they walked through to the escalators. Nobody else paid them much attention except to surreptitiously glance at Banjo because his voice was rather loud.

"...never understood why you'd want to pay three figures for a T-shirt," he said as they passed through the menswear on the first floor, towards customer services at the back.

"A T-shirt is a T-shirt. Do you put it on and feel much better? Oh my...this expensive T-shirt feels so much better than the cheap ones I can get at the supermarket. Honestly..."

They moved through plates, bowls and cups, with cutlery and tea-pots all laid out around them neatly. All except Alistair walked through towards customer service. Wayne looked around.

"You lot can stay here if you like I shouldn't be too long," he looked at Alistair further back who was simply standing there staring at nothing.

"Are those shoes leather?" Alistair asked, rather loudly. Wayne moved back towards him.

"Too be honest I didn't check," Wayne said, "but I'm getting my money back anyway so..."

"Are they leather? You know, like a bull". Wayne frowned. A few other people looked in their direction. Ray stared at him as well.

"Like a bull," he said, a little quieter. "Bulls in china shops. This isn't a china shop though is it? Why would they go there?" A couple who were looking at the dinner-sets moved away.

"Me! I am a bull, and I came here".

"Alistair what are you on about?" Wayne said. The others all looked confused, but Ray simply watched him. Other shoppers either stopped to look or walked slowly.

"I am a bull!" he shouted, and put both his index fingers to the side of his head as crude horns and bent forward. He began to breathe heavily, his chest pulsing as if he had just exercised, then began to hurl himself into the crockery. The plates smashed, the cutlery spread on the floor as he crashed his way around the area.

"Alistair!" Wayne shouted, and the others panicked but didn't know what to do. They were afraid to approach him, instead just shouted for him to stop to no avail. Other customers retreated, but watched as he smashed the displays.

"I am a bull!" he shouted, and sent teapots crashing to the floor. Soon, security guards were tackling him.

"I am a bull!" he screamed, but they soon overpowered him and wrestled him to the ground, where he relaxed and allowed himself to be taken.

His friends watched as they marched him away. Alistair was crying.

"Sorry," he muttered, "why did I do that?" Ray just looked at the destruction he had caused, saw Wayne and his friends distraught and talking amongst themselves. He slipped away, out of the department store, and walked aimlessly for a while until he ended up on a bench on the outskirts of a small park.

He tried not to think of it, but couldn't help himself. It was just Alistair going a bit mad. I don't know him, he may have mental issues as far as I know. Why else would you do that?

Across to his left at around thirty metres, he saw a woman in what looked like a

wedding dress being photographed by a man. She had one foot up against a tree. The man snapped away.

Photographer, he thought. Need to get a photographer. He watched for a few minutes as the woman struck various poses. He got up and slowly approached. The woman nodded in Ray's direction and the man looked at him. He stood up properly from his low angle. Ray saw she wasn't simply a bride. She had red lipstick smeared across her face and her hair was a curly bunched up wig. She had black gauntlets and gloves. Students, he thought. Probably some art project.

"Sorry to disturb, but I wonder do you do weddings?"

"Erm," he thought, clearly he had never done a wedding before. "I could do, yes".

"My sister's getting married soon and she's looking for a photographer, so you could earn a few quid if you like". The man smiled and nodded. "What are you doing here?"

"This is for my uni photography degree. I've got Chantelle here to pose for me as a kind of dystopian bride".

"A dystopian bride? what's that?" The man held the camera up for Ray to look through the viewfinder, which he did, but saw only Chantelle as she was, pulling another pose.

"Doesn't she look like a Centaur," the photographer said.

"A what?" asked Ray.

"A what?" asked Chantelle, frowning.

"A Centaur. A man-horse. You look like a man-horse". Chantelle was annoyed.

"You saying I look like a horse?"

"No, a Centaur. A man-horse".

"Now you're saying I look like a man".

"No you look like a man-horse".

"Cheeky bastard!" she said, then turned and stormed away.

"Doesn't she? doesn't she look like a Centaur?" Ray sighed and simply said:

"Give me a pen and paper and I'll write my sister's number down". The man rummaged in his bag and took out a pencil and note-pad. Ray scribbled the number.

"Doesn't she look like a...what have I said? why did I call her that?" he said as he looked at the tree where she had stood. Chantelle was a white speck in the distance, a speck that vanished around a corner. He quickly put his camera in the bag and hoisted it over his shoulder.

"Chantelle..." he shouted as he hurried in her direction. He turned around to look at Ray, but he too had gone.

## Chapter 40

Lee wasn't expecting a client until the afternoon, so looked towards the door with curiosity when there was knocking.

It was another policeman who had got no answer at Lee's flat and tried Gary's, the reason for his visit. Lee's shoulders dropped and he sighed. All the police and forensics around Nugget had gone.

"Mr Lee Sherwin. I need to talk to you about a Gary Mendel". The Senior Investigating Officer was one of those who liked to talk, and sometimes would veer off-topic. He wasn't as bad as some of them had been, treating him with contempt, as he started talking about his own family and about the job, meanwhile Lee was shouting in his mind: 'I don't care about what your issues are, or about your job. Say what you've come to say and fuck off!'. He was in no hurry, and spent a while writing in his little note-pad, then asking him about his business. Lee took a leaf from Gary's book and spun it so he sounded legitimate, professional, and the officer was satisfied with this and decided there was nothing here to pursue, and took a while to get around to leaving. One of those people that says goodbye, and are still saying it ten minutes later.

When he had gone, he left the flat and made his way to his other place as he was hungry and Gary's cupboards were sparse.

He noticed Shane's flat door was open and went inside to find Ray lying on the couch.

"You alright?" he asked. Ray just nodded slightly. He was clutching the cards.

"Yep,"

"Oh, hang on, I need you to do another job for me. Someone else that needs a kick up the arse to pay up," he turned to leave, but Ray asked:

"Lee. Do you believe in horoscopes?" Lee just smiled, as though Ray was asking him a trick question.

"Horoscopes? are you fucking kidding? Where you see pictures in the stars, something like a bull or a lion, and that's supposed to predict your future. No chance, it's bollocks. No I don't believe in it". He left the flat and went back in to Gary's.

Ray sat up and looked at the cards.

"Neither do I," he muttered, and stood up and crossed to a window. He opened it and threw the cards out. "Neither do I," he said again, as Lee came back in. He was handed another page from the note-pad.

"Just remind him, nothing else, but if you want to rough him up a bit then that's fine," Lee said with a slight smile before leaving again.

Lee was in his flat for five minutes before another knock came on the door. If that's another fucking pig, he thought, opening the door, to find a balding man of stocky build, with a bag over his shoulder, slightly older than Lee.

"Freddy!" Lee said, rather loudly, and they gave each other a hug. "Fuck man, you're looking well". They exchanged pleasantries, and Lee stepped across to Shane's and knocked on the door, even though it was open. Ray appeared.

"Ray, this is Fred. My mate from when I was inside. He's just left prison. I told him to come and find me when he got out". Ray shook hands with him, but he was one of those people who the second you laid eyes on them, the red light warning flashed in your mind.

This happened with Ray, although he couldn't fathom what it was. Just, okay, I've nothing against you. I don't know or care about you. I'll smile and shake your hand, but that's about it. Something about Fred told Ray to avoid him, but then that same something told Lee he would be a good friend, and that same something would be neutral in somebody else.

"You hungry? I'm just knocking up some brekkie," Lee said, as they went inside the flat, closing the door.

Ray went back to sit on the sofa.

Well Lee's got a new friend, and Caroline's wrapped up with Wayne and the wedding. He looked at the note Lee had given him, and was soon leaving the flat.

It turned out to be another long trip. A bus journey followed by a shorter bus journey, until he found himself in a housing estate, walking along the road looking for the address.

Eventually he found it and walked up the path and tapped lightly on the door. It was soon answered by an elderly lady.

"Hi," he said, "I'm looking for George Derrick". The woman nodded, as though Ray was just another person looking for him. However, she did not cover for him and said exactly where he could be found.

"Gemini function rooms back that way". She pointed up the road. "He left about five minutes ago. He plays darts around this time and there's a competition today. That's where you'll find him". Ray nodded despondently, thanked her and spent twenty minutes finding the place as it was along a pathway and behind high bushes, but it was called 'Desiree's function rooms'. He came across a few parked cars and could hear voices.

There was also muted noise coming from inside the building. Three men were chatting at the boot of a Volkswagen Passat, and Ray cautiously approached. They looked at him as he came near.

"Hi, I'm looking for George Derrick". Two men left and walked to the entrance.

"We'll see you in there George," one of them said. George stood there, a set of darts in one hand. He was smaller than Ray but older, and wore smart but casual clothes, the type from 'trendy' clothing shops.

"Can I help..?"

"I'm just here to remind you of your debt to.."

"My debt! Yes, I'm aware of that, now thank you for reminding me and fuck off". He walked towards the entrance.

"You're overdue and..."

"Yes okay, I'll pay up now go away". George was three metres from the crimson painted double doors of the function rooms when an arrow slammed beside one of the handles. They both stopped. George looked around and as the place was on the fringes of the countryside, there was a hill just across the other side of the pathway, and anyone stood there could look down on them.

Like a Centaur. It was too far away to make out clearly, but still looked exactly like a

man fused with a horse. A man pointing an arrow towards them.

"What the fuck is that?" George said loudly, and the Centaur pulled back the string of the bow, but there was no arrow. They were in its shoulder-back quiver.

George took a dart from the wallet and held one up. The Centaur pulled back the bow. George hurled the dart at Ray's leg. The Centaur released the string.

Ray screamed as the arrow entered his thigh.

"Go on fuck off!" George screamed, taking out another dart. Ray staggered back. George advanced. The Centaur drew back the bow and released it. George threw another dart and it slammed between one of Ray's right ribs. He yelled again and collapsed to the floor, but soon was up again, staggering away.

"Tell Lee he's not getting his money". The Centaur drew back again. George took out another dart. The bow was released, and the man threw the dart and it slammed into Ray's right shoulder below the clavicle. He shouted again and fell to his knees. The Centaur turned and galloped down the hill.

George was standing there confused, looking at Ray, and at his empty darts wallet. Ray managed to stand up, look back at him, and stagger to the car-park entrance.

"Look...I'm sorry..I don't know why I did that," George said, following. Along the pathway, a horse and rider came past. The police-woman, not the same as the one who had given Ray a ride home, looked at him as they passed by and smiled, and continued, turning around a corner.

"That's not like me...I," but Ray just ignored him, and took out all the darts, throwing them to the floor.

A silver Citroen C4 turned onto the pathway and made to go into the car-park, but it stopped about two metres before Ray. The driver wound down the window.

"Get in" he said, "you're late for your court-case".

"Wha..?" the man got out of the car and went around and opened up the back door. Confused and in pain, Ray simply staggered across and got inside.

The man got back in the driver's side and was soon reversing out onto the estate. Ray wanted to ask him who he was and why he was helping him, but instead just said:

"Hospital...take me to th.."

"Your wounds are superficial. Come on you can take them easy," he smiled and

pressed his foot down on the accelerator, speeding above the 30mph limit in the housing estate then out onto a main road where he twisted the steering wheel to the right and the back tyres skidded on the tar-mac. A few other cars beeped their horns, but the man did not stop, instead drove faster.

"Slow down," Ray said, but the man said nothing, focused as he was on the road, his foot pressing down the accelerator. The car hurled through the streets, speeding through red lights, but always avoiding anything. There were near misses. People stepped out into the road, stepped back, cars honked and braked, but the vehicle buckled and twisted its way along streets and was soon at its maximum speed of 112mph. Ray tried to grab onto something as he bumped and jostled, almost forgetting his pain.

"Slow...dow..!" but soon the car was screeching to a halt near the high-rise. The man looked back at Ray.

"Out. The scales of justice are balanced in your favour". Ray reached for the handle, and was soon falling out onto the pavement. The car sped away, around a corner. Aches and pains came back and he crawled for a few feet, before getting up and slowly making his way up the stairs.

In the corridor he found Lee and Fred casually chatting. Lee frowned when he saw Ray and came over.

"You alright, what happened?". Ray leaned against a wall for a few moments, breathing heavily.

"George...said he wasn't going to pay you...and then threw darts at me".

