

MEET THE BAD GUY GONE GOOD

A
CHARLIE
COBB
THRILLER

BREAKER



ROB ASPINALL

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A CHARLIE COBB THRILLER

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A man's gotta have a code. That's why I'm not gonna drop the guy. I'm just gonna scare the shit out of him. And this is my favourite place to do it. Grab 'em by their belt and flip 'em upside down.

I've got Mr Kavuk here dangling over the edge of the old Rope Works. It's a beaten up Victorian warehouse in the middle of a concrete, needle and weed jungle. It's stark and dirty. An abandoned world a couple of miles out of the city. Cold and windy too, especially in late February.

I bet if I dropped Mr Kavuk right now, the animals and birds would clean up the mess before the council did. It's that kind of place.

Kavuk himself is a middle-aged guy. Turkish, I think. Short. Chubby. Receding. Baggy black slacks and a matching jumper over a white shirt. A flash of gold around his hairy wrists and fingers.

"That's a nice watch," I say. "You buy it or nick it?"

"I don't steal."

"Sure."

"Is this what this is about?" he asks, wriggling and kicking his stumpy legs. "A few stolen watches?"

I let him slide a little lower over the edge of the flat cement roof. He gets a nice view of ten floors down.

"You know why we're here, Mr Kavuk. You've been roughing up some of the neighbours. Trying to get them to sell."

"The business is growing. I offer a fair price. They're stubborn."

"Yeah, well one of 'em has insurance with Mr Rudenko. And Mr Rudenko would like you to stop."

"I'm not scared of your boss."

"*He's not my boss,*" I say, tipping him further over the edge. "I'm independent. Like Switzerland."

"Then whatever he's paying you, I'll give you ten per cent extra."

"You cheap bastard."

"Okay," he says, his head filling with blood. "Fourteen."

I laugh and shake my head. I let go of his belt. He begins to slide through my grip. I've found over the years that expensive pants slide easy.

"*Shit!*" he yells.

I tighten my grip around his knees.

"You're getting heavy, Mr Kavuk. You agree or not?"

Kavuk eyeballs the patchy, cracked concrete below. He looks up at me. "No."

"*No?* You're hanging off a roof, mate."

I'm so surprised, I almost drop him. By now they're usually giving up their wife and kids. Anything to let 'em up. I decide he needs some extra motivation.

"Perhaps I'm not being clear," I say, letting go completely. He gasps. I catch him by his fat ankles. He swings. "You know, fat ankles like these are harder to grip."

His face shifts from panic to something else. I dunno. A kind of weird resolve, I suppose you'd call it.

"I don't care what you do," he says.

"Fine," I say, letting go of an ankle. I feel the strain in my right arm. "Did I mention my old shoulder injury? It freezes up if I hang on too long."

That's the truth. I once had this guy by his foot. My whole arm went dead. Yeah, that was a mess.

"If you're gonna drop me, drop me," Kavuk says. "I don't bow to anyone. Especially not a Russian."

I can see why the pig-headed fool's built himself a nice little empire. He's one hell of a negotiator.

"Okay," I say. "I've got another question. If I drop you right here, right now, who inherits your business? Your wife?"

"My son. Omar."

"Well then. My grip is gonna give out in about thirty seconds from now. And when your head makes a Jackson Pollock all over the concrete, I'll drive across town and find young Omar. I'll bring him up here and go through this all over again . . . Assuming, of course, Mr Rudenko's happy to stop there."

I can see him run it through his computer. He looks at the ground. Looks at me. Shakes his head. "Okay, okay. But leave my sons."

Just in time, too. My shoulder's getting stiff. I haul him up with both hands and flip him upright. He collapses against the lip of the roof. I drag him onto his feet and hold him while he gets his balance.

"Can we go now?" he asks, checking his watch. "I've got appointments."

"Course," I say. "Right after you go through the gift shop."

“Huh?”

“I can’t let you leave without a souvenir,” I say, pulling my phone from the inside pocket of my black bomber. I dial 999.

“What are you talking about?” he asks.

I hold a finger up for him to shush. A lady operator answers. “Ambulance,” I say.

She patches me through. A guy asks me what kind of emergency it is. I tell him it’s the serious kind. I give him the address and cut off the call.

I tuck my phone away and square up to Kavuk. “Right. So which arm then?”

“Which what?”

“The left or the right? Which can you do without?”

Kavuk attempts to run. I lunge forward and grab him. I bend him over double with a hand pressed on his shoulder. I extend the left arm out. “I’ll go with this one.”

“No! The other one! The other one!”

I guess he wanks with his left. I switch to the right arm. I straighten it out. “On three,” I tell him.

He squeezes his eyes shut and grits his teeth.

“One . . . Two . . .” I snap it quick.

He screams and scares a couple of pigeons off the side of the building. The guy whimpers. Holds the top of his arm. The bone sticks out the wrong way through the sleeve of his jumper.

“There,” I say, admiring a nice job. “Clean as a whistle.”

He throws up as I lead him across the roof. “You animal,” he says, trembling.

Round and round we go down the uneven narrow staircase that stinks of junkie piss and dead things. He curses me all the way. All the names under the Manchester clouds.

I walk him across the stretch of unused land. Weeds up to the knees. Broken glass crunching under my trusty docker boots: black and steel toed. One of three pairs I rotate to keep them fresh.

I don’t wear trainers. Trainers are no good for kicking in doors or ribs. Not thick enough for when you’re walking over needles and glass. Not grippy enough for when the floor gets slippery with blood. No, what you need in this game is a sturdy pair of boots. Health and safety always comes first.

We stop at my car. A big, dark-blue Peugeot saloon. Sporty and pricey in its day. I’ve got it parked up on a street where prossies offer a blow 'n' go drive-thru service.

“You smoke?” I ask Kavuk.

He nods his head, shiny with cold sweat.

I open the passenger door and reach inside the glove box. I pull out a pack of cigs and a silver lighter. I take out a cig and push it in Kavuk’s mouth. I light it. He puffs away, calmer now. The shock kicking in.

“You not smoke?” he asks me as I put away the lighter and cigarettes.

“Only after messy jobs,” I say. “The cigs are reserved for the people I hurt. I’m good like that.”

“I can’t believe you broke my arm,” Kavuk says, blowing smoke and staring at the bone. Getting used to it.

“You’ll be right as rain in a few weeks,” I say. “And count yourself lucky. Rudenko wanted a leg.”

As Kavuk makes light work of the cigarette, the ambulance shows up. Lights flashing blue. Siren on silent. It pulls up in front of my car. A pair of paramedics in green overalls jump out. A man and a woman in their forties. Short. But then most people are short next to me.

“This is your man,” I say, pointing to Kavuk. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“What happened?” the woman asks. She snaps on a pair of blue latex gloves as the male paramedic opens the back of the ambulance.

“He fell over,” I say, walking around to the driver’s side of the Peugeot. “Didn’t you, Mr Kavuk?”

Kavuk tosses the cigarette butt and nods. The woman guides him towards the back of the ambulance. Shaking her head and giving me the evils. Like I give a shit.

I get behind the wheel of my car and reverse out of there before they can ask any more questions.

See, I told you I’m a nice bloke. Most enforcers wouldn’t have called the ambulance. They’d have left him up on the roof with a busted leg.

That’s the problem with the new breed. They lack principles. Discipline. Class.

I spin the car round and shoot past a pair of late afternoon prostitutes in fishnet tights. I hit the elevated ring road that circles the city, the Manchester skyline like a giant game of Tetris. Some buildings old. Some new. Some made of brick. Some made of glass. Red and white cranes working on dropping the latest pieces in place.

As I tear past traffic in the outside lane, I get on the phone to Rudenko. I tell him it’s done. Kavuk agrees.

Rudenko tells me to come over to Dimitri’s, pronto. He sounds pissed off. I hang up the call and smile. A pissed-off client means there’s a big problem. And the bigger the problem, the more I get paid.

It's bouncing down with rain. Sky painted black. I'm parked outside Dimitri's, a Greek restaurant Rudenko bought to rinse the cash he was making from a crystal meth network. He doesn't say that, of course. Keeps his cards close to his chest. But if he liked Greek food so much, he wouldn't order the doner pizza and chips every time.

Anyway, it's a rundown place on the outskirts of the city. One of a terrace row of takeaway joints. I wait to be summoned, Neil Diamond cranked up on the stereo to play over the rain. "Love on the Rocks". I sing at the top of my lungs. It gets to the good part, the big chorus. I let it rip. I've got big lungs. A baritone voice. I could have been a crooner, but the gangs on my estate got to me first.

Just as the song's reaching its peak, a fist pounds on my window. I stop singing and dive for the stereo controls, spinning the volume to zero. I wind down the window. Fat, cold raindrops bounce in off the door sill.

Frogger leans in and fixes me with those big, wide-apart eyes that earned him his nickname. "What you singing to?" "Metallica," I say.

I'm not ashamed of my Neil Diamond fan club membership. But it doesn't do me any favours mentioning it. If this arsehole ever finds out, I'll never hear the end of it.

Besides, I can't have the underworld thinking I'm soft.

"The boss is ready for you," Frogger says, stepping away from the door. He pulls his red hoodie over his head.

I open the door and get out.

"You still driving this piece of wank?" he asks, snorting and spitting phlegm on the pavement.

I look down a few cars and see his blue Nissan Skyline with the big spoiler and gold wheel trims. "You still driving the pig magnet?"

"Like I give a toss," he says. "They know who I am . . . Come on."

I follow Frogger inside. It's warm and takeaway-bright. Smells of lamb and chip oil. It's a dinky place with a few tables and chairs on either side as you approach the counter. The lino's a dirty blue and white check in need of replacing. The menu board over the counter shows illuminated pictures of sick-looking meat.