"Darts? Wasn't going to pay up". He looked at Fred. "Fancy a job?" then back at Ray. "Don't worry we'll sort it. Oh, and I think these are yours". He handed him the zodiac cards. Ray just took them and went across to Shane's flat, entered, and threw them in the air, then fell onto the sofa.

After three hours, he was feeling better. There was no pain. He'd showered, changed, had a substantial meal, and was scrolling through the phone internet for further reinforcement of his beliefs.

...not real...fallacy...nonsense... He nodded in agreement. The coincidence argument though, was standing on thin ice.



## Chapter 41

Caroline and Wayne were deep in concentration, sat at the kitchen table either end. Wayne working on making thank-you cards for the guests and Caroline with her well-used notebook and media-pad tablet, trying to organise seating arrangements at the reception.

"We're going to need a guestbook for people to sign when they go in," Caroline said. Wayne leaned back and stretched.

"This wedding is costing a fortune," he said.

"Yes but it'll be worth it," Caroline replied. Wayne smiled and went back to work, when there was a knock on the door.

Caroline answered and found it to be Ray.

"You're still not getting a key," she said, as he walked inside.

"Just thought I'd come and visit, see how things are going. Two weeks now," he said as he walked into the living room.

"Yes it is," Caroline said, "and you are invited and you'd better have a suit. You're mates are still not invited so you'll be sitting with Mum, Dad and Shelley".

A few minutes later he was sat with them at the table while they worked.

"What happened to your friend?" Ray asked.

"He's..well..got charged and is being kept in custody. He'll be up in court".

"Will he be at the wedding?" Wayne simply shrugged and looked to Caroline as if she knew.

"I don't know".

"Thanks for the photographer," Caroline said, "even though he is an amateur student".

"Well, he'll be cheap".

"I told him no. We want a professional, so I've tasked Vanessa with the job". Ray just nodded despondently.

"Anything I can do?" he asked looking at the cards Wayne was making.

"Not really," Caroline said, "except go and find yourself a suit and shoes. Go and rent one from the place in town".

He folded his arms and sighed, unable to get out of it, but not really wanting to.

"Alright, see you later". He left, and Wayne and Caroline continued working.

As he made his way into the town, he received a text message from his work to go in in an hour, so he thought he may as well make his way there now, and spent six hours on his feet, covering for someone, as well as his own duties, so that by the time it came to him 'borrowing' drinks, he felt quite tired, and decided not to go home straight away but find somewhere to drink from a new bottle he had taken, a new brand 'Bronze Anchor'. He wound his way to the park where the funfair had been, near the pond. There were no fishermen, only someone out on the field throwing a ball for a Border Collie to chase.

He slumped on a wood-wormed bench and twisted open the bottle, finding that he didn't really like the new drink, but enough to finish it.

It began to rain, lightly for around ten seconds before it became a downpour, but Ray stayed, shoulders slumped, sipping from the bottle. The dog and owner left the field in the distance.

Lee had his new friend and his business, and Caroline had her man and was consumed by the wedding. No-one cares for poor old Ray, he thought. I'll leave no mark on this earth when I'm gone. I'll just be a fading memory until no-one thinks of me at all. There's hardly any pictures of me. I'm just passing through this life. Here I am. I'll wave, and then I'm gone.

He closed his eyes and slumped to the side, his forehead touching the wooden bench. The rain pounded him, but he didn't care. The bottle fell to the floor and spilled liquid.

Rain hammered and soaked him, and he didn't hear footsteps approach. When he did, he simply opened his eyes. There was somebody standing in front of him. He made out that it was a woman, pensioner, simply standing there looking at him as if somebody lying on a bench was a curious thing.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"No," Ray muttered and slowly sat up straight.

"My name's Virginia," she said, "fancy a walk?" She moved to his left. He wanted to say: 'No, not really,' but the rain continued to soak him, and he stood up and stretched.

He picked up the bag of ill-gotten gains and saw her around ten metres away, looking at him. He walked with her.

"What is it?" he asked, "can I help you?"

"Yes you can help". They walked out of the park. "If you can just follow me. We'll get a taxi to the train shop".

"What?"

"Or a bus to the plane station". Ray simply looked at her, and she smiled as they walked. They crossed a main road, and the rain seemed to ease, but not completely. The woman pointed ahead to a bus-stop which had around eight people waiting.

"Wait here with me for the bus". Most of the people were inside out of the rain, and the woman entered, Ray staying outside. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder.

"I'll be going now...if you", but the woman just gestured for him to come inside. Ray hesitated a few seconds, then walked in to her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"We're gonna get on this bus and go the plane shop, then we're gonna fly to Chile. Then we're gonna climb a mountain, and when it's night-time we're gonna lie there and look up at the stars and we're gonna see the constellation of Virgo and you're gonna fuck me". Some of the others around them glared at her, some moving outside. The woman put her hand down her trousers into her crotch, grinning at him. Other people left until there was two who had pretended not to hear or see. Ray backed away. The woman then put both hands to her head.

"Oh," she said, "I've just realised. If you fuck me I won't be a virgin anymore. Go on, go away". Ray's backing away resulted in him turning around and walking quickly. He could hear her laughing as he did.

Although he walked in the direction of the high-rise, he found himself going down a road he didn't frequent much, and one of the shops along here was a small aquarium. In the window were several tanks of different species, but as he passed by, he noticed that in each tank, there was only two fish, and each of those fish were not swimming around, instead simply floating there, watching him walk by.

"Fuck..!" he muttered, it can't be anything but a coincidence, because the zodiac is not real.

What else could it be? What else could it be? What else could it be? What else could

it be?

He made his way back home and was soon slumping on Shane's sofa.

Lee came in.

"Fred went and sorted out that fella that threw darts at you. Pounded his fucking face in. So he's gonna replace you".

"Alright," Ray said, quietly relieved. "Where's he gone?"

"He's not gonna live here. He's got a wife and kids and all that a few miles away, so he's gone back to them and he's gonna come here most days to help me out, a bit like what Blotto was to Gary".

"Right," Lee then went into the bedroom.

"I think we can get shut of this lot," he said surveying the weapons, and the money around the safe in the open cupboard.

"Ray! come and help me with this". He appeared, and Lee was picking up wads of notes in both hands. "Grab some cash and bring it through to mine".

For a few minutes, they went back and forth carrying the money and putting it on the desk in Lee's 'office'.

He discovered that the small safe in Shane's was not locked, only shut over, and they carried more wads into the flat.

Eventually Ray and Lee were stood looking at the money-covered desk.

"Okay, so I've got all this, plus what I got from the post-office, and what Gary had left out. Now all I need to do is open his safe". The large steel digital keypad safe was behind the desk beneath a window. "And I know it's fucking locked".

"Maybe Fred knows how to open it," Ray said, "or he might know someone". Lee just nodded.

"Yes...possibly". He stepped forward and picked up a wad of notes and handed them to Ray. "Do us a favour. Go and get all our shopping in. Just gets loads of stuff, and you can keep what's left. Fucks knows you don't deserve it but go on, fuck off before I change my mind". Ray did, muttered a thank-you, and turned and left, walking back to Shane's flat.

## Chapter 42

When Fred came back, he brought a friend with him. Lester Caldwell was a reedy individual who seemed to epitomise the word 'sly'. Some people just looked untrustworthy and that was Lester. The type who ducked and dived his way through life, cutting corners, getting everything he could for free, and selling anything that had at least one pennies value. The type who would sell his Grandmother's false-teeth to buy a cigarette.

Lee had no choice but to allow him in.

"Lee, this is Les. You mentioned you needed a safe-cracker, so Les here knows a bit about opening them".

"Oh, right, okay". Lee brought him through to show him, but Les walked slowly, looking at the surroundings. The televisions, the tablets, money that Lee had not put away which was lying around. He gave Fred a knowing glance as if to say: 'You were right'.

So Les looked at the safe. He had only ever managed to open one before, and that was because somebody else had tried and failed before him, and had loosened the lock. This was a digital passcode safe, and he could tell straight away this wasn't going to be cracked anytime soon. Les always talked himself up, but mostly fell short on delivery.

"Oh it's one of those safes," he said, "shouldn't be a problem. I've seen these before". He proceeded to push buttons on the keypad, look around it, size it up, as if he knew what he was doing.

"Gonna need special tools though, but don't worry I can get hold of them". Lee's red light in his mind flashed, but he wasn't in a position to express his doubt. Maybe he really could get the safe open.

Fred and Les stayed awhile until there was a knock on the door, a customer, and they left.

Out in the car-park, Fred whispered to Les, as if Lee could somehow hear from there.

"See, told you he's got loads of stuff. I know there's no fucking way you're getting into that safe, but I know you can get hold of horse tranquiliser and a van," Les nodded. Fred continued:

"When you've got it, I'll have a drink with him, spike his drink and when he's knocked out you can get the van and we'll clean the place out".

"Sixty forty," said Les. "I'm getting the tranquiliser and the van".

"Yes, and who told you about it in the first place? Fifty-fifty, take it or leave it". Les thought for a few moments, even though he knew exactly what he was going to say.

"Okay. I'll get the tranquiliser".

"Yes. Today. Now. I want it as soon as possible".

"Okay, I'll get it and text you". He then left. Fred watched him go, then walked away also.

What to get for a wedding present, Ray thought. They'll probably get enough irons and toasters and cutlery sets, so what can I get that's different? Wine maybe. Not sure if Wayne drinks it, but Caroline does. So he guessed the next time he was at work, he would try and steal the most expensive bottle they had, and perhaps a few glasses. Shouldn't be too difficult, he thought, satisfied.

Still though, they didn't sell suits, so he would have to fork out, and wound up in the flat and left, heading for the small tailors that catered for all occasions. He would probably have to be fitted out, so took some of the money Lee gave him and headed into town.

Ten minutes later he could see it in the distance, but passed by a charity shop. There was a mannequin in the window wearing a black shawl dinner suit.

Fuck it, he thought, it'll save messing around getting fitted, and it looks like it'll fit me, so he entered, and five minutes later was in the dressing room nodding to himself in the mirror doing up the cuffs. Not bad, not bad. Pretty smart. It was one size too small, but it looked like nobody would notice.

He decided he would keep it on and go and show Caroline, and would ask for a bag for his other clothes. An elderly woman was ahead of him, being served. As he waited he looked at a shelf of paraphernalia. Puzzle sets, coasters, dvd box-sets. What he didn't notice however, was the scorpion that left his top pocket and crawled onto his shoulder. The lady serving glanced at him as she served the woman and her eyes widened and she pointed.

"Sir, there's a Scorpio on you shoulder".

"What?" Ray looked and there it was, a bark scorpion. He flinched and swept it off, but swepted it towards the counter. Both women flinched also. The customer screamed as it seemed she had a phobia of crawlies, and would have screamed had it been a lady-bird or butterfly.

Then more came out of the pockets and crawled over him.

"What the fuck?" he said flapping around, trying to swat them off. He twirled and crashed into a rail of coats.

"Scorpios!" the woman screamed as she headed for the exit. "Scorpios!"

"Take it," the woman said behind the counter, as scorpions started crawling around the shop.

"Take the suit and go". Ray didn't need telling twice. He staggered his way to the exit as more scorpions left the pockets.

Out on the pavement, the creatures scuttled in all directions, and still they came, crawling over him as he frantically swatted at them. People shouted and back away.

"Scorpios!" somebody yelled, and Ray fell to his knees when it seemed like the last scorpion left his top pocket, scuttled down his arm and away on the pavement.

He was breathing heavily, then got to his feet, gathered his bearings and made his way gradually towards Carolines. He tentatively tried to check all the pockets on his way, and was soon satisfied that there were no more.

There must have been a nest or something that got disturbed, he thought. Shouldn't clothes be checked by the charity workers before putting them out on display? then decided that a free suit was a free suit.

Ten minutes later Caroline was sat at the gazebo, her hands over her face in despair.

"So let me get this straight," she said, looking at Ray in the back garden, stood there in the suit. "You stole a suit from a charity shop because it had scorpions in it".

"No I didn't steal it, the woman said I could have it".

"Because it's got scorpions in. You took the suit because it had scorpions in the pockets. Are you serious?"

"Yes, there was loads of them. Must have been a nest inside or something".

"Sounds like you said it had scorpions in the pockets, the one serving believed you, and you walked out with a free suit. It sounds exactly like you stole from a charity shop to me". Ray sighed.