Dimitri keeps the restaurant empty when Rudenko's around. Hardly matters if the place makes money or not. The big cheese himself sits on the middle booth on the righthand side. Sure as a bear shits, he's halfway through his doner pizza and chips. A fourteen incher. The fat bastard must be nervous about something.

After ten years of working for a guy, you get to know his habits. And he pigs out more than usual when he's nervous.

Me and Frogger stand dripping on the lino. I see Rudenko's personal bodyguard sitting to the left. A cueball in grey sweats taking up the entire table. A burger demolished down to crumbs in front of him on a wax wrap. He stares at me every time I come to see his boss. As if he's trying to put the fear into me.

Nobhead.

Rudenko sprinkles the pizza with salt. Doesn't bother looking up. "Sit down."

Frogger takes the chair on the inside of Rudenko. I sit across from the boss. The chairs look play school compared to the four of us sitting on them.

Freddie, Rudenko's bodyguard, is the biggest. Six-nine tall and a long walk around. I'm next in line. Six-five and solid. Frogger's six-three. Six-four if he didn't hunch. He's lanky and wiry like a coat hanger.

Rudenko's big too, but only in a circle. He's five-nine, tops. And that's in those Cuban heels. Makes him stand taller next to his blonde giraffe of a wife.

"The usual, Frogger?" Dimitri shouts from behind the counter.

"Just the meat," Frogger says, in a nasal Mancunian accent. No trace of his Lithuanian family in his voice. Only the shaved, sandy hair and angular features.

"You want anything?" Rudenko asks me between gobfuls of chips. He chews with his mouth open. Breathes through his nose. A suntanned face that greases itself.

"I'm good," I say, checking my watch. "Out for a meal in a bit."

"Your daughter?" Rudenko asks.

"How'd you guess?"

"Cause you're a Billy No Mates, that's why," Frogger says, snorting.

Rudenko looks sideways at Frogger. Frogger shuts up. His tray of doner meat slides into the picture. He shovels the meat in like he's gone feral.

"Let's talk business," Rudenko says. "We've got a big problem. The trial."

"I thought that was a dead end," I say. "Prosecution didn't have a witness."

"Not until last night," Rudenko says.

"Kid saw us do it," Frogger says. He turns his jaw to the ceiling and lowers a strip of meat into his big, cartoon mouth.

"They saw *you* do it," Rudenko says, slurping on a foam cup of black coffee. "I was just standing there. But they want the big fish, you know? Not the little worm."

"If you'd hired me in the first place," I say, "none of this would be happening."

Rudenko shrugs. "Cashflow."

"Anyway," Frogger says. "How'd we know some kid'd be hanging around the tunnels on the estate?"

One thing I forgot to mention about Rudenko. He's been on trial for a couple of months, out on bail. Something to do with a bookmaker, shot in the head and left in an unused sewer tunnel that runs under a large block of flats.

I know it well. I grew up around there.

Used to stash my money and drugs in that tunnel when it was still working. I'd stick a peg on my nose and plastic bags on my trainers. Go in and hide the gear where no one ever looked.

But that's when I was a dealer. I'm a changed man now. What they call a *fixer*.

And yeah, I might lose a client if he goes down. But there'll always be people who need straightening out.

People the likes of Frogger and Freddie can't handle.

"So I suppose you want me to do something about this kid," I say.

"You suppose right," Rudenko says. "I've got a man on the inside. They're keeping him in a hotel for two days before he takes the stand. If the kid testifies . . ." Rudenko straightens up in his chair. Punches the centre of his chest. "Fucking heartburn."

"Don't worry," I say, as Rudenko returns to his pizza. "Just give me the details, and I'll sort it."

Rudenko wipes his mouth with a serviette. Nods. "I'll have the hotel and the room number tomorrow. Somewhere in the city centre. Frogger will come with you."

Oh, no, no, no.

Ever had to work with someone you'd happily see fed alive and into an industrial mincer? Now imagine that fucker is a walking disaster who turns everything into a hurricane of shit and you're the one left holding the mop. Yeah, that's Frogger.

"I'm a one-man show Mr Rudenko. You know that."

Rudenko shakes his head. "No. You take Frogger. He's your contact with our man inside. And anyway, it's a two-man job."

"Sorry, Mr Rudenko. But you know my terms."

I hear a screech of chair legs across lino. Freddie casts a shadow as he gets to his feet.

I turn to my left. "Don't make me get out of my chair, cueball."

Freddie stomps over regardless. It's like that scene in Jurassic Park. When the T-Rex is coming and the water in the cup is bouncing.

I get to my feet. My chair in one hand behind my back. Before the big man can lay a knuckle on me, I swing it around and up in both hands. Hard and fast.

The rim of the metal seat cracks the underside of Freddie's nose. He staggers back and collapses against his table. It flips up sideways and spills a large coke down his front. He clutches his nose in both hands. Blood all over the place.

I return the chair to the floor and sit on it. Frogger smirks and carries on eating. Rudenko doesn't bat an eyelid.

"I'll do it if I can bring in my own man," I say, before pointing at Frogger. "But I'm not working with *that*."

"I'm not jizzing my pants about it either," Frogger says, shaking up a bottle of mayo.

"Do it or don't do it," Rudenko says. "It's still getting done."

"Well good luck then," I say, standing.

I start to walk away.

"Double your usual fee," I hear Rudenko say.

"Triple," I reply, pausing on my way out. "And I plan the op."

Freedom's a seller's market. Rudenko soon caves in. "Fine."

"And cash up front, this time," I say. "Payment for this one and you owe me for Kavuk."

"Frogger will have the money. You'll get a call tomorrow. Just don't fuck it up."

I turn, a hand on the door. "When do I ever?"

Rudenko chews it over. He grunts. "I suppose that's why I let you rob me blind. You're worse than my wife. Now get the fuck out of my restaurant."

I step out into the rain, reeking of chip oil.

A job with Frogger. That's all I need. Still, one kid. A guy on the inside. How hard can it be?

The rain has stopped, but a strong wind blows across the half empty car park. Few people have a car here. Most are beat-up rust buckets a couple of decades old.

That's why I drive the Peugeot. It's fast, with a turbo engine. But it's not fancy enough to get nicked.

I walk across the car park to the flats, pink balloon tugging in the wind. It's one of those fancy ones. A big number nineteen, tied with sparkly ribbon instead of string.

Don't wanna leave it in the car in case someone steals it.

The block of flats looms high over me. Looks more like an open prison than a residential area.

I notice a black Mercedes saloon parked up near the main entrance to my block. Not a raindrop on it. Means the owner keeps it undercover, lives local and only just arrived.

I look around me. I don't see any trouble, so I head into the open communal area at the bottom of the block.

The lifts are playing up again. There's a scruffy note, written in biro and taped to the breezeblock wall. Someone kicked the shit out of a lift door and now both are knackered.

So I take the stairs. Seven floors up. Concrete steps and naked walls scrawled in graffiti and stained with old piss.

No, make that fresh piss.

Disgusting.

I feel the climb in my legs. I'm not quite as young and fit as I used to be. For a second, it occurs to me that I might be getting too old for this business.

Then I think, *nah*. Gotta get back in the gym, that's all. Lay off the cake and biscuits.

I'm five floors up when I hear another pair of feet a couple of flights below. Heavy scuffs in shoes. The formal kind.

Must be someone dressed up for court, I think.

But as I round the railing onto the next flight, I see a burly guy coming up below me. A walking wardrobe in a dark-blue overcoat. Shaved ginger hair receding on top.

I keep climbing. Up to the seventh. The guy picks up the pace behind me. Breathing heavy. I hit the covered walkway that leads to my flat. It looks out over the industrial wastelands. High-rises, terrace houses, boarded-up shops and rundown factories. Merging into converted mills and swanky glass apartments as they get closer to the city.

Along the walkway to the left, sits a long line of pale blue doors. Mine is number 707. There's a guy standing facing me at the end of the walkway. Jet-black hair and rugged features. A young version of me, before the battle scars and grey sprinkles.

I move towards my door, heavy raindrops dripping slow off the roof edge. I stop and tie the balloon off on the walkway railing. Slow. Careful. Both eyes on the guy in front.

I reach inside the left pocket of my faded black jeans. Pull out my door keys. My younger lookalike starts towards me. I unzip my jacket as I walk.

I turn at the sound of those fancy shoes. The ginger guy from the stairwell has caught up. Red in the face. Blowing out clouds of cold air.

The net closes in. A guy on either side. Me in the middle. I pass door four, five, six . . . I get to seven and stop. I reach slow inside my jacket. I grab at fresh nothing.

Bollocks. I left my gun in the glove box of the car.

I leave my hand there anyway. Maybe it'll fool 'em.

No, they close the gap.

As they reach inside their coats, I fly through the options in my head.

Option one: I plant a left on the chin of the guy in front, spin and throw a backhanded right at the one behind.

Option two: I move fast as the guy in front reaches for his weapon. I grab it and direct the shot at Ginger Nuts behind. Then I wrestle the shooter over the steel railing.

Option three: I bust through my own front door before they can get a clean shot. I run through the hall, into the kitchen and grab my sawn-off from under the sink. As they run in behind me, I come out blasting.

Yeah, the third one sounds best. Okay, three, two, one . . .

I put my left shoulder through the door. It flies off its hinges. I run along the dark, narrow hallway, into my small, untidy kitchen. I fling open the cupboard under the sink. I reach up blind for the pre-loaded sawn-off. I tear it out of its gaffer tape fixing and bolt back out into the hallway.

"That won't be necessary, Charlie."

A man's voice. Well-spoken. Coming from the living room. I pause with my finger on the trigger and look to my immediate left. Mr Murphy sits facing me in my favourite recliner chair, right leg crossed over the left. A black, fifties-style hat perched on his knee. Silver hair. Tailored navy suit. An expensive overcoat and a fortune in Rolex around his wrist.

Should have known it was him. Only two people call me Charlie. And one of them's Connaugh Murphy.

Everyone else calls me Breaker. It's a historical thing. You can probably guess why.

I pause with the sawn-off. I notice Murphy's PA, Laura, perched in a grey trouser suit and cream raincoat on the end of my worn brown sofa.

The two goons from the walkway amble in. Hands by their sides, empty of weapons.

I tut at them. "Why didn't you two clowns say something?"

"They don't speak much English," Laura says in a light Dubliner accent.

No doubt she picked the lock. She acts like she floats above it—what, with her pinned-up black hair and wouldn't-melt face—but Laura here comes from the gutter, just like me.

Oh, and she doesn't date 'the help'. I already got the door in the face on that one.

I lower the sawn-off. "Cheap labour. Not like you, Mr Murphy. Where's Col and Trev?"

"Dumb shits are in the nick. Thought they could do a bit on the side. And you know what it's like now. Not many takers for protection work. They all want to be personal trainers. Tans. Haircuts. All that bollocks."

Murphy might have upper class delusions, but he still swears like a bastard.

As the goons brush past me into the living room, I look at the damage to the latch. I shake my head. "Busting in my own door. That's a first."

"I'll have a man come fix it," Murphy says. "Laura, sort it out will you?"

Laura takes out her mobile and retreats to the window. Speaks quiet into the handset.

"Come in and take a seat," Murphy says.

Take a seat in my own living room? How kind of you, you Irish prick.

I drop onto the sofa and rest the sawn-off on my lap. Murphy sits to the right, the goons stand inside the doorway of the room.

I check my watch.

"Somewhere to be?" Murphy asks.

"Daughter's birthday tea."

"How old is Cassie now?"

"Nineteen."

"University?"

"Criminal Psychology."

Murphy rocks forward with laughter. "She ought to be an expert already, growing up around you."

He settles back into the chair.

"So who needs hurting?" I ask.

"No one," Murphy says. "I've got a business proposition for you."

"I don't like salaried work, you know that."

"I was thinking more of a partnership."

As in?

"Exclusivity rights," Laura says, coming off the phone and standing arms-folded in the window.

"What's that mean?"

"You work on behalf of my organisation," Murphy says. "Just mine. No one else."

These bosses. They always use this corporate lingo. The shirts. The suits. As if they can buy class off a peg.

I need all of a second to think about it. "Sorry, Mr Murphy, but you know me. I'm like Switzerland. Rudenko runs his empire. You run yours. And I keep the peace in the middle. I don't think anyone wants another war."

Murphy leans forward in my chair. "Haven't you heard? They found a witness. That fat Russian fuck's going down. Any day now."

I act dumb. As if it's news. Seems even more important the kid doesn't squawk, now I think about it. The last thing I want is to be Murphy's newest fist puppet. I've done more than my fair fill of that.

Murphy throws out his arms. "Come on, Charlie. Look at this place. I could put you up in a plush apartment. Views over the city. Or somewhere leafy, if that's more your taste. Cassie's tuition fees can't be cheap, either."

I blow the air out of my cheeks. "Twenty-odd grand a year . . . She works part time, but . . . you know."

"Look," Murphy says. "When Rudenko goes down, there's going to be a void. And I intend to step into it. So one way or another, you're going to be working for me. You can either dine at the table or feed off the scraps."

Laura saunters across the room and checks her hair in the mirror over the electric fire. "Not much call for a peacekeeper when there's only one side," she says.

"Think about it," Murphy says, rising to his feet and fixing his hat just so. He walks towards the living room doorway, entourage in tow. He stops. Turns. "You're not as young as you think, Charlie. You don't want to be one of those sad old granddads, still thugging around."

I put the sawn-off away as they leave. I retrieve the balloon and watch them from the balcony. Murphy and his crew take off in that spotless Mercedes. Right on cue, a locksmith van parks up below.

Murphy's a proper operator. He doesn't do things on the cheap like Rudenko.

Yeah, the man makes a damn good argument, with or without Rudenko in the picture. The problem is, I'm a stubborn bastard. And I promised the Russian. Maybe after tomorrow, I'll reconsider. Can't live in this shithole forever.

Tomorrow me and Frogger get to that kid. We'll see if Murphy still wants me after that.

“A pink balloon, Dad? Really?”
 “What? You don’t like it?”

Cassie sits across from me in a one of those overpriced chain restaurants. Some kind of bean burger thing on her plate. The 19 balloon tied to the back of her chair.

“I appreciate the thought, but I’m a grown woman,” she says.

Mandy, Cassie’s mum, pinches her cheek. “Aw, you’re still my baby.”

I point at the bean burger. “I don’t know how you can eat that rubbish.”

“I don’t know how you can eat an innocent creature,” she says, turning her nose up at my double cheeseburger.

“You know your dad,” Mandy says. “No meat, no meal.”

“You don’t think they’d strip you to the bone, given half the chance?” I say.

“Cows are herbivores, Dad.”

“Herbi-what?”

“They don’t eat meat,” Mandy says, shaking her head.

“Yeah, but they would if they did.” I say. “They’d eat you alive, too. At least we put a bolt in ‘em first.”

Mandy—my one-time, long-ago squeeze—sits alongside Cassie on the inside of the booth, next to a window facing a busy city street. She picks at her chicken wings with false orange nails, hair dyed half blonde, half brown. Her mind elsewhere as usual.

Cassie gazes out of the window too. Her mother may be on cloud cuckoo half the time, but not my Cass. Usually she’s as sharp as a tack. Switched on and telling me all about her life at uni.

“Something wrong, Cass?” I ask. “You don’t seem your chirpy self.”

She circles a fry in a puddle of ketchup. Looks up at me with those big blue eyes. Uh-oh, I know that look. I’m about to get hit with some bad news. A boyfriend. A baby. A loan. All three.

“It’s nothing,” she says.

I let it go and bite into my burger.

Then she spits it out. “When are you going to stop?”

“Stop what?” I say, mouthful of burger.

“Being a criminal,” Mandy says.

I swallow my food. Look around the restaurant. Glare at Mandy. “Why not announce it over the PA?”

Mandy shrugs and gnaws on a chicken wing.

“Mum’s right, though. When are you going to give it up? You’re in your forties now. It’s embarrassing.”

“Time you got a proper career,” Mandy says.

“What, like you? Handing out happy endings at the massage parlour?”

“I’ve already spoken to Mum,” Cassie says. “She’s agreed to stop doing them.”

“And the cigs. I’m packing them in too,” Mandy says. Proud of herself. Mother of the pissing year.

The pair of them burn holes in me.

“What am I supposed to do?” I ask. “I’m too old to do anything else.”

“Lots of people change career in their forties,” Cassie says.

I think about Murphy’s offer. I put down my burger and sip on my beer. “Well, now you mention it, I’ve been offered this, um, management position. A big organisation. Pay rise. Benefits. Apartment.”

Mandy laughs. “You?”

“What company? What doing?” Cassie asks.

I think fast. As fast as my brain will go. “Project management. Mergers and acquisitions.”

Cassie takes a bite out of her hippy burger. The heat’s off: she bought it.

“You mean running a gang then,” she says.

Bollocks.

“Come on, Dad. We’re not stupid.”

“Well, one of you isn’t.”

Mandy sneers back at me.

“If it makes you feel better, I might have to wear a suit.”

“It’s not enough,” Cassie says. “You’ll still be hurting people.”

Christ. First the veggie thing, then the protesting, now the sudden moral compass. It’s ever since she started that damn uni.

Tree hugging do-gooders filling her head with lovey-dovey new age nonsense.

Cassie drops her burger. "Every time I'm in lectures, I get this image in my mind, of you bashing someone's head in, breaking someone's door in. Or going back to prison. I start to feel sick, like a fraud. I'm there studying criminal behaviour and my dad's this mafia guy."

"You're ashamed of me?" I ask. The thought never occurred to me.

"I used to tell myself you were a good guy who happened to do some bad things. But you're not a good guy, Dad."

I look towards Mandy.

Mandy shrugs. "She's not wrong, Charlie."

"You had a rough start, Dad, I get it. But you're middle-aged now."

"Steady on," I say.

"Not far off," Mandy says.

So much for a pleasant birthday meal. I'm letting it play over in my head a while, when I notice a young skinhead in jeans and a red sweatshirt. He's kicking up a fuss over the bill. Throws a couple of notes at the slip of a young waiter and calls him a fucking nobhead. He gets up and shoulders the waiter out of the way. Swaggers off to the gents' toilets.

If there's anything that grinds my gears, it's a lack of manners. If there's anything that grinds 'em more, it's some scally bastard throwing his weight around.

"Going for a piss," I say, dropping a fry and walking across the restaurant.

I follow the guy into the gents. He lines himself up in front of a urinal. Before he can pull out his dick, I grab hold of his neck. I throw him backwards, off his feet, into an empty stall. He lands twisted on the toilet bowl. I drag him back out by his ankles, a cake of blue detergent in my spare hand, scooped from a urinal.

I pull his face up to mine, a hand squeezing his throat. "Open your mouth," I tell him.

He looks at me wide-eyed in fear. Shakes his head. His lips sealed shut.

"It's this or my dick."

He half opens. I shove the blue cake in the gap. "Now close it."

He bites down on the cake and gags.

"This place might be a rip-off," I say, "but manners cost nothing." I drag him to his feet. "Now piss off."

He spits the cake out and bolts through the door, I rinse my hands off and follow him out. He scurries across the restaurant. Humiliated. Fuming. His girlfriend asking him what's wrong. Their confused playschool-age daughter in tow.

Was that me when I was younger? Is the girlfriend Mandy? The young girl Cassie?

I shudder at the thought, but reassure myself. It was a long time ago, and I've changed. A seven-year stretch in Strangeways'll do that to you.

As soon as I slide back into the booth, Cassie's onto me in a flash. "See, this is what I'm talking about."

"Eh? I just went for a piss."

Mandy shakes her head.