"I was gonna pay...anyway, any chance you could wash it. There might still be eggs inside it or whatever".

"What happened to your other clothes?"

"They're still in the shop. I was too busy trying to get scorpions off me to think of them". Caroline said nothing for a few moments, then leaned back in the chair.

"Why couldn't you just have gone to a proper tailor and rented a proper suit?"

"Well they probably would have charged loads and I saw this in the charity window".

"Couldn't you have afforded a tailor? My big day and you still have to get things on the cheap. You can't help it can you Ray? and it's too small anyway," she said, looking down at his one inch of socks below the hemline.

"Leave it here," she sighed, "I'll make sure it's got no scorpions in and that it gets a proper wash. You've still got clothes in the cupboard upstairs, go and change into them". Ray smiled.

"Any chance of a cuppa when I come back down?"

She had tasked him with picking up shoes, and he had every intention of buying not necessarily expensive, but new ones, so he found himself in a shoe shop, surveying those that would go with the suit. He didn't want to go traipsing around shopping so black pebble-grain shoes would do, and he could barely look at the price, but decided to just pay it and keep Caroline quiet.

He asked a spotty young assistant who looked like he had just come out of sixth-form for his size, and was soon sitting down trying them on. He slid his foot inside, only to receive a sharp sting.

"Ahh what the fuck!" he shouted and watched as a scorpion came out of the shoe.

...and out of the other one.

The other customers and workers all looked in his direction.

"Scorpions," said one. They scuttled across the shop floor. There must have been at least ten or fifteen that emerged from both shoes, causing ruckus in the shop as people



shouted and yelled and jumped up on chairs or stamped on them. Some scuttled over Ray who tried to shake them off and succeeded.

"They were in the fucking shoes," he shouted as the worker came back red-faced.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry sir, I don't know how that happened". They had stopped emerging, but were still causing panic by the other customers.

"Sir have the shoes as an apology".

"Fuckin' right I will," he said, picking them up and inspecting them for scorpions. Satisfied there were no more, he left the shop, and limped his way back to the high-rise.

Some of the scorpions must have still been on him somehow and dropped into the shoes.

He wasn't satisfied by that. Maybe he had eggs on him, and they fell into the shoes and then hatched, yet would have to have been fairly big eggs, as each of the scorpions was around 2-3 inches.

It can't have been a coincidence that there were scorpions in the suit, and in the shoes. That means there must be scorpions in other clothes. Maybe there's an infestation.

That could be it, either they're the ones from the suit that stayed on him without him knowing and fell into the shoes, or there's a scorpion infestation, because there was also a load of them in the other supermarket. That's it, it's got to be a plague of them or something. There could be loads in clothes all over the place. Not my problem though, he thought. Others can sort it out.

He was soon entering Shane's flat.

It wasn't long before he was hearing curious noises from outside, a strange clicking and snapping, coming from further down. He stepped out to see Les hunched near the door of Lee's office. It looked like he was trying to get in.

He must have heard Ray stepping out because he looked with wide-eyes at him, caught out, but Ray didn't quite fathom that he was trying to break in, but just looked at him with curiosity. It was Les who spoke first:

"I'm a friend of Lee's. I was just seeing if he was in".

"Not sure. He's in and out a lot". Les felt the need to follow up with some sort of

excuse as to why he was there.

"I was er..just going to ask him whether there was a flat available here". He pointed to Ray's old place with the broken-in door.

"Is...this one available?" Ray believed him, but remembered he had not cleaned up Nugget's blood and viscera and decided to do it there and then once Les had gone.

"No, not at the moment, but it will probably be available soon". Les just nodded, and pursued it no further. He thanked Ray and left.

Outside, he looked at the text he had received earlier from Fred. Him and Lee were out on a debt collection job and Fred had asked him to try and break in so they could make a start on taking the money, although he had no van as yet. He would text when they were on the way back so Les could get out of there and maybe lock up if possible. His friend who did have a van told him he could borrow it in the afternoon and wanted twenty quid. An argument ensued, but Les was still getting the van although he never said why.

He had tasked a friend with acquiring the 'horse tranquiliser' who took no prisoners when it came to taking what he wanted. Les had promised him a hundred pounds and more if what he had in mind came off, which he intended to pay if it was job done, if they cleared Lee's place, but if something happened and they didn't, he wouldn't be speaking to him for a while. He would basically be avoiding him, even though his friend was a violent person, he was rather dim-witted, and promising him things and saying it would come good always usually had the desired effect.

Les didn't know what tranquiliser to get so asked his friend to go and get something that would 'knock out a horse'. As it turned out, he had found out where a mobile vets was parked up, threatened the vet with 'smashing his fucking face in' if he didn't give him something that would knock out a horse. He had given him a bottle of Etorphine, and the man punched the vet in the stomach anyway, then ran away, giving Les the bottle on his promise of paying up when the job was done.

Two hours later when Lee and Fred came back, Lee paid no attention to the blue van in the car-park, the one with Les hunched up in the drivers' seat. Fred told Lee he was just popping to the shop and would be back in five minutes. Les got out of the van.

"There you are," Fred said, "you'd better have it". Les just handed him the bottle.

"Get on with it," he said, "the owner of this van wants it back later".

"What, no we need it longer. We store some of it in your place and some of it in one

of those storage places". Les shrugged.

"Whatever, just get on with it," he said, waving him away.

"Think I might just take a hundred percent," Fred muttered, "and give you a smack in the face". He turned and entered the high-rise. Les just sat back in the van and hunkered down.

It wasn't too long before Lee suggested coffee, and Fred insisted that he would make it. Lee just shrugged and continued trying and failing to evade a password screen on one of the laptops.

Fred did not know how much Etorphine to administer, so simply poured the whole lot in Lee's cup and was soon putting the coffee on his table.

"Ta," he said, "I'm gonna have to buy a proper computer. I'll have to see what Gary's got in his lock-ups, and I'm gonna need his wifi code". Fred slowly sat down, tense, on edge, watching as Lee struggled with the laptop whilst drinking the coffee.

It didn't take long for it to have an effect, and before he slumped backward he seemed to understand what Fred had done. He glared at him and slurred: "What the fu..?" before his eyes rolled back and he fell off the chair. Fred leaped up, went round the desk and punched him hard in the face just to make sure he was out, and grabbed some of the money that was lying around, hurrying out and down to Les, who the second he saw him left the van.

"Get back in and turn it round. Back it up against the door. Lee's out and I don't know how long for. Let's just hurry the fuck up". He threw the notes into the open drivers side window and went back inside.

Although Les could drive, he did not have much experience in handling vans, so sometimes stuttered and stalled or would rev the engine too much whilst going nowhere. He managed to manoeuvre it around so it was backed up near the entrance and leapt out to go and help.

Ray stepped out of his flat. "What's going on?" he asked as Fred came out with fistsfuls of money.

"Nothing, shut the fuck up and get back inside". Les appeared and although was usually loathe to get physical, the situation called for him to push Ray back inside the flat and reiterate what Fred had just said.

"Stay in there and keep your fucking mouth shut". Even though Ray could probably overcome Les in a fight, he simply nodded and backed away. He certainly would not be able to overcome Fred.

They're robbing Lee, he guessed, but he was in there wasn't he? They must have done something to him. Ray felt helpless. He thought for a fleeting moment to call the police, but then realised Lee would not thank him for it, so he simply walked across to the living room window and watched as Les and Fred filled the van with money and goods from Lee's 'office'.

It sounded like they were struggling out in the corridor.

"...why the fuck are tellys always so heavy..?" moaned Les stepping slowly down the stairs. They managed three televisions, putting them beside the van to put in at the end, and gathered the tablets that Gary had amassed and dropped a few as they put them in the back. Also an acoustic guitar. Les was breathing heavily, leaning against the van. Fred was also rather exhausted with his hands on his hips.

"Few more things, then we're gonna need to get the safe". Fred simply nodded, then was startled as something slammed into the side of the van.

"What the fuck?" He turned around and could not help but say it again:

"What...the fuck?" A Ram stood there watching them.

Les came round to see. "Where did that come from?" he asked. They apprehensively looked at each other seeking explanation. It walked towards them and reared up, taller than Fred who was six feet two, and slammed into his chest. He hit the wall beside the main entrance, then it turned and ran at Les who put his hands up as if to stop it but it just tossed him into the air and he fell to the tar-mac, cracking his head. It turned back to Fred.

Ray watched wide-eyed, opening the window so he could lean out. The Ram's hard keratin curled horns slammed into his chest again, breaking the ribs, then again before he had a chance to slide down the wall, stopping his heart for a few seconds before it began pumping again. When he did slide down, the Ram backed away around a metre, then hurtled itself at his face, smashing his nose and teeth and fracturing his skull, splitting his jawbone.

Les was on his knees, and the Ram hurled at and slammed into him, his ribs splintering. He lay on his back, groaning. The animal stepped across and put its hoof into his mouth pressing down, taking his front four teeth with it, crushing his tongue, his tonsils, choking him. It pressed harder, Les convulsing, trying desperately to

remove it from his mouth. The Ram took it out, and he rolled over choking, coughing, blood spilling out onto the tar-mac.

The Ram backed away and stopped, angled its head so it was clearly looking up at Ray, then turned and ran, out of sight beyond a corner.

Ray closed the window, but could hear the moans of Fred and Les. Then he heard another moan, coming from Lee's place.

"Shit...Lee!" he said, and dashed in to find him holding his head, trying to get up behind the desk.

"Lee are you okay? I'll need to call an ambulance".

"Ray...fuckin..Fred..cunt...fuckin..spiked me..I'll...be okay...don't you fuckin..dare..call an ambul..." However, in the distance, sirens came closer. One of several passers-by who had observed what had happened had immediately rang them, even before the Ram had turned on Les.

"You called them...you fuc..." but then the effort was too much, and he fell back.

"I didn't, honestly Lee I didn't," but then Ray made a rapid decision. He could do without the hassle of ambulances and police, so backed away, turned and headed for the exit before the paramedics showed up. He managed to get far enough away, and watched as an ambulance screeched to a halt outside the high-rise. He turned a corner, and walked quickly into the town.

He found he still had his wallet, so didn't hesitate to find a pub and sit drinking his favourite pint. As he relaxed, an elderly man approached him.

"Can I buy you a pint of water sir?" Rays frown was his answer.

"I'm the water-bearer you see".

"No..no thanks". The man simply turned and walked away.

## Chapter 43

He didn't want to go back to the high-rise. Not for a while, but the thought of asking Caroline to stay was daunting, but she couldn't refuse him, and getting in the way of her and Wayne was not something he wished for either. Yet, where can I go? he asked

himself. Put up with interrogation, not just from the police at the flats, or face his sister who would flat out refuse to let him stay. Knowing he may have to play the 'but it's half my house' card, so finished up his pint and slowly made his way there.

To find no answer. They would both be at work. He'd only ever visited her workplace once, and that was when she started, but now he knew he would have to go there, find her and persuade her to give him the front door key so he could go and get one made, and stay for a few days.

It took a long and stuffy bus-ride, with a large gentleman in a flat-cap taking up three-quarters of the seat pressing him against the window, but eventually he was relieved to be stepping off and reluctantly heading into the garden centre, which was bigger than he remembered.

He wandered by garden ornaments. His eye was caught by what looked like a maiden holding a sheaf of wheat. Next to her was a crudely carved Lion. Behind that was a stone bull. There were also several pairs of fish dotted around. There were no other kinds.

He frowned and walked away from them, through the outdoor furniture and just beyond the artificial plants to customer services, where he waited in a small queue to ask to see Caroline.

He was told to wait at the side and five minutes later she came out, looking rather harangued, as if she had been in a tough business meeting.

"You alright?" Ray asked.

"Yes, just in a business meeting with bosses who are trying to make changes. It's all...oh nevermind, what is it?"

"Erm...well. Just for a couple of days. Can I stay at the house?"

"No," she said, and made to move away.

"Please. It's been mental back at the flats and Lee's annoyed with me, I just need a place to stay for a couple of days".

"Nope, me and Wayne are up our ears in the wedding, so I'm afraid you'll have to sort it out with Lee".

So then he played his card.

He was quite surprised she didn't resist further. Instead she just sighed and took from her pocket the keys, unhooked the front door key and handed it him.