How the hell Cassie ended up smart is beyond me. She gets her looks from her mother and the balls from me. But I don't know where the class or the brains came from.

In the end, I crumble. Can't fight against those guilt-trip eyes. "Fine. I'll jack it in."

Mandy always said I was a softie with her.

Cass picks up her burger. "You promise?"

"I promise."

"Swear on my life?"

"What? Hold on now."

"Swear on my life that you'll give it all up. No more Mr Nasty."

"I'm not swearing on your life, Cass."

"Swear on my life, or I quit uni."

"You're not gonna do that."

"I mean it," she says, staring me point blank in the eye.

Shit, she *does* mean it. You know why? Because she's just like her old man. Stubborn as blood stains on a tennis shoe. And she knows I'm a man of my word.

I sit back and sigh. "Fine."

"Say it, Dad."

"Cassie, I will give it all up. I swear on your life."

"What will you give up?" Mandy says. "Be specific."

Cassie raises her eyebrows. Cocks her head. Mandy the same.

I crumble again. "I give up the violence, the crime, the whole bloody lot. Just don't you dare quit your studies."

Cassie smiles. She slides her iPhone across the table. Pushes a big red button on the screen.

"You recorded it?" I ask.

"Now you can't take it back," she says.

I pick up my burger in my right hand. I keep my left hand under the table. Fingers crossed. A promise doesn't count if you've got your fingers crossed. Everyone knows that.

So yeah, tonight I'm a reformed man. Father of the century. But tomorrow night, I do what I do best.

From the top floor of the Renaissance Hotel, Detective Neil Price had a clear line of sight. He could see right across the back end of the city, where towering new developments rose out of a dirty old part of town.

Detective Price's National Crime Agency unit had secured the entire top floor. He'd chosen the suite himself. It was tucked away from the hustle and bustle of Deansgate and Market Street, where shoppers, drinkers and big-brand advertising screens collided. It was quieter at the rear of the hotel. And far more private too.

With straggled hair and a hipster beard, Price didn't look much like a detective. That was, except, for the off-white shirt, the black tie and the weapon holstered against his ribs. He leaned out of the window and sucked on a half-smoked cigarette. He blew a small cloud into the air. It caught and drifted on a light breeze. He surveyed the immediate area, looking for signs of activity. The surrounding buildings. The grey van parked several stories below. Left and right along the windows of the hotel. No sign of anything.

"Team One. Perimeter check," he said.

"Team One clear," a tinny voice said in his ear.

"Team Two," Price said.

"Team Two clear."

"Team Three."

"Clear, sir."

Price took a final drag on the cigarette and flicked it out of the window. He watched it spiral all the way to the ground below. A tiny orange spark as it hit the service entrance car park.

He pushed the window closed and replaced the long linen drapes.

It was dim inside the second bedroom of the suite. Price grabbed his dark-blue Barbour jacket off the back of a brown velvet desk chair. He walked across the thick carpet into the living area. Briggs and Sanders sat slouched on a caramel sofa, watching Jeremy Kyle on a flatscreen on the wall. Shoulder holsters worn on the outside of crumpled office shirts.

Price headed into the master bedroom. Large with plenty of floor space. A king size bed in the middle. Danny Platt, the witness, was a fashionable black teenager in a light-grey hoodie, jeans and trainers. He sat with a blank expression, running rings around Jennings: a chubby, red-faced police officer.

"Pause that for a second," Price said.

Jennings stared at his controller. "I don't know how."

"Here," Danny said, doing it for him.

"Listen, Danny, I've been called out to another location," Price said. "I'll be back in a while, but you're in good hands, okay? We've got three of my best officers in the suite. An armed guard in the corridor, and two more in the lobby. I've got more units watching the streets and full CCTV. The lift only goes up as far as the floor below and we've fixed a code lock on the door to the stairs."

"Don't forget tactical response," Jennings said.

"Machine guns, choppers, the works," Price said. "And tomorrow morning, you'll have a full armed escort to the court house."

Jennings nudged Danny on the arm. "Even the prime minister doesn't get this kind of attention."

Price zipped up his jacket. "Anyway, I'll let you get back to kicking Jennings' fat arse."

"I'm only six-nil down," said Jennings. "Still time for a comeback."

Danny nodded and went back to the game. The young man didn't say much. And who could blame him? He must have been terrified.

Price moved back into the living area. "Back later," he said to Briggs and Sanders.

"You're gonna miss the pizza," Briggs said with a yawn.

"Always the way," Price said, stepping out of the door into the corridor. Another of his unit stood guard outside, rotating with the men inside the suite.

Price patted him on the arm and walked along the corridor, up to the stairwell door. He punched a code into the temporary lock, fixed earlier in the day. He pushed his way through. Two flights down, he took the lift to the lobby. He acknowledged the hidden camera positioned over the doors.

Price came out of the elevator. He strode across the patterned marble floor of the brown and cream themed lobby. He made eye contact with two undercover officers. One, a man reading a paper, off to the left on a lounge chair. Another, a new member of the team. Young and blonde in a black business suit on an iPad.

Price exited the lobby onto the busy street. A short walk later, he climbed inside his grey Mondeo pool car and pulled his

mobile from his jacket. “It’s Price,” he said. “I’m leaving the hotel. Coast is clear. We’re all set.”

I wait, crouched in a ball in the darkness. The smell of a summer meadow. The rumble of road under wheels. Air brakes hissing. Traffic beeping. Muffled voices. The chugging engine of a fixed trailer wagon. I rock back on my heels as we lurch forward again, the air around me close and warm.

I light up my digital watch in the dark. The journey seems to have taken an age but we're right on schedule.

I feel the wagon stop, the brakes whining. The engine cuts. One at a time, the doors open at the back. I hear the driver activate the loading lift. Before I know it, he's wheeled the cage out and lowered it off the truck.

Not that I can see shit with these white cotton bedsheets piled on top of me. All I've got is my ears and the feel of a rough ride over tarmac as the driver pushes the laundry cage inside. I hear him talking to the two cops in the grey van we know they have parked in the loading area. I can tell from their voices, the fuzz don't sound concerned. They sound bored.

Bored of checking every single delivery that comes into a big, busy hotel like this. That's why I insisted we leave it until later in the night.

Cops are like the rest of us. They get tired and sloppy. And after the umpteenth delivery, they'll cast a quick eye over the paperwork and won't even bother checking the loads.

I hear the wagon engine firing up. The brakes spit out some more air as it rumbles off. I hear the side doors to the hotel close. Then silence.

My phone lights up in my hand. A text from the driver. *Clear*. I unzip a trouser pocket on my overalls and tuck the phone away. I push the heavy, folded sheets upwards and stand up out of the cage. The sheets flop onto the floor of a storage area where they park the cages. They wheel the fresh laundry in and the dirty stuff out.

Frogger emerges from his cage. Without a word, we exit the room, slipping out while no one's looking. Into a nearby stairwell and up four floors. I check the coast is clear and then wave Frogger on into the fourth floor corridor.

Frogger takes out a keycard as I play lookout. The lock flashes green and we're in. The room is dark. The curtains drawn. I turn on the bedside lamps but otherwise keep the room dim. I reach inside the open wardrobe on the way into the room. I pull a black travel case off a chest-high shelf and drop it flat on the bed. Frogger spins out the code on the lock and opens out the case. We reach inside and each grab a mask. Both identical. The faces of old men. Made of rubber. White hair and ugly, wrinkled faces with more folds than a Japanese hand fan.

We fix the masks over our faces in the mirror. We both pick out a weapon. Glock 17 handguns with silencers. We load and prep, tucking them in holsters inside our blue overalls. We zip up and grab the rest of the stuff we'll need.

Frogger closes and locks the case. Sticks it back in the wardrobe. I walk over to the window, pull a drape aside and place the guest chair under the ledge.

I step out onto a window-cleaning platform: steel painted blue, with two railings up to waist-height. Suspended from a rail on the building roof, it's operated by an electronic winch. I power it up as Frogger climbs on. I push the lever forward and the platform judders into life. It rises slow but steady. The higher we go, the breezier it gets. The platform sways a little. I peer over the edge. A long way down to the police surveillance van below.

After what seems like too long, we make it to the top floor, where the suite is. I hope we've got the window we need.

I stop the platform. We step as soft as we can to the right. Frogger hands me a small black suction cup. I attach it to the window close to the frame and pull back to the left. The window opens with a quiet *shush*. I take out my phone and tap on the camera icon. I reverse the shot and angle it so the lens can see the room and I can see the screen.

The second, smaller bedroom is clear. Bedside lamps left on. Just a pair of twin beds and nothing else. I withdraw my phone and nod at Frogger, my face already sticky with sweat behind the mask. Nostrils filled with the pong of new rubber. The world framed by eyeholes.

I draw the window back another foot and a half. Slow and quiet, we climb through and drop onto the hushed carpet of the bedroom. We creep over to the half-open door. I hear a TV blaring. Cops talking and yawning. I draw the door open and count down with my fingers. Three . . . two . . . Frogger bursts into the room before I'm ready. The giddy shit can't help himself. I follow him in. A tall, grey-haired cop freezes with a slice of pizza in his mouth. Another has his weapon out on the table.

I hold a gloved finger to the lips of my mask. Eyes stray towards weapons. The slice of pizza drops to the floor, but before they know what's hit 'em, we've got 'em eating carpet.

While Frogger watches the two men, I move towards the front door of the suite. I pull it open.

There's only one guy on duty. He's playing a fishing game on his phone. I put my silencer barrel to the back of his skull. He tenses up. I drag him inside. Don't want anyone bursting in during the job.

Sixty seconds in and he's down next to the other two. Phones, weapons and radios confiscated. Arms behind their backs. Wrists in white plastic ties.

That leaves the master bedroom. I hear the sound of a video game. Footie. A man swearing. A lad laughing. The final cop of four and the witness.

I put two fingers to my eyes and point at the men on the living room floor. Frogger nods.

I move across the carpet fast. I put a hand on the door, take a breath and fling it open. I have my gun trained on the cop before he can blink. He puts down the controller. I beckon him off the bed. He's fat and slow.

"Fucking move!" I shout. "Move or I'll shoot you in the face!"

He hurries off the bed. I tell him to pull his gun apart.

"Faster, faster!" I shout.

He fumbles the clip from his weapon. Throws it to the left, the gun to the right. I grab him by his pube-like hair as he walks over. I march him into the room fast.

I kick his legs out from under him and he hits the deck face-first. Frogger ties his wrists as I check my watch.

Two minutes in. We've gotta hurry. I double-back into the master bedroom.

The kid hasn't moved. The game plays on.

"Pause that thing," I say.

The kid pauses the game. He's a wiry black teenager with a trendy haircut and a face younger than his eighteen years. He wears those skinny-legged, baggy-arsed jeans they wear now. And a pair of black trainers with white soles.

I tell him to get off the bed. The kid sits there shaking.

"Off the fucking bed!" I shout, grabbing him by the arm and yanking him onto his feet. I drag him over to the nearest wall and push him down against it. I pull out my phone and bring up some photos. Shots of his mum out shopping. His younger sister coming home from school. The door of the flat they live in. Same kind of place as mine.

"Tomorrow, you're gonna change your story. It was dark. You didn't get a good look at the shooter," I say to him. I shove the gun hard in his face for good measure. "Change your story or you know what'll happen."

He nods. Frantic. Breathless.

I look in his eyes. After all these years, I know when someone's gonna do what I tell 'em. And this kid is gonna do *exactly* what I say. He knows he's not safe now. That Rudenko can get to him, no matter what the cops try. The mum and sister are the icing on the cake. The added incentive.

I'm about to tell him exactly what to say in court, word for word. But I hear silencer shots fired in the living area of the suite.

One. Two.

I dash out of the bedroom to find two of the cops with their brains blown out, point blank. Blood all over the carpet. Two guys still alive. Shaking.

I look at Frogger. "*What the hell did you do?*"

"They made a move."

"No they didn't," says the grey-haired cop.

"Shut your fucking face," Frogger says, pushing the gun in the back of his skull.

I drag Frogger away by the arm. He shakes himself loose of me. "You bloody idiot," I say, seizing him by the neck and pushing him hard against the wall. "Now you're a cop-killer too. You've dropped us all in the shit."

"Big deal," he says, pushing me off. "We'll finish the other two off, then the kid. No witnesses."

"I *knew* you couldn't be trusted," I say, heading back into the room.

The kid sits hunched against the wall where I left him. Too scared to move. I yank him to his feet and into the living area.

Frogger snatches him off me. He pushes him down. "On your knees, maggot."

I step between them. "I'll do the kid. You do the pigs."

Frogger seems to approve, turning his back on me. He takes aim at the nearest cop on the floor.

I hold my gun to the kid's head. He squirts out a few tears, but all credit to him, he doesn't piss or shit himself. "Sorry about this kid," I say.

The squad car had barely hit the curb before Detective Price had bailed out onto the pavement. He pushed his way through a crowd of passers-by to get through to reception. The soles of his shoes squeaked across the marble floor as he scanned his immediate area. Left, right. Almost running straight into a blind hotel guest waving a stick and pulling a large suitcase.

Gibbons, the undercover officer he'd stationed in the lobby, met the detective in front of the reception desk. She tried to explain, but it seemed like she couldn't breathe. Detective Price pulled her along. A lanky uniformed officer in a high-vis jacket held an elevator door open for them.

The ride up was silent and tense. Price caught his breath. Officer Gibbons fought back the tears. The faintest tinge of dry vomit in the corners of her mouth.

The elevator doors opened. Price led the way, jogging down the corridor and pushing through into the stairwell. A couple of flights up, he jabbed in the code on the door and yanked it open. A hurried walk along the corridor brought them to the hotel suite. The door was wedged open with a suitcase.

The scene inside was a mess. And only Briggs and Sanders remained alive.

They sat on the sofa with their hands tied. A phone on a side table with the receiver off the hook. Had they dialled it in with their noses? Their heads? Their chins?

Price cast his eyes over Foster and Jennings, dead on the floor. Holes blown in the backs of their skulls. Bloody brain tissue exposed. The beige carpet around them soaked a sickening red.

He turned to Gibbons. "Go and find something to cut those ties."

"Yes, sir," she said in a shaky voice, spinning on her heels and out of the suite.

Price strode into the master bedroom. No sign of the witness. The bed covers roughed up and the football game on pause, but that was it.

He headed back into the living area. "What the fuck happened?" he said to the men.

"One of them shot Foster and Jennings."

"Yeah, I can see that," Price said. "One of how many?"

"Two, sir."

"And my bloody witness?"

Briggs and Sanders looked at each other. Lost for words. White as the hotel bedsheets.

"Well?"

Both men tried to explain.

"They were gonna shoot us, sir."

"One minute we had a gun to our heads. The next, we woke up and it was just us."

"How the hell did they get in?" Price asked.

Both men seemed clueless. Distant. Price knew concussion when he saw it. Knowing he wasn't going to get much out of either officer, he headed into the second bedroom. It was dim. One of the linen drapes ruffled at the far end. He followed the chill breeze, pulled back the drape and found an open window.

Price leaned out and looked around him. The night was alive with city lights. Manchester Cathedral lit up in a pale white, off to the right of the hotel.

He heard wailing sirens bouncing off buildings. A world of cops and forensics descending on the scene. Ready to cordon off, dust down and bag up. He'd let another detective worry about his two dead men. His only concern was his witness. *Had they taken him? Killed him? If they wanted him dead, why not just leave the body here?*

And why kill a pair of cops? Were they total idiots?

Whatever had happened, this was on him. On his watch. And the consequences . . . Well, he didn't want to think about those.

Detective Price lit a cigarette. He peered out of the window as he blew a plume of smoke. He glanced left, right and down towards street level. Directly below, he noticed a window-cleaning platform several floors down.

Price tossed the cigarette.

He leaned out of the window and counted the floors to the platform. He bolted from the bedroom out into the living area, where Gibbons had returned with a kitchen knife. Price skipped around the crime scene and out through the hotel door. He sprinted along the corridor only to run into the code locked door.

He jabbed the number in once. It didn't work. "Come on!"

He jabbed again and pulled the handle to the right. He was through. Flying down stairs, one flight after another. He had to find the right room. The room next to that platform.

Price checked his watch as he ran. He was sure his phone would ring any minute, the boss demanding a report. So he flew

down flight after flight, out of breath and out of time. He heard the scream of the sirens close in on the hotel.
Forget about the witness. Someone had killed two cops. The whole city was about to get locked down.

She stands there in skinny, torn jeans and a baggy green jumper. Messy blonde hair and a pile of smart-person books in her arms. A look disappointment on her face.

“Dad, you promised.”

I should tell you at this point, I tend to see and hear things. As if they’re real. Some prison shrink said it might be all the bangs to the head I’ve taken. Boxing. Fighting. Baseball bats to the skull.

Anyway, the same shrink wrote me out some of these little yellow pills. All they did was make me sick and tired. So I chucked ‘em. I’d rather put up with a few imaginings than a fuzzy head and twenty-four-seven farts.

So Cassie stands there looking at me. Shaking her head as I hold the barrel of the gun over the witness. And before I know it, I’m not putting a bullet in the kid’s brain. I’m swinging my left elbow and connecting hard with the base of Frogger’s skull. At the same time, I clock the kid on the head with the butt of the pistol. The pair of them drop like stones. The kid on the floor, Frogger face-first on the sofa.

I tuck my gun away and take Frogger’s from his hand. I swipe it across the heads of the two cops the crazy bastard left alive.

They may as well take a nap too.

I slide Frogger’s gun under the nearest sofa. I reach inside one of his overall pockets and find a spare plastic tie. I roll the kid on his back and tie his wrists in front of his body. I scoop him up and throw him over a shoulder. Carry him into the second bedroom. Over to the window. I pull it open wider and lower him through onto the platform. He flops onto the steel mesh as if he’s dead. I climb out after him and power up the winch. The motor whirs and the platform drops down a floor. Then another. Then . . . *Wham!* A falling shadow, heavy as a barrel of bricks landing on top of me.

The platform swings and shakes. Bounces off the side of the building, but keeps dropping.

Before I know what’s what, I’m pinned to the floor. A wrinkly old face in mine. Frogger. His forearm against my throat. I thought I’d knocked him out good.

But damn. Jumping out of a top floor window? He’s tougher and even crazier than I thought. And now he’s slamming the back of my head against the platform floor.

Well, I stop him doing that with a left across his chin. I stagger up. Him, too. He swings and misses. I connect with a right. He drops to one knee. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the kid slipping between the platform floor and the railing. I drop to the deck and catch hold of his arm as he falls.

His body hangs limp over the side. I start to pull him up, but Frogger jumps on top of me. He punches me once, twice, three times. The rubber mask stops me cutting up, but he’s gonna beat me senseless if I don’t do something.

Do I let go of the kid? I’m tempted. Wouldn’t be the first body I’ve dropped.

But no. Can’t do it. I snatch hold of Frogger’s throat with my spare hand. He keeps punching. I keep squeezing. The punches get weaker. I slam forehead against the platform railing. He flops to the floor, out for the count.

I drag the kid up and through the gap in the platform. I scramble over Frogger’s body and hit the big red emergency stop button on the winch motor. We’re a couple of feet below the room Rudenko arranged for us. The linen drapes billow out in the breeze. It’s cold up here, but I’m sweating like Satan’s bollocks.