"I need that back before I leave at five". So he thanked her, and also mentally thanked the bosses out the back for seemingly wearing her down. With whatever her superiors were saying, and the wedding preparations, now was as good a time as he was going to get to get back into the spare room, or the sofa, at least for a short while.

He was not familiar with this part of town, so spent around ten minutes finding a key-cutter, and was soon making his way back to the garden-centre. She took another few minutes to come back out.

"That was quick," she said, "but it's only for a few days though. Promise". Ray nodded emphatically and gave her the key back.

On the bus-ride back, around halfway it pulled up at red lights, and he had the seat to himself. A biker pulled up alongside and looked at him. She got off and stepped across to his window. In all the gear, helmet and high-vis jacket, she looked to be in her late twenties, and banged on Ray's window. The other passengers all looked in that direction.

"My name is Virginia," she said loudly, "Please fuck me. Fuck my pussy. Oh hang on...if you fuck me I won't be virgin any more". The lights turned to amber, then green, and the bus pulled away. He saw Virginia looking confused as she got back onto her bike.

He was soon inserting the new key into the door, and had the house to himself. Not hesitating to make himself a cup of tea.

In the evening, Caroline explained to Wayne that Ray was up in the spare room. Wayne could only react with disappointment, and lowered his voice incase Ray heard.

"Caroline...we can't have him staying. He'll just...get in the way".

"I know, but I can't really refuse him, and he said it's just for a few days".

"A few days?...but how are we supposed to...you know..I'm not going to feel comfortable with him in the next room".

"No. Nor am I, he better had leave soon".

In the morning, Caroline was up and out early. There were two staff meetings she

needed to attend so left in plenty of time. Wayne though, was in the cafe at ten am, so was in no rush. He came down to find Ray watching television with his feet up.

"Alright," he said, as he went through to make breakfast. He was soon sitting at the table with his bowl of apple-blueberry granola until he realised there was something Ray could help him with, so he took his breakfast and sat in the armchair.

"Ray," he said, "I'm wondering if you could help me out with my wedding speech. Have you got any funny stories, or things about Caroline I could say?". Ray simply smiled and turned off the television.

He thought for a while, then said: "When she was about five, there was a time we all went to the supermarket, and Caroline was in the ice-cream section, and because the freezer was so big, she was reaching in to grab something, but fell inside. The manager was close-by but instead of rushing to help, he just burst out laughing". Wayne smiled and nodded.

"Or there was another time, her and Vanessa in college, or uni were good at tennis. They played doubles and reached the semi-finals of some important cup or something. Did she tell you that?" Wayne nodded.

"Yes," he said, "she's mentioned it a few times".

"Or back in her early twenties I think, one of her other friends, her parents were having some posh do to celebrate their wedding anniversary. The 30th or whatever, and they were having it at some local golf club. So Caroline got herself all dolled up. Posh dress, new hairdo, and got a taxi to the club, but the driver made a wrong turn and parked up near one of the greens. He couldn't find the entrance so Caroline said it was alright, she'd walk from there, so when she got out of the taxi, it sped off, leaving her to walk across the grass. But then it started to rain, and I mean rain. It was an absolute downpour. So she ran to the club, but by the time she got there she was drenched. Soaked to the bone. She had to change, but there was nothing but some of the jackets or whatever the chefs have to wear. So she spent the whole night looking like she worked in the kitchen". Wayne smiled.

"Yes, I think I can use that. And, is there any pictures of her? Embarrassing ones that I could use. I was thinking of copying some and putting them up at the reception".

Ray remembered that in the back of the cupboard in the main bedroom, there used to be a shoe-box of photographs, and wondered if perhaps something was in there he could use.

However, because of where it was, he was quite reluctant to simply go in there now,



such was the sacrosanct nature of the most private room in any household. It seemingly belonged to Caroline and Wayne now, and he almost felt like asking permission to enter.

"I think there's some in...your bedroom in the cupboard". Wayne stood up and beckoned him.

"Whereabouts?" he led him up and into the bedroom. Ray opened the cupboard and found that the box was not where he thought it was, but in the next cupboard along, at the back of a large drawer.

He took it out and placed it on the floor. Wayne looked at his watch.

"Alright. I need to skidaddle. At least I know where they are. Will you put them back in the same place?"

"Ye," Ray said, and Wayne left. He picked a few out. His parents having a cocktail on the balcony of a hotel in Valencia with sunglasses and a background of deep blue sea.

Shelley and one of her friends standing on a sand dune.

His parents, Caroline, Shelley and Ray all together when it was his Fathers 60th birthday celebrations in the foyer of a local social club which had now closed. Ray smiled at the memories. Everyone together. Happy.

A time before his parents grew more and more disappointed with him. A time when he still had good prospects, before they went down the sink. When they were still semi-proud of him.

Perhaps this would make a good wedding present, he thought. She probably hasn't seen it for ages. Maybe years, so I could present it in a good frame. Not a tacky one from the supermarket, but maybe get it made specially.

He hid it under his spare bed, and when Caroline and Wayne were back in the evening, he was sat at the table with his arms folded while they continued finalising their wedding.

"Wayne," Caroline said, "could you please find something for Ray to do".

"But there's nothing left. Everything's done...oh hang on, yes, there is one thing. I've written out a play-list for the DJ to play at my stag-do, but I can't email because he's one of those guys that doesn't use computers, only plays vinyl. Could you go and give him the list for me". Ray sighed.

"Alright," he said, better than facing Lee anyway, he thought. "The stag-do. What is it you're doing?"

"We're having a river cruise down the Thames. It'll be relaxing as the DJ plays seventies instrumental rock".

"Right. What about you Caroline?"

"Me and the girls are going on a spa break in a country mansion hotel. We're just gonna chill and be pampered. It'll be great".

"So where can I find this DJ?"

"He'll probably be on one of the boats on the Thames. That's where he works".

"Okay. I'll do it tomorrow".

He found that it was easier to get a train, and wasn't happy about paying the fare himself, but said nothing and sat by the window for the fifteen minute journey into London.

Along the way there were graffitied walls gliding by.

'Gemini' 'Gemini' 'Gemini' he saw in various colored font styles and felt the thin ice of his lack of belief cracking more, but it held.

A long walk through the streets eventually brought him to the riverside, which gave him another walk of around a mile before he eventually found the cruise boat he sought moored near a bridge. As he approached, he could hear music. 1920s ragtime, where a small group of pensioners were chatting, dressed up in suits stood close to the walkway which led aboard.

'Guests only' said a small sign hanging from a steel railing, and Ray guessed that all he had to do was walk on, find the DJ station, leave Wayne's play-list if the DJ wasn't there, or give it to one of the staff. So Ray simply walked aboard, a few people looking at him, guests. They had no idea whether he had the right to walk on or not. He could be staff for all they knew, so said nothing.

There was a function going on, a tea-dance, and the music was coming from the top-deck. He wound his way up there to find a dance-floor with couples sashaying around to the music, a small crowd clapping them. Ray guessed it must be a dancing club or society who were having an outing or event. He found the DJ who had two decks either side of a mixer.

The man looked to be in his early sixties, drinking from a carton of pineapple juice as the music played and he surveyed the dancefloor.

"Excuse me," said Ray. The DJ saw him and put down the carton, stepping across and angling his ear to Ray who raised his voice slightly.

"Are you the DJ that's doing the function for a stag-do on the weekend for a Wayne..." he forgot he didn't know Wayne's second name. "Wayne. He's having a stag-do on here at the weekend. Are you the DJ?" The man thought for a second.

"Yes. Yes that's me," he said, and Ray gave him the piece of paper and the man just looked at it, then nodded. "Alright, thanks," Ray went to walk away, but then the music stopped and the DJ spoke into a microphone.

"There he goes, Pisces cunt. One tough nut to crack". The dancers stopped. The audience ceased to clap, but then the dancing couples stood closer together and started stepping around each other as if in some sort of artistic contemporary dance.

"Okay, each couple will represent two fish, and they will swim around and around each other," said the DJ, and they did. The couples stepped and spun. The audience outside the dance-floor looked confused, not knowing what was going on, but onward they stepped and around they went as Ray made his way slowly to the exit. The couples then gradually stopped, and looked at each other confused.

"What, oh, er sorry," said the DJ, and the ragtime music started up again. Ray walked slowly back to the train station, and was soon again sat at a window seat. The graffiti came again on the other side. 'Gemini'...'Gemini'...

Eventually when he got back to familiar territory, he decided he would go back to Caroline's to pick up the photograph.

There was nobody in when he got there, so he made himself another cup of tea, helped himself to some food, texted Caroline to tell Wayne he'd given the DJ his list, took the photograph from beneath the bed and thought he had to go and face Lee at some time, so left the house, closing the door behind him.

All the way home, it wasn't the prospect of facing Lee that played on his mind, but the zodiac had his lack of belief hanging by a thread.

There was always a rational explanation. It's got to be science and nothing else, he thought, and plenty of people thought that way, he guessed. Perhaps he needed another rout through the phone to reinforce his beliefs.

As he neared the high-rise, a youth was on a mobile phone, walking in the opposite direction, talking loudly:

"What was that Leo? plenty of people believe. More than you would think. Those that don't may be a toy. A piece on our giant board-game. We will have fun with them". Ray just stopped and looked at him as he walked past. He took out his phone and while he waited for the internet to come on, his mind just repeated: Coincidence coincidence coincidence...

Then the scientists on his small screen and the sceptics reassured him as he made his way up the stairs. He put the photograph in Shane's and felt a shot of adrenalin as he knew he would have to face Lee.

He found him in his 'office'. His empty office, standing staring at the safe, the only thing the police didn't take.

"Here he is," Lee said, "the fucking grass".

"I didn't grass Lee. I didn't call an ambulance".

"Look, when I woke up after that cunt Fred spiked my coffee, I saw you and you mentioned an ambulance, and then what happens? an ambulance and police car show up and cart me and everything away. I went to the hospital to get checked, then I spent the night in a fucking cell because you called an ambulance".

"I didn't Lee honest".

"Just like you didn't throw a phone at Gary. Fucks sake Ray do you take me for a fucking idiot?" Ray just sighed in despair.

"I can't trust you Ray," Lee continued. "I want to but I can't". There was a moments silence.

"Why would they take everything but the safe?" Ray asked.

"Don't know. Two fucking pigs tried to carry it, and found it too heavy I think, so they left it. Actually I remember one of them saying something about scales of justice...not balanced in Ray's favour. Oh yes, I remember thinking why did he mention your name? but they took everything else, like, everything. Nothing here is worth fuck-all now. Probably thanks to you".

"Lee it must have been someone else 'cos it wasn't me".

"Oh just get out! go on fuck off!" Lee yelled, waving him away. Ray complied, and sheepishly walked back into Shane's flat.

## Chapter 44

Ray was soon leaving the flat, picture in hand, heading into town. He was seriously tempted to just buy a cheap frame and put it in, but resisted, and it wasn't long before he was entering a framers inside a little gallery that sold giclee prints and some originals with a side business of framing.

It was fairly small inside, the type of shop where it was difficult to browse because the person behind the counter would just watch you, or ask if you needed any help the second you stepped inside. As Ray approached the shop, he saw that several pictures in the window featured bulls. In fact, he noticed, they all did.

Walking in, a little bell above the door jangled, and all the pictures inside also featured bulls.

He stopped and looked around at them for a few moments, a sinking feeling inside him, then got the framer to choose a good frame for him.

As the photograph was six by eight inches, there was already several styles of frames ready-made, and the framer picked out one that he thought would work nicely.

"...and this will complement the photo nicely.."

"It'll what? doesn't matter, looks good," Ray said holding it in both hands. It was fairly big for the size of the photograph with a cream mount. He left, glancing at the bull pictures as he went.

Back at the high-rise, he found a painted over nail on the wall in the kitchen and hung the picture up, standing back to admire it.

He was still admiring it a few minutes later when Lee walked and saw it.

"What's this?"

"It's my wedding present to Caroline. She gets married on the weekend".

"Great," Lee muttered, "anyway, I need your help. A favour, and you'd better do it if you want me to believe you're not a grass".

"Lee, I didn't..."

"Nevermind. Fred and Les are still alive, and in intensive care in the hospital. We're

gonna pay them a visit. I heard they got fucked up by a Ram".