I shake the pain from my face and loosen the tension out of my arms. I pick up the kid and launch him through the open window. I heave Frogger up over both shoulders and overhead press him. It’s a struggle, but I get him half in, his arse and legs hanging out. I climb up onto the railing of the platform and clamber in over Frogger’s body. I throw the kid onto the nearest twin bed and drag Frogger inside.

I’ve half a mind to leave him out there. Let him take the rap. But he’ll squeal on me the first chance he gets. And I’m neck high in rhino shit as it is.

I pull the drape inside and slam the window shut.

The first thing I do is head to the bathroom. I turn on the light and remove my mask. Check my skull for damage.

No, I’m fine. Just a sweaty red sheen and a few bumps and bruises. I wipe my face and neck down with a fluffy white hand towel off the rail. I unzip my overalls and step out of them. I’m wearing a black suit and matching tie with a white shirt underneath. My weapon holstered inside the jacket.

I bundle the overalls, mask and towel together and dump them on the floor in the bedroom. I pull a large, empty suitcase from the wardrobe and open it out on the nearest twin bed. I throw the overalls, mask and towel in the bottom. I pick the kid up off the other bed. Still out cold but breathing. He goes inside the case, just.

Good job he’s small and bendy.

After arranging him in the foetal position, I zip up the suitcase. I take out the travel case again. I unlock it with the same code I saw Frogger use earlier. There are two folded metal canes inside and two pairs of sunglasses.

I snap out the cane to full length. I leave the travel case next to Frogger for when he wakes up. I drag the case with the kid inside off the bed, stand it up and pull it over to the door. I stop and look inside the wardrobe. Grab a wire coat hanger. I open it out, then fold it over in two. I slide it inside my jacket pocket, slip on my shades and pull the case out of the room.

I hurry to a bank of lifts at the end of the corridor and catch an empty one going down. The lift pings open on the lobby floor. I hear a siren wailing outside the entrance to the hotel. I wave my cane side to side, as if I can't see a bean. I pass a blonde female cop—dressed up to look like a businesswoman but fooling no one. Another cop rushes in. Unkempt and in a hurry, his badge flashing on his hip. I pretend like I don't see him and he almost crashes into me.

I guess one of the fuzz in the suite woke up and called it in. I realise too late that I still have my black leather gloves on from the job. But no one seems to notice. I make my way out through the front entrance and onto the street.

The hotel sits on a busy four-way crossing. I head left, hearing more sirens on the wind. I wait at the busy crossing with a few other pedestrians, struggling to see in the shades.

I feel a heavy hand on my shoulder. The long arm of the law. A pig in uniform, *Shit, rumbled.*

"Here, mate," he says. "Let me help you across."

The green man flashes. The traffic lights beep. The beat cop wrestles the suitcase off me and takes hold of my elbow. He guides me across the road and hands me back the case.

"There you go, pal."

"Thank you, officer," I say. "There aren't enough like you."

"Tell me about it," he shouts, jogging back across the road before the traffic can move.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I move on with the case. I round a couple of corners and fold up the cane.

I slip the cane and shades into a public bin and peer round the corner wall of a clothes store. Blue lights flash and the scream of sirens cut out as a convoy of police pull up outside the hotel.

I grab the case and stride off at pace into the night, wondering what the hell I've just done.

Ivan Rudenko was trying a new topping on his pizza. Chicken and garlic.

Dimitri stood over the table, drying his hands on a small white kitchen towel. "Well?" he asked.

Rudenko looked up from the pizza box. Chewing slow, thinking hard. "Not bad, Dimitri," he said, swallowing. "Maybe a little less garlic."

Rudenko picked up the next slice and held it to his lips. The front door flew open. A figure in a black suit and white shirt burst in off the dark streets, into the artificial light of the takeaway.

"I was waiting for your call," Rudenko said.

Frogger didn't speak. He hurried to the table and stopped. On edge. Tap dancing on the spot.

"Well? Is it done?" Rudenko asked, fixing his attention on the fresh bruise on Frogger's forehead. He dropped the slice of pizza. "What happened? What are you not telling me?"

A loud ringtone broke the silence. Rudenko reached inside the left breast pocket of his pinstripe navy suit. "Yes?" he answered, eyes on Frogger, pinching tighter the longer the caller spoke.

Rudenko came off the call. He was calm. "Sit down," he said, laying his phone flat on the table.

Frogger took a seat across from Rudenko. Unsure.

"Pull your chair in," Rudenko said.

Frogger scraped his chair in close to the table.

Rudenko pushed his pizza box across. "Here, eat."

Frogger looked at the box. At Rudenko. "It was Breaker's fault. He lost his bollocks and took the kid."

"Later," Rudenko said. Ice cool. "Now you need to eat."

Frogger picked up a slice and took a bite. Rudenko grabbed a large pizza cutter off the table: a large wheeled blade with a stainless steel handle.

"Taste good?" he asked Frogger.

Frogger nodded, taking another bite.

Rudenko smiled. He snatched Frogger's right hand and pinned his palm flat to the table. He rose out of his chair and leaned in close. *"Two dead cops? You useless fuck!"*

Rudenko dug the pizza slice into the top of Frogger's hand. Blood spilled and Frogger screamed, trying to pull his hand away. Yet Rudenko had all his weight pressed down on it. And he wasn't done yet.

Rudenko rolled the pizza slice left and right with all the force he had. *"Eat it. Eat the fucking pizza, you dumb asshole!"*

Frogger chewed, screamed, cried as his own hot, red blood pooled out over the table.

Rudenko let go. He tossed the bloody pizza cutter across the table. Frogger dropped the half-eaten slice of pizza and held his hand close to his chest, the open cut down to the bone.

Rudenko stepped away from the table. "Now for that other piece of shit."

As Dimitri rushed out with fresh kitchen towels, Rudenko spoke to Freddie. "Get the boys together." He turned to Frogger, "And you. Stop fucking bleeding. You've got work to do."

Frogger whimpered as Dimitri wrapped a white cloth tight around the cut.

Rudenko stood with his arms out by his sides, cursing in Russian. Freddie helped him into his long black overcoat.

"Sorry about the mess," he said to Dimitri on the way out of the restaurant.

As Frogger followed Rudenko and Freddie, Dimitri busied himself cleaning up the blood.

I pull the case along Deansgate. It's a long, wide drag lined by some of the swankier bars and restaurants in town. I'm making good progress, but the case starts to tug in my hand. I realise the kid's awake. He's banging on the inside.

Shit, I forgot to leave him some air.

I stop on the street outside a tapas restaurant.

The case wobbles side to side. I hear his muffled shouts. So do a bunch of passers-by. They stare at me and at the case. I stare back and they move on. I unzip the case halfway around. The kid spills out onto the pavement.

Now I've got another audience. A group of shrieking old women.

"Call the cops and you're all dead," I say to them.

They shuffle on their way, pissing in their frillies.

The kid gasps for air. His eyes wild. He picks himself up. Stares at me. Looks around him. Then runs, right across the street. Straight up a side alley.

Bollocks!

I boot the case to the side of the street and take off after him. He's a fast little bugger and leaves me for dust. But I know these streets like the inside of my arsehole. Even the posher ones. I head left into another side alley. It's the much shorter route and he'll soon be sent my way by a couple of dead ends.

Sure enough, I'm waiting for him when he pops right out. I reach to grab him. He body swerves me and takes off up a pedestrian street, heading towards civilisation.

I give chase again. I see two uni-age lads ahead. A little bit drunk.

"Hey, stop that kid," I shout. "He stole my wallet!"

One of the lads reaches out and gets hold of the little bastard. I catch up to them, breathing hard.

"Give him back his wallet," one of the lads says.

"I didn't steal nothing," the kid says. "He's trying to kill me."

"I'll sort him out from here," I say. "Cheers, lads."

I think they're starting to doubt the situation, but I can see they don't have the stomach for a rumble. As they continue on their way, I pull the kid to one side. I shove him inside a doorway.

"Don't kill me," he says.

"Kill you? I'm saving your arse, soft lad."

"You knocked me out and stuffed me in a case."

"You're alive. Don't be ungrateful." I let him off the wall. "Now, listen, I can't protect you if you keep running off. We need to work together."

"Why? Just hand me over to the police."

"No can do."

"Why not? No one saw your face. And I won't say nothing."

"Let's just say me and the law don't get on." I check the coast both ways. "Besides, half the bastards are bent."

I hear a chopper hovering overhead. See a light in the sky. Not too far from here.

"Just let me go," the kid says. "Better all round, yeah?"

"This isn't Brexit or X-Factor. You don't get a vote. Now come on."

I take him by the scruff of the neck and march him down a couple of side streets. I find a car parked in the shadows. A silver Toyota Yaris. One of the old models. Nice and easy. I take the coat hanger out from my jacket pocket. I use it to break into the passenger door.

Passenger doors are easier. Fewer wires in the door panel.

I push the kid inside and flash him the gun inside my jacket. "Don't get any ideas," I say.

A few seconds later, I've got the engine started.

The kid looks across at me as he pulls on his belt. "What are you gonna do with me when we get out of here?"

"One thing at a time, Columbo. Christ."

I ram the seat back as far as it'll go. I look like King Kong in a clown car, but it'll do. I spin the Yaris out of its space and along the back alleys.

We hit the main drag. If I can make it to the ring road, we'll be clean out of here.

But there's a problem. A big, roadblock-sized one up ahead. Cops in neon yellow jackets checking driver IDs, no doubt all ways out of the city. We pull up in a queue, two cars back from the cops. Another car pulls up behind. The police chopper drifts sideways overhead, scanning the area with a blinding spotlight.

I look at the kid as I think over my next move. His left hand goes for the door handle. He unclips his belt with his right.

I grab him by the elbow before he can bail. As the car in front pulls forward, I step on the accelerator. I spin the wheel, holding onto the kid with my spare hand.

I pull a u-turn in the path of an oncoming coach.

It slams on its brakes and we miss it by a whisker. As the kid tries to wriggle his way out, I get the Yaris up to speed. Thirty. Forty. Too fast for him to jump.