"Yes, they did. I saw it. See, there must have been witnesses who saw it as well, so someone told you a Ram attacked them. Someone else must have called an ambulance".

"You'd still better help me get revenge on those fuckers. I'm not gonna kill them, I'm just gonna make sure that they stay in hospital a lot longer. I want you to conceal a knife".

"Lee! No, I won't do it. If I get caught then I can't go the wedding and how's that gonna look on me? The whole family's coming up and if they know I took a knife into a hospital they'll disown me".

"They already think you're a useless fuckwit so it won't make much difference. Look, I'm still not convinced you didn't grass me up, get the ambulance here knowing they would bring the police, so prove it to me and just do this one thing. All you have to do is conceal it. I'll deal with them, you're just taking the weapon in. That's it. If I get caught with it then my ass is getting chucked back inside, but if you get caught you'll just get a caution or something. Come on Ray just do this one thing for me". Ray's shoulders slumped.

"Alright," he muttered. "when?"

"Now". Lee went into the bathroom and looked through the blades in the bath.

"Think I'll stab them in the thigh. Or maybe the shoulder. Or slash them a few times on the face. Fuck it I'll just decide when I'm there". He picked out a four-inch paring knife.

Back in the kitchen, Ray was shrugging on his jacket and Lee handed him the knife.

"See, it's not that big you can easily conceal that". Ray just took it and put it in his inside pocket.

They hardly spoke as they walked down to the hospital, Ray gradually becoming more and more apprehensive, his face colouring slightly more red, unnoticed by anyone.

"How are you gonna find them?" Ray asked.

"Intensive care shouldn't be too hard to find".

"They're not just gonna let you in are they? unless you're family or whatever".

"Fuck, they might have a police guard," said Lee. "Fred had just got out of prison and was caught stealing from me, so chances are there's a copper up there as well".

"Look Lee, if you wanna take the knife then..." but Lee just headed towards the hospital grounds, and Ray hurried after him.

Nobody paid them any attention as they walked into Accident and Emergency. That was except for a nurse who was helping a teenager slowly get up from a plastic chair. Spying Lee she dropped the patient who crashed down and cried out.

She hurried across to them.

"Are you here for those criminals up in intensive care?" She looked at Ray's jacket where the knife was concealed and smiled.

"Because you go down the corridor, turn right, and take the lift to the fifth floor. Turn right again when you're there. They're towards the back. There's a policeman there though. Go easy on them. Nah, whatever, do what you like, so says Leo". She then looked rather confused, and hurried back across to the patient who was struggling to get back on the chair.

Lee just stared at her, then at Ray.

"Strange," he said, "how did she know? Who the fuck's Leo?" Ray sighed.

"Let's just go," he said, and Lee followed him, past day surgery, past a pharmacy, past orthopaedic outpatients and around to the lift, which was a smooth ride up to the fifth floor.

When the doors slid open, there he was in a plastic chair, reading a newspaper, the over-weight moustachioed policeman.

"If I can't get past him, sneak past, go in and stab the cunts," Lee whispered.

"What!" but Lee approached the entrance. The policeman put down his paper and stood up. As he looked to where he was placing it Lee glanced at Ray and nodded to the entrance.

"Lee Sherwin," the man said, "I recognise you".

"Fuck".

Ray found himself at the double-door entrance with an intercom. He felt he could do nothing but press the button. Either he stood there and did nothing, in which case Lee would berate and possibly assault him later on. Or he could go inside and do nothing. Tell him he'd bottled it. Lee would believe him, because he would be right.

"Hello," came a metallic voice.

"Hi, I've come to see Fred and Les".

"They can't have visitors". Opposite the intensive care unit was the entrance to operation theatres, and a doctor came out and went across to the double doors. He pressed his card against a sensor and both doors opened.

Lee saw his chance and aimed a fist at the policeman's jaw, knocking him crashing against the chair making him fall to one knee. He rushed at Ray, putting his hand in his inside pocket, but also causing him to stumble to the floor.

"The knife, give me the knife!" he said as he took it out of the pocket and ran into the unit.

There were six beds, three on either side, four of them occupied.

"Fred. Les you cunts where are you?" he shouted. Nurses shied away.

"Fred, Les!" he looked at the other occupants but found who he was looking for at the farthest beds, opposite each other. He hurried across to one.

Fred was tubed and bandaged up, linked to various machines and monitors. He was awake and looked wide-eyed at Lee as he wielded the knife.

"There you are you cunt!". A blue sheet covered Fred up to his chest. Lee stabbed him in the thigh twice. Fred yelled out, even though he had a breathing tube in his mouth. He rushed across to Les and managed to stab him in the thigh once before the policeman tackled him. He allowed himself to be arrested, and shouted at them as he was marched out.

"That's what you get you cunts, that's what you fucking get!" Ray was kneeling on the floor, almost crying. Images of Caroline and Wayne went through his head. How far away he was from being in the same boat as them. Someone to love. Someone to spend the rest of your life with. Instead of being a yes-man to the likes of Lee. Instead of drinking and smoking away his sorrows. Find a woman, marry her, maybe have kids, or just ride through life together, holding hands. Such wishful thinking. Then he did burst into tears.

For most of the rest of the day he was in for questioning, but then satisfied, they let him go. Asking why he was there, asking about Lee. His mind was not geared up to lie, to cover for Lee. Instead he told the truth, because he knew that was the fastest way out of there. Lee could have been justified in calling him a grass, but he didn't deliberately talk him down, simply told it like it was, and it was almost a relief to speak about it,



because perhaps Lee was now going back inside, and Ray, deep down, knew he would be happy with that.

However, when he got back, he saw Lee's 'office' open, and cautiously went inside.

To find Lee sitting on the safe.

"Lee!"

"I don't get it. I was on the way to the station in a van, and then it stopped. The police all told me to get out, I need to keep annoying Ray. That was what they said. Keep annoying Ray, the scales of justice are in his favour, and that was it. Like when I killed Blotto, but I don't understand".

Ray slowly made his way back into Shane's flat, and on the table, there was the zodiac cards. The Libra card on top.

## Chapter 45

Ray lay on the sofa with a fist against his forehead, his eyes scrunched. The zodiac is not real, he thought, but then his thoughts were disturbed by a banging on the door. He wound his way up. More banging.

"Ray open up". It was Lee. When the door was opened he walked in and into the bedroom.

"I think I'll use one of these shotguns," he said, surveying the weapons, picking out a Remington 870 Express tactical. "No-one's gonna argue with this," he said, pumping the barrel.

"What are you doing?" Ray asked.

"I need money. I'm gonna hit another post-office, and you're gonna help me".

"What Lee no. I already helped you at the hospital".

"Look, we could both do with money. The fucking pigs took all mine so I'm gonna do a post-office and I only want you on lookout. It's not like I'm asking you to shoot anyone. Just keep dixie. That's it".

"Come on Lee, if I get caught...the wedding".

"I'm the one in the balaclava with the shotgun. All you're doing is keeping lookout, stopping people from coming in. If you get caught then nothing's gonna happen. Just say you're a member of the public. That's all you've got to do. Fucks sake Ray. Are you gonna help me or not?"

Ornotornotornotornotornotornotornot..! his mind screamed.

"Fine," he muttered. Lee turned the shotgun at Ray's face and pulled the trigger. It clicked on an empty barrel. Ray flinched and stumbled back. Lee punched him in the shoulder.

"Come on," he said, "I won't hit the same one as last time. There's another one I've got in mind. They usually close at five. And closing time is a good time to hit them. Not as many customers and all their heads are on going home. So they won't be expecting a fucking shotgun in the face". Lee gathered the bullets, then cautiously looked out of the flat to make sure there were no other residents to see him with the weapon, and went into his own flat and grabbed the bag and balaclava.

They were soon heading out to a nearby bus-stop. Ray just had his hands jammed in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. Lee just looked at him and shook his head. There was nobody else around them.

"You're just keeping dixie," he said, but Ray didn't reply. The bus turned up and they were soon sat at the back, journeying the four miles south to a post-office Lee had hit before.

Ray was still quiet. Lee had his arms folded.

"So, your sister's getting married to that hippy fucker". Don't call hi...thought Ray, but still said nothing.

"Fuck knows what she sees in him".

"She loves him," Ray said.

"Well whatever. Actually, tell you what," he said, "what a pair of cunts like us needs". His voice, although not high, was high enough to be heard by a few other nearby passengers.

"We should go and chat up some birds. How about tomorrow night? We'll go into town, hit a few pubs, see if we can pull anyone". Ray thought about that for a few moments, and realised he liked the idea. He nodded.

"Yes," he said, and smiled.

The post-office was a mile from the bus-stop and was closing in ten minutes. Ray felt more nervous than he was expecting, but Lee just seemed as if this was a normal thing for him to do. Maybe somewhere inside his stomach there were butterflies. One butterfly. A lazy one that flaps its wings a little then gives up.

There were two people chatting outside the entrance, but then they bid farewell and went their separate ways.

"Go in and see how people are inside," Lee said.

"What...why?"

"What do you mean why? just fucking do it. Go in, look like you want to buy something or just take a leaflet and come out and tell me how many customers are in there". Ray sighed, then went inside.

Lee was agitated, looking around. There was some traffic and a few people at a distance, but no-one close enough to look curiously. Ray came out with an 'online fraud' leaflet and said.

"There's one guy in there. He's not at the counter, but writing something on a table". Lee moved quickly. He put the bag on the floor, took out and pulled on his balaclava and grabbed the shotgun. Ray looked at him wide-eyed with fear and stepped back.

"Keep fucking dixie," Lee muffled, and went into the post-office. Ray stood at the entrance like the world's worst bouncer. 'If your name's not down, you're not coming in'. Oh hang on, maybe there were exceptions. Plenty of them.

He could hear Lee shouting: '...cking money!..' '...king hurry up!'

One person was approaching, a man in a grey suit with a grey beard who looked to be pushing seventy.

"Sorry," Ray said, "it's closing". The man stopped.

"I haven't come to go in the post-office. I've come to ask you what your star-sign is". Ray just stared at him, saying nothing, then the post-office door flew open and Lee barreled out, crashing into the man, both falling to the floor.

"Fucks sake..!" some of the money that had been in the bag spilled out and fluttered around. Lee hugged it to him and scrambled to his feet and just ran, notes drifting in his wake. Ray looked at Lee, then at the man who was laughing, and as Ray started to run, the man shouted:

"You're Pisces. You're a Pisces".

Lee vanished down a side road, took off his balaclava and stood waiting for Ray. When he caught up to him, he punched him hard in the stomach.

"You fucking idiot!" he shouted. "Why were you talking to that guy? I lost a load of money 'cos of you you stupid cunt". He opened the bag to see how much was left, and there was quite a substantial amount still there, and this seemed to pacify him slightly.

"Alright, come on. Look normal. Just walk. We'll get a taxi back". They walked down the long road with neat, expensive houses on both sides, Ray trying to breathe and trying to walk normally, clutching his stomach.

He was relieved to be sitting in a taxi, neither of them speaking all the way back.

"Keep the change mate," Lee said, handing the driver a twenty-pound note for an eleven pound fare. The driver nodded and drove away.

"Can't believe you," Lee said, "talking to some guy while I'm inside getting money. Where the fuck is Shane when you need him?"

"He just asked me...the time".

"Should have told him to fuck off".

"I said it was closed".

"But you said he just asked you the time. Oh look it doesn't matter. Fuck knows how much I lost thanks to you, idiot". He walked away into the high-rise.

Lee went into his office and upended the bag onto the sofa. It did look like a lot of money. Ray appeared next to him.

"Are we still going out tomorrow night?" he asked.

"Fucking right we are," Lee replied.

Ray made his way back into Shane's and decided on a small glass of whisky, just as a stabiliser, to realign his nerves. As he made it he saw all twelve cards on the kitchen counter in a neat pile. He spread them like playing cards. They were face-down so he saw all the representative symbols.

Fucking zodiac, he thought. He gave serious thought to throwing them out of the window again, but then guessed Lee would gather them up and put them back.

Why would he do that? he thought. Lee wouldn't care. He sat back on the couch and looked at a blank television.

He remembered the man at the post-office, and the Ram and the Centaur, and other things that have shoved astrology right into his mind.

I'm not a believer though, he thought. How can I believe in it if it's not true? It can't be true if scientists have discarded it. How much have they looked into it though? How can it be disproven? Scientists must know their stuff, he thought, because they know about things like that. Boffins know their onions, don't they?