He shuts the door.

“You’d better put your belt back on,” I say, checking in all my mirrors.

Wailing blue lights fill each one. I guess we got their attention. The chopper tracks us too.

Tonight just keeps getting better and better.

Here's a tip. If you're gonna steal a getaway car, don't pick a dinky little runabout with skinny tyres.

I almost wipe the thing out as we handbrake-slide across a busy intersection. Pedestrians dive for cover as we skid over the road and bump up onto the curb.

I spin the wheel to the right just in time to avoid a bunch of human skittles and a parked blue Aston Martin. But I'm pretty sure I just knackered the suspension.

I keep my foot to the floor and head up Peter Street. It takes us between the circular stone library that sits on the left and the grand old Midland Hotel on the right. As a small line of cars wait at a red, I pull to the right into the headlight glare of oncoming traffic.

I steer left in time to cut back in ahead of the queue at the lights. But I see police cars blocking off Oxford Road ahead: my alternative route out of the city.

Without thinking, I brake and throw a hard left. The Yaris mounts a sweeping pedestrian area in front of the library and old gothic town hall.

The only obstacles here are scattered trees and passers-by. I swerve around the trees and punch the horn. We snake from side to side. Dozy pedestrians slow to move out of the way fast enough.

The cops follow me at a safe distance. The kid looks ready to chuck his guts up, buckled up with hands over his eyes.

I can't help laughing as I look at him. It's just like when I was young. Stealing cars. Giving the pigs the runaround, then getting paid after.

If you had to ditch the car, you still got the thrill of the chase. Jumping over hedges. Cutting through people's back yards. Sometimes you'd get caught. Others, you'd lose 'em long enough to nick another plush set of wheels off someone's driveway. Such a buzz. Better than sex. I'd forgotten how good it felt.

Anyway, the smile is soon wiped off my face when I almost crash into a run of wooden benches on the right. I veer left, but we're blocked off by grey bollards and the white stone war memorial.

So I turn right again. I head for Princess Street, which cuts down the side of a large, pillared art gallery.

Only trouble is, there's a tram pulling out of the St Peter's Square stop. Another of those big yellow snakes trundling the opposite way.

"No man, don't do it!" the kid shouts. "We're gonna die."

Too late. I pull off the pedestrian area and across the tracks in front of the first tram. We bump and fly across both tracks to the sound of blaring tram horns.

I think the kid might be right.

We miss the first tram, but the second clips the back end of the Yaris.

I hear a crunch of metal and smash of brake lights.

The car shunts and spins three-sixty. I wrestle back control and keep driving.

I look in my mirrors. The cops are blocked off by the passing trams. We've got a couple of seconds before they get a fix on us again, so I skid left into a tight and tiny alley.

It's lined with big, square industrial bins. Blue and orange and overflowing.

The alley leads straight into the heart of China Town. I guess this is as good a place as any, so I slam on the brakes. Ram the gear lever into reverse. Back the car up and to the right fast, tight between two of the bins. I kill the lights and we wait.

The kid dares to breathe again. Removes his hands from his eyes. I look in the mirrors. Hear the cry of the sirens. See the flashing lights blast past the mouth of the alley. The sirens fade into the distance, but the chopper is still in the area. I can hear the churn of its rotors, bouncing off tightly-packed brick buildings.

I peer through the windscreen. The blinking red light of the chopper is drifting too, following the cops.

"See," I say to the kid. "Pigs *do* fly," He doesn't laugh. No one ever laughs. But that's not gonna stop me doing the joke. "Get out," I say, squeezing myself through the doorframe.

A cold breeze blows down the pitch-dark alley. It stinks of rotten food. As the kid gets out of the car, still a little shaken, I take hold of him by the arm. I grip him tight. He bleats in pain.

"Just so you don't do a runner," I say. "It's for your own good."

The kid shakes his head. I ignore him and march him fast out of the alley. Left, then across the road and up a street.

China Town is dead, but full of the smell of dim sum and noodles and fried pork and . . . Christ, I'm hungry.

We stop outside Blessed Thai Massage. The place marked by a glowing white sign with fancy gold lettering and a pretty young woman with pebbles on her back.

The kid pulls a face. "A massage parlour?"

"Shut up and mind your head," I say, steering him through an open steel door. Through a low-hanging doorway. Down a set of wonky red steps.

It's warm inside and smells of lilies. A small reception area with a walnut colour scheme. The faint sound of pipes and plucked strings. You know, Far East kind of stuff. The kind of thing the prison shrink used to try and get me into.

Said it would calm me down. As if I was caving other cons' heads in 'cause I was angry.

I told him, I'm not the one who starts things. I just specialise in ending them. The other guy has to swing first. And when you're in the nick, there's always some animal or other trying to shank you in the kidney. Or bite you on the nose. Burn you in the shower. But that's another story. Back to this one.

I haven't been here in a while. I see they've spruced the place up. They've got a tropical fish tank and fake black leather arm chairs to wait in. Folded white towels on a small, arcing counter. But no one on reception.

I push the kid along a dim, narrow corridor. There's a small office at the end behind a frosted door, then a room either side.

Massage Rooms One and Two.

Room One is to the left. I try the door. There's an empty massage table and nothing else. So I turn the brass knob on the next door and push it open.

Me and the kid stop in the doorway. A fat man on his back. Red and sweaty. A white towel folded under his head for a pillow. Another one thrown over his crown jewels. His eyes are closed—a big grin on his chops as a woman's hand tosses him off under the towel.

The hand belongs to an arm. The arm leads up to a brunette-blonde dressed in a crisp white uniform. One with a collared top and a tight skirt down to the knees. Her hair tied up and by the looks of it, a white latex glove peeping out above the towel on her wanking hand. She stares into space. Bored, lazy puffs on a cigarette.

Yep, it's the mother of my child.

I cough to get Mandy's attention. "Sorry to interrupt the tender moment."

She looks at me and sighs. "Never heard of knocking?"

I shake my head in disgust. "Cigs *and* happy endings. Couldn't even last a day."

Mandy takes the cigarette out of her mouth. She blows a plume of it my way. "What am I supposed to do? Tell Mr Chung *no*? It's why these sad sacks come in here."

"Hey," the man on the table says, eyes open.

"Not you, sweetheart," Mandy says between drags. "You just relax."

The man closes his eyes. The smile returning to his face.

"Anyway, you can't talk," Mandy says. "What have you done this time?"

"Don't know what you're on about."

"Come on, Charlie. Why else are you here if not to hide out?" She looks at my suit. "I heard the sirens. You skip out on court again?"

I don't have a comeback. She's got me nailed.

"Ah, the truth comes out," she says. "Mr Pot and Kettle."

"That's where you're wrong," I say, "Fucking did the right thing, didn't I?"

Mandy laughs, cig hanging from her lips. "*You*? The right thing?"

"It's true," I say.

"Um, do you mind?" Mandy's client says, propping himself up on his elbows. "I've paid good money for this."

"Sorry, love," Mandy says, speeding up the job. Towel jerking up and down.

"Ugh, this is sick," the kid says.

"Who's the young lad?" Mandy asks. "Long lost son? You've got enough of 'em."

"For the thousandth time Mand, I don't sleep around."

Mandy narrows her eyes at me as she brings the fat man to a climax. The kid turns his back and sticks his fingers in his ears. The guy on the table looks at me as he shoots his boots.

The kid's right. This *is* sick.

Mandy stubs out her cigarette and drops the latex glove in a bin. The guy pulls his crumpled office clothes on. Mandy dumps the towels in a wicker laundry bin in the corner. She rinses her hands, lights him a smoke and he leaves.

"So what's up?" she asks, resting her rear end against the massage table.

"You hear about the thing at the Renaissance Hotel?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's been on the news. Why?"

I look at the kid.

"This is the witness?" she asks.

"Saved his life," I say, surprised by the swell of pride I get in my chest.

"You knocked me out and kidnapped me," the kid says.

I shrug. "You say potato."

"So what happened?" she asks.

"Better you don't know," I say. "Is Chung around?"

"Next door," Mandy says leading us out of the room. She closes the door and hurries back down the corridor, past reception. She walks halfway up the stairs. Sticks her head out on street level, both ways. Pulls the steel door shut and locks a bolt in place at the top and bottom. She walks back up the corridor. "We were closing anyway," she says. "Come on."

Mandy leads us towards the back office. Just before, there's a white panel in the wall. Mandy pushes it open and beckons us through. I shove the kid into the dark, tight space ahead of us. I have to bend double to fit through. But a few metres on, Mandy leads us through another door into a bright, noisy kitchen. Clattering pans and kitchen hands laughing and shouting in what I guess is Chinese.

Mandy pushes through a pair of white swing doors with porthole windows. There's a buffer zone from the smells and sounds of the kitchen. Two more swing doors ahead of us painted black.

Mandy leads us into a place I'm familiar with, just not from the server's entrance. The Dancing Dragon. An intimate bar and restaurant. Traditional, China-red lanterns hanging from the ceiling. Matching red art on the wall, with black Chinese writing.

It's the early hours of the morning already, so the place is empty.

Paul Chung is a second generation immigrant. Beijing-born but with a Manchester accent. He sits at a table with a couple of other men in their fifties. Except he looks younger. Jet black hair and a face free of creases. He wears a charcoal t-shirt under a

designer black suit. He chows down with his buddies on a banquet in the centre of a large, circular table.

"What is it with you bosses?" I say. "You're always stuffing your faces."

"That's not true," Chung says, setting down a bowl of noodles and a set of chopsticks. "Sometimes we drink and gamble." He stands and shakes my hand. "Good to see you, friend." He looks at Mandy, stood beside me. "You still here?"

"Had a couple of late-nighters," she says.

"Well take a seat. Eat something." Chung clicks his fingers and a young male waiter on standby glides over and pulls out a chair. Mandy sits down and loses herself in the menu.