They're clever folks, and if they don't believe in astrology then why should I? Yet the weight of astrological pressure he'd been under, still was heavy, and only a threadbare amount of opposition was keeping him from believing. He wanted to still think it was 'all a load of bollocks', because how could it be true?

He couldn't say there was no evidence, because lately it had entered his mind like the arrow from Sagittarius. Yet still he wasn't a 100% believer, because he still had his want not to believe it, wasn't quite at the stage of covering his eyes in the face of evidence. Science doesn't care whether you believe in it or not. You can believe in whatever you liked it didn't matter. So Ray was more open-minded to the fact that astrology could be very real. However, he didn't want to, and clung to two things that stopped him. Two barriers that had received a hammering, but still just about hung on by their metaphorical fingernails.

The fact that 'reputable' scientists did not believe in it and it had not been scientifically proven.

The other being coincidence, which still stood on thin ice. Ice that had cracked, that was not freezing over again, but still stood battered and bruised.

Yes, he thought as he drank his whisky. I don't believe. I don't believe. I don't...he sighed, and downed the glass in one.

Perhaps tomorrow night would just be what he needed. A night out, a few drinks, and maybe a chance to meet a woman. Someone he can show off to his parents and Caroline. Look, I've met a woman. I'm not an embarrassment anymore.

How long before she sees you for exactly what you are and leaves you? is what Caroline would probably say. It's happened before. What can you possibly bring to the table in that relationship? A huge portion of nowt. She'll be like your carer. Someone uglier, dirtier, smellier, with a single digit IQ could probably make her more happy. Still though, people can be fickle, and someone out there will look at Ray with hearts in

their eyes and say: 'He's perfect'. She'll be out there somewhere. Perhaps on the other side of the planet, or maybe in another era of time, but there is someone for everyone, yet finding them, that can be impossible.

Ray didn't not expect to find the perfect woman. Perfect for him. Liked a smoke and a drink and a laugh and maybe a quick bunk up in a shed or in the park at night-time. She'll do nicely, but life wasn't like that. It was almost random, and chaotic, and sometimes people found their ideal match. It was like the roll of the dice. Roll a six and you've found your perfect partner. Together forever. Still just as in love in the twilight years as when first together. Roll a one and you'll be at each others throats.

Where once they were right, now it's the divorce courts. I love him I love him I love him. Now I fucking hate him with absolute vengeance.

Still though, Ray was not expecting marriage. Just a companion would be nice. Lee was his only friend now outside of family, and he guessed should Lee meet someone, Ray would be left behind, breaking the childhood friendship without a second thought.

## Chapter 46

"Really sorry to hear about your business Lee, and I was about to give you the go-ahead as well," said Billy Price, looking genuinely upset. "I know it wasn't your fault. Those guys saw an opportunity and took advantage. But still, you must not let it get you down. Get back on the horse. Stay strong. Start again". Lee was back sitting opposite Billy in the probation offices behind the local police station, in his usual position. Arms folded, hunched down. Papers were strewn before Billy and a small vivobook laptop was open.

"Still though, you okay for Monday?" Lee looked concerned.

"What?" he asked.

"Remember I booked you in to give a motivational talk at the prison".

"Fu..oh, oh that...yes, alright".

"Good. Also, in light of recent circumstances, the Blossom project will make you feel a whole lot better, give you a spring in your step. That will be starting soon as well". Lee just leaned back and looked at the ceiling, thinking of the evening when him and Ray would go out and hopefully enjoy female company.

Ray had received no money at all from Lee's robbery. He told him if he wants any he can go back to the post-office and pick up any notes that he had caused him to lose, but Ray still had enough to go and buy some 'going out gear'. He had allowed himself to be coerced into trying on and buying a nice white shirt and charcoal regular trousers, thinking he could wear the shirt with his suit at the wedding.

He had decided to stay in the clothes and put his others in a plastic bag. The shop assistant nodded with approval and told him, when he walked out onto the shop floor:

"You look like a goat-fish. Doesn't he look like a goat-fish?" he asked a confused looking nearby customer.

"Sorry sir, don't know why I said that". Ray just sighed, paid up and left.

On his way back, he was texted by his work as to whether or not he could come in in an hour. He didn't want to, but thought he might as well, and worked in his new clothes with his tatty high-vis jacket.

It was another exerting couple of hours, having to break up an argument between a staff member and a customer, and pick up a spillage of pears, along with his usual duties, but, he still managed to steal drinks and cigarettes, and wondered if perhaps he might have a little 'starter' drink to loosen any nerves he might have in talking to women strangers.

He decided against it. Not wanting to be tipsy, or drunk when they went out later. Plenty of women he guessed would have at some point, had to put up with a drunk man trying to chat them up.

As he walked up the stairs, he saw a few pea crabs high up on the wall, and went into Shanes place.

After a couple of hours, Lee knocked on the door and Ray answered, ready to leave. Lee had also bought new gear.

"Don't we look like a right pair of fucking stallions," Lee said, "or is it cunts?"

So they left, and decided to get a taxi to take them further out to places they had never been before.

When they left the vehicle, Lee slammed the door shut and it drove away, leaving them on a thoroughfare of restaurants, pubs and wine-bars.

"Looks a bit posh round here," Lee said. "Might meet Caroline and her mates. When's her hen-night?"

"It's now," he said. "She's gone to a spa retreat somewhere and Wayne has gone on a river cruise. They get married in two days".

"Can't they just have a normal piss-up like everyone else? Hang on, that means there's an empty house. Your Caroline's house will be empty". Ray guessed what he was going to say, but couldn't get out of it. He just nodded.

"If we cop for a couple of birds, we can take them back to your Caroline's. Better than taking them back the flats. It's not like we'll be staying the night. Just the time it takes to have a drink and a shag. She probably won't even know we were there. Not if you tidy up properly".

"Nah, it's too risky".

"What d'you mean risky? If they're out for the night we'll just be there for a short while, then we'll go. What's the problem?" Ray couldn't think of one, and just began walking along the pavement.

"What about in here?"

"It's a winebar," Lee said, "You only get posh birds in winebars. So your Carol and her mates probably come here all the time. And posh birds look down their noses at us anyway. If we're not good-looking and rich then we can fuck right off. Nah, I don't mind a dirty slapper who can drink me under the table".

"Might as well give it a try," Ray said.

Lee thought for a moment, shrugged and they went inside.

The place shouted elegance. At the window there were two-seater tables with several couples enjoying the beverage of their choice. They walked down a couple of steps into a small area with low tables and sofas. Across to the right was the bar with spaced-out round stools. Towards the back were larger tables. The place wasn't full, but people dressed for a night-out talked and laughed in at least half of the seating.

"See, told you it's for posh cunts," Lee said. "Let's go to a pub and find ourselves a couple of slags". A few heads turned in their direction, but then carried on chatting as normal.

At the back, a couple were on a six-seater table, and looked cosy together, as though



they were in a newly formed relationship, kindling their passion for each other. They were drinking from a cocktail 'fish bowl' from two long straws. The woman, who looked to be in her early twenties, looked across at Ray, then stood up and walked towards him. Her companion simply looked at her as she walked across the marble flooring to the man who looked out of place.

"Aye aye," said Lee, nodding towards the woman. "Looks like she's coming to you Ray".

She was. Ray looked wide-eyed as the woman approached and smiled.

"Fuck," muttered Lee.

"Hi you," she said, proffering her hand. Ray shook it, for he could do nothing else.

"You look lost and lonely. Would you like some company? My name's Virginia".

"I'm...Ray," she grabbed his wrist and led him across to the area in front of the bar, a pseudo 'dance-floor' which was empty.

"You are gorgeous Ray," and she caressed his face, trailing a finger over his shoulder.

"Jammy fuckin' bastard," Lee muttered, hands on hips. Virginia then turned and leaned forward and grinded her posterior against Ray.

"Let's dance Ray," she said, even though there was no music. "I'm dancing to the music inside my head," as she gyrated against him, then turned and put her hands on his shoulders, pressing and grinding against him. Most of the other customers were either simply looking at them, or giving sideways glances.

"Nikki!" her boyfriend said, standing nearby, a look of confusion on his face. "What are you doing?"

"Ben, you can fuck off. I'm with Ray now". Ben's mouth opened but nothing came out. She caressed Ray's face again.

"I want him to fuck me". There was a few mutterings and tuttings from customers. Ben stormed out, and his shoulder knocked into Lee as he went, but Lee didn't care, he was still staring at Ray and Virginia.

"Will you fuck me Ray? Oh hold on. If you did, that means I won't be a virgin anymore. I won't be pure. Oh well, nevermind," she stepped back, turned and headed towards the table, and stopped when she saw the half-finished fish-bowl, looking confused.

"Ben?" she then hurried to the exit, not looking at Ray or Lee. "Ben!"

Ray slowly walked back across to Lee.

"Fuck Ray, what was that about? jammy bastard. I'll bet that won't happen again tonight. That was a one off. She needed her fucking eyes testing. I don't know what she saw in you. She had a boyfriend for fucks sake. She just leaves him and goes to you. How many times does that happen? Rare as fuck. She was out of your league anyway. Let's be honest, you hardly ever see a woman in a pub or bar like this on their own. They're always with someone. So if we see one that looks on her own, chances are she'll be up for it. No-one on their own in here, shall we go somewhere else?" Although people were looking in their direction, nobody else approached. Ray scanned the area, as though someone else would break from their couplings and come over, but all they got from a few people was hostile stares.

"Alright," he said, and they left in the cold, brightly lit street.

"Tell you what Ray, there's no fucking way she was a virgin. And girls today. They're more straightforward aren't they? Just come out with what they want. I don't remember girls being like that, and certainly not in my mother's day. The guy would have fainted. I've been inside too long".

They walked further into the area and ended up visiting four pubs. They did chat to a few women, but some of them dropped the tried and tested method to stop being chatted up by mentioning a 'fella' or boyfriend as early as they could in the conversation. Some they spoke to left with their friends, and a couple they spoke to for a while, but it was clearly going nowhere as they just broke away and went back to their friends, so took a taxi back that night in silence and went to their respective flats in silence as well.

## Chapter 47

Ray woke with a familiar feeling. A hangover, but he had had a lot worse, and felt tired and groggy, but after a few hours just lazing around the flat, his sobriety returned. He thought of the previous night, of Virginia, and the women he had tried to 'chat up', and thought perhaps there was potential there. Don't give up, he thought, keep going.

Not tonight though. He wanted maybe an early night, or at least no alcohol in his system for tomorrow's wedding. He was quite looking forward to it, having never been

to one before and it would be nice to meet everyone. Still though, he guessed he would try and avoid 'Uncle Pete's' or 'Auntie Ivy's' go-to question that is used universally, even when trying to chat someone up, besides 'What's your name?' is the question: 'What do you do?', or 'what are you up to these days?'. It would be tempting to say: 'I'm up to a whole load of none of your fucking business'.

He was embarrassed to admit it, the truth. I'm a cleaner in a supermarket. I scrub toilets and put trolleys away and get paid a pittance, and what do you bleeding well do? Perhaps some preparation would be in order for when he was asked. Something to look good, as he would be meeting Wayne's family and he at least wanted to seem as good as he could be, even though his own family knew exactly what he was. They were hardly proud of him.

'Yes I've been thinking of going vegan for a long time now'. 'I love getting back to nature whenever I can'. 'I'm thinking of starting an animal rights campaign'.

For all he knew, he thought, Wayne could be the only one in the family who could be called bohemian. His family could all be 'hard-assed' meat-eaters who pump iron and box all day in the gym.

Fuck it, he mused. I'll just have to wing it.

A banging came on the door, and he guessed it was Lee. He can never knock normally.

"Ray!" he called, "open the door", and when he did, he walked in and into the bedroom, standing there looking at the weapons.

"I think it's time we shifted this lot. We need more customers". Ray came in.

"How?" he asked, "how do you get customers for weapons without the police knowing?"

"It's just word of mouth I think. They find out one way or another. We're probably going to have to remind people that there's weapons for sale. When was the last customer?"

"Days ago,"

"See, there's fuck knows worth of weapons here, and I think it's a lot, and they look new as well, and all the ammo, so we need to go out there and get some customers".

"We need to?" Ray asked.

"Yes, both of us, and we can split the profits. There's plenty of shady fuckers out

there. All you need to do is tell them. Let them know we're open for business".

Ray looked confused, but Lee simply continued.

"We've just got to go out and tell certain people that we have weapons for sale and word of mouth should do the rest. There's a few people I know that go the local pub who I know I can trust not to say anything. I can get them to put the word out. I'll go there now, see if anyone I know is there. There's some people I know you can see".

"Lee I'm getting ready for the wedding".

"Really, how? how the fuck are you getting ready? The wedding isn't until tomorrow. Just fucking do it. All I'm asking is for you to go and tell them there's weapons for sale. How hard is that? Fucks sake Ray". He left the flat, returning a few minutes later with a piece of paper from a note-pad. On it were three names and addresses. He handed it to Ray who was sat on the sofa almost in a sulk.

"Go and see these, they're just people I know who might be customers, or they might put the word out. That top one there," he said, pointing to the name, "Owen Quinn, works for a night-club owner. He's like his right-hand man. A bit like what you are to me. Until someone better comes along you're my Blotto. Anyway, tell him, and he might tell his boss who might buy the lot. Nice fucking payday," he said, rubbing his fingers together to indicate money.

"I'll go and work on those fuckers in the pub. You just go to that address and let him know we're open for business, okay?" Ray was quiet, sullen. Lee stepped forward and leaned closer.

"I said okay?" Ray just nodded, avoiding eye-contact.

"Right, get on it today. And take pictures of the weapons on your phone to show them". Lee then left, and Ray crushed the piece of paper in his fist.

Outside it was cold and rainy, and a light wind blew across the town. Ray had to get a bus which stopped quite far away from the address, but he walked rather slowly to the destination, in no hurry, checking the map on his phone for direction.

He passed by a quiet fire-station, and crossed a road to where a narrow public footpath cut between a low wall, with overgrown bushes almost obscuring the entry. It would be easy to miss, but he walked along it, with more haggard bushes, weeds and low walls on either side.

A man who looked to be a vagabond, or tramp was coming the other way, and as he approached, placed a hand on Ray's shoulder and leaned in close.

"Are you looking for Owen Quinn, gangster wannabe?" he didn't wait for an answer. "At the end of this path on the other side of the road is a gym. He goes for a swim three mornings a week and is in there now. You'll find him on his own doing laps. Don't worry, you can just walk in. Go in the main entrance to the left hand corridor. Go to the end, turn left and through there is the main pool. I know this because I'm the water-bearer". Then he continued walking. Ray just watched him as he turned a corner. After a few more seconds, he took out the piece of note-pad paper and looked at the address. It wasn't a gym, but he decided to believe the man, or at least see if he was right.

Bloody zodiac, he thought. Nope, still don't believe. What else can it be other than coincidence? Nothing, he thought, and nothing joined coincidence standing on the slowly cracking thin ice.

When he emerged from the pathway, the gym stood as a large imposing building across the road, and Ray wondered if it contained other businesses and offices. Perhaps it did. He crossed over at the lights and walked through the busy car-park to the entrance. There was a queue at reception, but he simply walked in, guessing he could anyway because he wasn't there to use any of the facilities.

Following the vagabond's directions, he soon emerged into the large swimming pool area, the odour of chlorine entering his nose. There were a few people swimming leisurely. A bored looking life-guard stood looking out of a large window. In the far left corner there was what looked to be an aquatherapy class. They were standing in the shallow end, arms raised, leaning to the side.

On the right side was a man on his own who looked to be doing lengths. That might be Owen, Ray thought, and waited for him to swim near enough to catch his attention. The man slowed down.

"Are you Owen Quinn?" Ray asked. The man just nodded. He looked a little older than Ray with more 'meat on his bones', and blue goggles, which he removed, then sat up on the poolside.

"Are you the weapons guy?" he asked, "show me what you've got".

"How did you kn..?" Maybe Lee called ahead. Ray took out his phone and brought up the photographs. Owen took the phone in his wet hand and looked at an image of a submachine-gun.

"No, sorry, I don't want your stupid weapons," he said rather loudly. A few people

looked in their direction.

"Could you keep your voice down..." but Owen continued, even louder:

"Tell Lee to shove his weapons. Tell him to fuck right off!" He then threw the phone into the water and laughed. "I'm the water-bearer," he shouted, then fell back into the pool and swam away.

A few more people looked in his direction, and the life-guard was walking slowly closer, hands behind his back. Ray sighed heavily, then turned and walked quickly out.

He didn't lose momentum out in the car-park. If I lose another fucking phone..! he thought, but then slowed to a halt and took out the piece of paper. He angrily ripped it in half and threw it. Now he couldn't remember where the other two addresses were. Fuck Lee, he thought, and really wished he could say it to his face.

Although Lee wouldn't be happy about him not visiting the other two people, he wouldn't be too pleased with Owen either, but that wasn't his fault. That would be between them. They can deal with it. The prospect of going back to tell him he had not done it was not something he was ready to face. He looked back to where he had thrown the paper. One was out of sight, and the other was being blown by a light breeze over the traffic. He spent a good five minutes looking around the vehicles, trying to find the one by the traffic, but they had blown away.

Perhaps he could tell Lee they were not interested. Or they were not in. Yes, that'll do. They were on holiday or something, or away for a few days.

He still didn't fancy the idea of going back to the flat yet though. Maybe Lee was still in the pub, or had brought customers back to the flat, so Ray decided on finding something to eat before making his way home.

He found a cafe and ordered a beef and vegetable pasty, deciding to sit down and eat it in the outside seating. When he came out he saw near one of the tables a woman with a buggy and a nearby child that looked upset.

"Well where did you leave it?" he heard her ask, but the little boy continued to cry. The mother looked exasperated. She turned and saw Ray.

"Excuse me sir," she asked, "you haven't seen a toy centaur, have you? My boy has lost it".

"A toy cen...no, sorry". The child looked around the area, when, at that age, a lost toy was a major crisis. Ray just sighed. A fucking centaur, he thought.

"Found it!" the boy shouted, lifting up the plastic toy he had found in his buggy.

"How did we not see it in there?" the mother asked. It was a rather large, cheap looking toy, the type found in discount super-markets. The man part of the horse held forth a bow with what looked to be a shiny nail as the arrow.

"Yay!" the boy cried, happy, and ran around with it as though it was a toy plane.

"Sorry mister," the woman said, smiling. The boy stopped before Ray and looked up at him. Ray was still looking at the mother. The child aimed the toy at him and pressed a button on the side of the horse's shoulder. The nail fired from the bow and hit Ray on the cheek-bone.

"Ow," he cried, stepping back. The nail fell to the floor. It drew a bead of blood and Ray put his hand over the pain.

Instead of saying sorry, apologising for her boy, the mother and child burst out laughing, the mother pointing, tears of joy in her eyes, the child in pleats as well, red-faced with laughter. Ray composed himself then stormed away. When the bleeding and pain had stopped, he calmed down, and found he still had a luke-warm pasty in one hand. He slowly ate it as he gradually made his way back to the high-rise.

He heard voices from Shane's when he got back, so went inside his other flat.

Later on, Lee was more annoyed with Ray for not making the sales-pitch harder with Owen, and he didn't believe the others were 'away'.

"...but he said he didn't want the weapons and tell Lee to fuck right off. That's what he said".

"...should have smacked him if he said that. I'll go and sort him out myself. You're fucking useless d'you know that?"

He helped Lee with moving the weapons from Shane's to the 'office', cautiously doing so in case other tenants came by.

When the last lot of knives had been moved, Ray just closed the door to Shane's and went and opened a can of lager.

## Chapter 48

Wedding day, Ray thought, and spent the morning with a few butterflies in his stomach, although he wasn't sure why.

He wondered why people get nervous on wedding days. If they'd lived together, been boyfriend and girlfriend for months or years, engaged, then what was the difference after marriage? They just went back to the way it's always been. Perhaps it was all the fuss around it. Have I got and done everything I need to? Who will I be meeting? Will I have something to say to some relative I've never seen or knew existed?

Still though, it was Caroline's and Wayne's day, and he was pleased for them.

He made a hearty breakfast, and dressed in the clothes he wore on his night out with the shoes he'd bought.

He looked at the picture on the wall and smiled at it. She should like this, he thought, and took it off, putting it under his arm.

He left the flat and saw that Lee's office was ajar and went inside to find him kicking the safe with frustration.

"I'm going the wedding now," Ray said. Lee just nodded.

"Have fun," he said, and went back to glaring at the metal box. Ray left, and wondered why he bothered telling Lee at all. Just a half-assed 'Have fun'. He shook his head and descended the stairs out into a cold morning.

As he stepped onto the pavement beside the high-rise car-park, he saw a familiar looking man on the other side of the road. A familiar looking man who walked further down, then crossed the road, heading to the flats. A familiar looking man with a picture under his arm.

It's that guy, he thought, the one who really annoyed Lee and Gary. The guy who looks like me, and he's wearing identical clothes.

It must just be a neighbour that looks very much like me, he thought.

Lee was on his knees fiddling with the keypad when he heard the door open and saw 'Ray' come in.



"Thought you were going the wedding," he said. The doppelganger walked across and lifted the picture, bringing it down, smashing it over Lee's head.

"Fuck!" he shouted, collapsing to the side. Glass had lacerated his face and blood spattered the floor and safe.

'Ray' picked up one of the grenades that was on the sofa. Lee stood up and looked with shock at the doppelganger.

"What the fuck Ray you cunt!" he shouted, and stepped towards him with his fists clenched, but saw that 'Ray' had picked up a grenade and pulled out the pin.

"Have you tried blowing it open?" he said, throwing it to the safe.

Lee quickly scrambled away. It exploded, but only managed to move the safe a few inches. It didn't open. 'Ray' laughed, and threw another grenade at it.

"Ray what the fuck are you doing?" another explosion. Lee backed away further, covering himself like a boxer receiving a barrage of punches. Some shrapnel hit him in the stomach and chest.

The doppelganger quickly pulled the pin out of the others and threw them at the safe. They exploded in a chain reaction, and the steel box slowly swung open to reveal more wads of money and jewellery and watches.

"You've always been a fucking cunt Lee," the doppelganger shouted in Ray's voice, then gestured to him the way some men fired up for a fight will goad an opponent. He gestured with both hands for him to 'come on'.

"Come on then! Come on!" but then the doppelganger ran to the entrance of the flat, shoving Lee into the wall of the hallway as he hurried past, then stopped to make sure he followed.

"Ray you fuckin' bastard!" Lee shouted, and ran after him, seeing the doppelganger at the top of the stairs before running down.

When Lee reached the top, he didn't see the man, but the entrance door slowly closing. He dashed down and burst through, looking around and seeing the real Ray across on the pavement about forty metres away, still looking towards the high-rise, contemplating whether or not to follow the man, or continue to Caroline's.

The fact that he didn't seem threatening, and still had the picture under his arm meant nothing to Lee as his anger was in full rage.

"Ray you fucking cunt, get here!" Ray's eyes widened.

Fuck, he thought, that bloody guy. Lee barrelled towards him, and he could see he was absolutely incensed.

He could do nothing but turn and run. What did the man do? he asked himself, as he ran as fast as he could along the pavement, his fear rising.

"Ray!" screamed Lee. He's gonna kill me, Ray thought. Fuck! An image of Blotto flashed in his mind, and he ran as fast as he could into the traffic.

The traffic however, seemed to stop or slow down and be in such a position for him to avoid any collisions.

"Ray!" Lee screamed across the road, trying to cross, his supposed aggressor close enough to see the blood on his incensed face, but on the pavement continued to run, and turned down a side-street hurling down it as if he was in the olympic hundred metres.

From around the same corner, the doppelganger appeared and smiled across to Lee, gesturing to him. People stopped to watch, some took out their phones.

"Come on Lee you fucking pussy". Lee barrelled across the road, a car screeching to a halt. He banged against left light but carried on running. 'Ray' turned the corner, and when Lee reached there, saw the real Ray near the bottom of the road.

"Fuck," he muttered, and dashed after him.

Ray ran across the road, again, the traffic polite to him, and he ran into a paved shopping area, amongst pedestrians, and turned another corner out of sight of Lee who was much further back.

He had to stop to catch his breath, red-faced, panting, leaning against a wall. A teenage girl was walking nearby holding a phone but looking at him.

"Please," he said, "please, take this picture to my sister Caroline. She lives at 18 Conrad road. Tell her Ray can't make it. Tell her to have a lovely day. I'll pay you". The girl lowered her phone.

"Please!" Ray said, offering the picture, and the girl could see the genuine anguish in his face. She took it. He reached in his pocket and took out a handful of notes and threw them at her feet.

"Thanks," he muttered, breathless, and carried on staggering away.

"Ray!" shouted Lee, behind him, around 40 metres away. The girl stared at the incensed man who seemed equally out of breath who was focused on Ray, up ahead,

his face reddened, still bleeding from the glass, but mustered enough renewed energy to pelt at and gain on him.

## Chapter 49

The house was a hub of activity. Shelley was there, their parents and bridesmaids, so when the doorbell rang it was Caroline who was closest and answered in her bathrobe with rollers in her hair. The teenage girl proffered the picture.

"Are you Caroline?" she asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Message from Ray. He said he can't make it but to have a lovely day".

"What? Ray!" she took the picture and looked at it. The girl walked away.

"Thanks," Caroline said, rather confused, then and felt anger rise within her, but she suppressed it, and stepped on to the pathway.

Can't make it but have a lovely day...can't make it but have a lovely day...can't make it but...she felt tears forming in her eyes.

"Ray," she muttered, looking at the picture, at his smiling face.

She could not have known that Ray, even within the turmoil his brain was going through at that time, knew that to tell her what was really happening, 'Please help me Lee is gonna kill me!' would have spoilt her day, so he had rapidly thought, quick message, can't make it, have a lovely day, would mean she still got married, still was happy, and the next time she saw him, if at all, she would be angry with him, but so be it. He would much rather face her wrath than Lee's, and would have to put up with it, even if he missed her wedding day.

She stood there a while, staring at the photograph, smiling slightly, then held it to her side in one hand and surveyed the area as if he would appear. She put one hand on her stomach, intending to tell him today that there was a new life growing inside her.

"Ray," she said again, quietly, shaking her head, then went back inside the house, closing the door behind her.

## Chapter 50

Ray had found renewed strength, but Lee was still fast approaching.

"Get here you fuckin..!" Ahead of them there was a small queue for a cash-machine, and Ray barreled through them, but when Lee did, one lady put her foot out and tripped him up. He crashed and rolled, coming to a halt on his back. He glared at the woman who looked worried, wondering why she did that.

"Fuckin' bitch!" but then 'Ray' loomed over Lee, grinning.

"Come on dick-head, you can do better than that," and punched him in the face, breaking a nose that had already been broken four times. Then the doppelganger ran, and Lee screamed with absolute rage, got to his feet and hurled after 'Ray', who turned a corner out of sight. When he reached it he saw the real Ray over the other side of the road, and something in his mind, through the turmoil, wondered how on earth he could have got ahead so fast, but ran after him, and found that after about thirty seconds his energy levels were seriously depleting, as were Ray's.

They began to jog, Lee a little faster, but then coming down the road in the opposite direction, a cyclist turned and sped across, mounted the pavement, and before Lee realised what was happening, barreled full tilt into him, and they both crashed into a flower display outside a florists.

The cyclist got to his feet, rubbed an aching shoulder and winced, but picked up the bike and laughed, before riding away.

Lee took longer to get to his feet. The public around all looked in his direction, but he staggered across to a crossroads and looked around.

Ray was gone.

"Ray!" he shouted, "Ray you fucking bastard!" he scanned around, his face red, his nose bloody.

"Ray you cunt, come and face me!"

Then he did, or his doppelganger did. On the diagonal corner to where he stood, he appeared from behind a group of several people who were waiting to cross and gestured a 'come on' gesture.

"Come on then Lee," he shouted, "this way", and Lee, not thinking straight, just launched himself in that direction. Vehicles screeched to a halt and people shouted and

beeped the horns. 'Ray' was further down the road, gesturing for him to follow, a grin on his face, which incensed Lee to find more strength from within, but only to jog faster.

Ray had to stop, he was too exhausted, hands on his knees breathing heavily. Looking behind he could not see his pursuer around the bend of the road, but guessed he would appear very soon. He was near a train station, and saw an electronic display above the entrance. The next train to anywhere but here was three minutes away.

He hoped if he could hide until the train came, he could escape that way, so looked again to see if Lee was imminent, but could not see him, and walked onto the platform. There were several people waiting, and he hoped he could hide amongst them.

'Ray' came around the road until he came to the train station, and mounted steps on the metal bridge. He stopped and gestured to Lee.

"Come on dick-head," he said, and each insult only served to put more fuel in Lee's fire, but his tank was nearing on empty, and when he reached the bottom of the steps, the doppelganger stepped away out of reach.

"Ray for fucks sake what..!"

"You've always been a cunt haven't you Lee?" who found an extra burst and mounted the steps. 'Ray' though, jogged to the other end of the bridge, turned and gestured for him to come, and walked down the steps.

Lee followed, and made his way down and onto the platform. Several passengers waited for the train which was one minute away.

"Ray!" he shouted. "Ray what the fuck?" Everybody on both platforms looked at him, and then he spotted him on the other platform, trying to secrete himself behind a man with a large ruck-sack, but Ray knew he had been spotted, and eyed Lee with absolute fear.

Lee stepped to the edge of the platform and pointed at him.

"Ray you fucking cunt, you're dead, then I'll go the wedding and fuck up your Carol and Wayne. I'll shoot the cunts," then he felt a tap on his shoulder and glared around.

To see 'Ray' smiling at him. The train was further down the track, heading their way.

"What the fu..?"

"He's our toy," then was shoved onto the tracks, and found out that the rails were live as he screamed and writhed as 750 volts of electricity surged through him. He was

still screaming as he was ripped beneath the train.

The driver had slammed on the air-brakes but the train still slid by as it came to a halt. People milled around in a kind of panic, not really knowing what to do, and the doppelganger Ray simply stood on the station as they came to realise he was responsible. Only a few people saw him push the man, but he simply stood there as the train glided by slower and slower, watching Ray through the windows flashing by, who watched him also. The doppelganger simply grinned, and Ray just stared at him, his brain scrambling with questions.

The real Ray left and mustered enough energy to cross the bridge. He had to confront him. Had to know who he was, and when he reached the other platform, found the doppelganger nowhere to be seen. People still milled and fussed around, no-one brave enough to confront him, giving him stern looks, instead hoping somebody else would accost him. The train had stopped, and he came back out and stood on a pavement, still breathing heavily, looking around.

Then somebody called from a taxi outside.

"Oi, mate, get in. I'll take you to the wedding". Ray just looked confused at him, but the driver gestured him across. He wasn't the doppelganger, but an over-weight man in a lumberjack shirt.

"Hurry, I can get you there when everyone starts arriving". Ray went across.

"How do you kn..?"

"Get in," and Ray did, collapsing on the back seat, the taxi pulling away, the door slamming closed.

"Who are you and how do y..?"

The driver came away from the train station and maneuvered out onto the main road, but said nothing.

"Tell me!" Ray shouted. The driver just looked at him through the rear-view mirror and sped along an A-road where he joined a motorway.

Then the man spoke:

"Just to let you know. Your mate Shane. He actually did become a personal trainer up in the Lake district. Did quite well for himself".

"What who...how?" and guessed all his asking of questions wouldn't muster any answers. Instead would be told them, if at all. He sat there forlorn, hand on his head.

"This is not the way to the wedding," he said, looking around, and tried again with his inquisition, but the man was silent for the four miles he took to come off the motorway, and drive further and further out into the countryside. He tried one final burst, and banged on the plastic partition.

"Fucking telling me who you are!" but he guessed exactly who he was but didn't want to admit it, didn't want it to be true, because if his beliefs cracked any further, then what? he would come to wonder.

If the zodiac is real, then what were the implications? They would be different for everybody. There would be plenty of non-believers out there who would steadfast fold their arms and shake their heads, with evidence waved under their noses who were even more disbelieving than Ray used to be, and there would be plenty of people who would nod with satisfaction 'Yes, see, told you astrology was real', and everything in between.

The taxi drove along a country lane, until it could either turn left or continue. It came to a halt at the junction. The driver got out, then opened the passenger door.

"Get out," he said to Ray, hooking a thumb over his shoulder. Then he turned and strode along the lane. Ray just looked at him, and looked at himself.

The man had morphed into the doppelganger, and in a burst of energy, Ray left the taxi and tried to hurry after him.

"Wait, who are..?" but 'Ray' simply walked on, as that was quicker than Ray was jogging. He was still exhausted, and tried to run faster but only managed about twenty metres before having to walk, the doppelganger keeping to around thirty metres ahead, looking back occasionally.

Further up was a metal gate, beyond which was 'Mendel Farm'.

The doppelganger hurried, putting more distance between them and stopped at the gate, turning and leaning against it, waiting for the out of breath Ray to stagger near. He then opened the gate, walking into the farm.

Up ahead were several vehicles outside a negligent farmhouse, and besides that was an open garage with a car with its wheels off and bonnet open, tools and parts scattered around it. There was nobody to be seen. Further down to the right, a group of geese wandered around. 'Ray' walked to the left, past a few chickens and stables which seemed empty. They could both hear sheep, and sometimes goats would chime in from the area behind the farmhouse, but 'Ray' wasn't heading there. He walked past a vegetable garden beyond a wooden decrepit fence into a small open weed-ridden concreted area with a rusting truck trailer against a wall which looked like it would

never be used again, next to which was a stack of four well-worn tyres besides broken palettes. Near a wall at the back with a wide entrance out onto the fields was a parked up tractor that had seen better days and needed a good hosing down. Beyond that were people seeding out in a pasture and were not looking in the direction of the vaulted roof cowshed, where Ray's doppelganger entered and turned beyond a tall pile of haybales.

"Stop...who?" With another surge of energy, Ray ran into the cowshed, but stopped, too exhausted, and fell to his hands and knees, breathing heavily. The shed was large and had six square pens. The two furthest away had four cows in each, and in the one nearest him there was a bull.

The doppelganger had gone, and there were no workers. The cows sometimes bellowed. He barely had any energy to stand, so he crawled across to the gate-pen and tried to drag himself up. When he was three-quarters up, the latch keeping the bull in unlocked and the gate swung open, causing Ray to fall forward on to the freshly laid straw. He was still breathing heavily, and sat back on his haunches.

Towards the back of the pen the bull looked at him with curiosity. Ray crawled back and leaned against the iron fence beside the gate. He was too exhausted to go anywhere, and as he looked at the bull he saw how big it was. It was normal size for a fully grown male adult, but still a large powerful beast, sleek black with vicious looking horns.

He realised what it was, and accepted the fact that nothing and coincidence had fallen through the ice. He believed. One-hundred percent.

"Alright," he muttered. "Alright!" he said, louder. "Alright! I believe," he screamed. "I believe. I believe. I fucking believe..." and within his mind, all his disbelief had switched into believing in the zodiac, in astrology, and the Taurus bull knew this, slowly walking towards him.

Even despite the cushioning of the straw, the weight of the animal made Ray feel a slight vibration when each hoof hit the ground.

It came beside him and breathed out through its nostrils in his face. Ray winced. Then from deep within its diaphragm, its strong lungs formed words from its mouth:

"I win," it said, and then took a few steps back. Ray could only stare at it, and it stopped and watched him.

He then felt pain. A splitting pain in both his hands which formed into fists. He raised them before his eyes and saw they were not hands.



They were hooves.

His bones cracked, skin ripped, clothes tore. His forearms were black fur, His skull split and became bigger, horns emerging. He was thrust forward onto the straw, on his hoofs and knees, his lower legs morphing into the backs of his thighs and black fur forming as his knees turned into feet. Muscles and tendons split and ripped apart, blood splashing onto the straw, but only the amount that was necessary to transform. His ribs and stomach were elongated, new skin forming, his head and body becoming furry, his teeth and jaw cracking forward, his face ripping.

Ray twisted and split and became a bull. Not a calf, but one that was older. Not as big as Taurus, but one of a substantial size.

His brain however, stayed the same. It was still Ray, who was well aware of what was happening, and the Taurus bull began to laugh, a deep, booming laugh that resonated for almost a mile in all directions.

The Ray-bull screamed.

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