Chung is one of the nice guys. Okay, he may have the odd bloke bumped off, cut in half, or dissolved in a tank of acid. But he does it quick and quiet. With a courteous smile, you know? Manners don't cost anything. That's what I always say. He looks at me, then at the kid. "So what's going on, Breaker? I didn't call *you*, so there must be something up."

"Job went tits up," I say.

"Let me guess. Rudenko."

"How'd you know?"

"Word spreads fast."

Chung speaks to his two mates. Something in Chinese. They get up and move down a couple of tables, taking their food with them.

"Here," Chung says, offering us a seat.

We sit down. The waiters approach with plates, bowls and chopsticks. I ask for a couple of forks and spoons. I spin the centre of the table round and scoop some sticky rice into a bowl. Sweet and sour chicken on top.

I turn to the kid. "What do you want?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing."

I guess he's not in the mood.

"Listen," I say, "if you don't eat something, it's a sign of disrespect. And that man across from you is the head of the China Town mafia."

He looks at Chung. Chung plays along, raising an eyebrow. Giving the kid the look.

The kid swallows hard. "Maybe just a little," he says, putting a solitary salt and pepper prawn on his plate. He nibbles at it as me and Chung talk.

"So what can I do for you?" Chung asks.

"I was hoping for some protection."

"Shouldn't it be the other way round?"

"Not for me. For the kid," I say.

Chung dabs his mouth with a napkin. "You know I can't do that."

"You owe me," I say, gobbling up the chicken.

"And if there's anything else you need, I'll be happy to oblige. But I've got the community to think about. We can't afford another war here and I haven't got the manpower. You know how it is."

This is where flying solo can hurt you. If I was one of Chung's guys, he wouldn't hesitate to tool up.

"Thought I'd ask," I say, as a waiter brings over a dish fresh from the kitchen for Mandy.

Chung tears a bun in two and mops up some sauce. "Look, we'll lock the doors. You can lie low here for the rest of the night. But if anyone comes knocking, no guarantees."

"Thanks, Paul. It'll give me time to think," I say, as the kid loads up his plate and bowl from the centre of the table.

"This stuff's good," he says through a beard of noodles.

"Best food in China Town," Mandy says.

Chung smiles. "There's always time for a good meal." He stands up from the table. Dumps his napkin. Shakes my hand. "Good luck, Breaker."

Chung shouts some instructions to the staff before leaving the restaurant with his pals.

"I should call my mum," the kid says.

"Uh-uh," I say. "You're not calling anyone. In fact, give me your phone."

"No," the kid says.

I grab him by the front of his hoodie. "Give it 'ere."

"Charlie," Mandy says. "Leave the poor lad alone. He's been through enough."

I let the kid go. *Why do I still let her tell me what to do?* I've gotta stop letting her boss me around.

I pour out three glasses of water from a large glass jug. The staff come out of the kitchen. Coats on, ready for home. They say goodnight and disappear, leaving only a few lights on in the restaurant.

I push a glass over to the kid. "There's one thing I don't get about you," I say. "You're from the estates, right? You know how things work. Why testify?"

The kid chews his food, like he's thinking about it. "It was the right thing to do."

"The right thing to do would have been to keep your trap shut."

"How bloody noble, Charlie," Mandy says, rolling her eyes.

"It would have been," I say. "I bet the guy they shot was a lowlife anyway."

"I didn't say nothing at first," the kid says. "But I couldn't sleep at night. I felt better after I agreed to do it."

"And how do you feel now?" I ask.

The kid puts down his fork. Takes a drink. Turns it back on me. "Why did you do what *you* did? In the hotel?"

Truth is, I'm still trying to figure that one out. As I'm about to speak, his phone rings. He pulls it out of a jeans pocket.

"Don't answer it," I'm about to say. But too late.

I snatch the phone off the kid before he can talk. Put it on speaker. My free hand over the kid's mouth.
"Danny?" a man says on the other end of the line. "It's Detective Price."
I take my hand from the kid's mouth. "You know him?" I whisper.
"The head of the witness protection unit," the kid says.
"Danny? Are you there?"
"What do you want?" I ask.
"Who's am I speaking to?" Price asks back.
"Never mind that," I say. "What do you want?" I check my watch. "You've got ten seconds to spit it."
"Is Danny there with you? Is he okay?"
"Seven seconds."
"I'm here," the kid says. "I'm safe."
"Where are you now?" the detective asks.
"I'm asking the questions here," I say.
"Look, we just want the boy back safe. I take it you're the other man who broke into the hotel suite?"
"I might be," I say, checking my watch again.
"Then I assume you mean no harm to Danny."
"What do you think, Sherlock?"
"Well, I can take him off your hands for you. Give him the protection he needs."
"You talking about a handover?"
"Just me," Price says. "There's a mole in my unit and half the force is in Rudenko's pocket."
"Yeah, I put 'em there," I say.
"Then you name the time and place. I'll come alone."
I think fast. I look at the kid. He nods. Can't wait to get away from me. Well I can't wait to get rid of him either. "Okay," I say. "Meet us in one hour. There's a multi-storey behind Portland Tower."
I cut the detective off before he can say another word. I check my watch. I think we beat the clock. No doubt someone was tracing the call.
"Right, best eat up then," I say, scooping more chicken and rice into my bowl. "Looks like you're off the hook."

A trio of black BMW 5 Series saloons cruised nose to tail through the streets of Manchester.

"Isn't this overkill?" Freddie asked, wedged in the passenger seat of the lead car. He picked at a white dressing over his recently reset nose. "It's only one guy."

Rudenko snorted from the back. "The same *one guy* who busted you up without taking his coat off."

"Caught me by surprise, that's all."

"Yeah, sure," Tony, the driver said, his face illuminated by a neon-blue dash.

Freddie glared at the Tony.

Tony shut up fast.

"You didn't know him in the wild old days," Rudenko said. "There's a reason I hire him."

"Ah, he's all reputation," Frogger said, sitting to the right of Rudenko in the back seat. A thick bandage wrapped around his left hand.

"Why don't we just do a drive-by?" Tony said. "Find the asshole and put a bullet in him. The same for the kid."

"Because a bullet's too good," Rudenko said, squeezing the handle of the baseball bat in his lap.

"Sounds like a plan to me," said Frogger, just as his phone lit up with a jaunty tune in his jacket pocket. He took the call.

"Okay. Got it." Frogger said, coming off the phone. "The word is, he's in China Town."

"Which part?" Rudenko asked.

"Dunno, but that's the word."

Rudenko leaned forward in his seat. "China Town, Tony."

Tony indicated left and pulled a sharp u-turn. As the lead BMW span onto the opposite side of the road, the other two cars followed. Supercharged engines accelerating as one.

Inside the lead car, Freddie slipped a pair of brass knuckle dusters on each ogre-like hand. He laughed to himself. "I'm really gonna enjoy this."

I stand with Mandy inside the massage parlour reception. She pulls on a silver puffer jacket with a fake fur hood. She has a key to the steel doors in hand. I look at her face. Eyes lit a turquoise-blue by the fish tank.

"What?" she says. *"Something on my face?"*

"Once I get the kid safe, I'm gonna have to leave."

"And?" Mandy says.

I grab her and plant one on her lips. Like kissing a dead shark. I let her go.

She pulls a face. "What was that for?"

"Just checking something," I say.

"Well here," she says, grabbing the last remaining mint from a bowl and handing it over. "You need it more than me."

I suck on the mint. "Wait a few minutes before we leave," I say. "We're going right. So you go left."

She nods. "What do I tell Cassie?"

"Tell her . . . I dunno. Tell her I'm trying."

Mandy lifts her eyebrows to the ceiling. I push the kid up the steps and pull the steel door open. I look around. It's cold. My breath fogs the air. No sign of cops. The whole town bright with neon signs, but low on people.

I give Mandy the thumbs-up and we split.

"Walk natural, but keep your head low," I say as me and the kid move along the street.

We've got a five-minute walk ahead of us. Out of China Town. Across Portland Street, to a multi-storey car park tucked away behind an office tower. Somewhere the searchlights and thermal imaging won't find us.

I keep a discreet hand on the kid's elbow as we pass by a strip club. It's quiet in the early hours. So quiet I hear the faint buzz from the horizontal pink neon sign outside. Two sumo-shaped bouncers stand on the door. They look tired.

We're just heading past the main square in China Town, when I hear squealing tyres and the sound of V6 engines.

As we cross the road, I see bright headlights converging on us. From the left, the right. Three BMW saloons screeching to a halt. The doors fly open and big guys in dark jackets and hoodies jump out. Freddie and Frogger too.

"Bollocks," I say, stopping the kid in his tracks. "Run."

I turn and push along into a sprint. We double-back, Rudenko's men catching up. Pumped up. Tooled up.

The only place I see open is the strip club.

The bouncers are already shitting their black pants, shutting the doors. I run full-pelt and shoulder barge my way in before they can lock us out. I force my way through. The bouncers try and push me back. I nut one of them hard and grab an empty beer bottle left on a ledge. I smash it over the other bouncer's head. It buys me a second to drag the kid in behind me.

But there's no time to lock the doors. The charging pack are right up our arses.

I run the kid down a short flight of stairs and straight past the window where you're supposed to pay for entry.

Into a large room bathed in pink and purple light. Crystal balls hanging from the ceiling. A series of circular platforms with thin Far Eastern girls hanging off poles. A mix of late-night chancers with fivers held out, ready to stuff 'em in a G-string.

I look for a way out. All I see is a long bar lit white on the back wall. I don't see an emergency exit and I don't want to get suckered from behind. So I push the kid over to the bar, knocking a waitress flying with a tray of drinks.

The kid shouts at me in panic. *"What do we do?"*

I pick him up by his hoodie and the belt on his jeans.

The barman scarpers. I drop the kid behind the bar and tell him to stay down.

I stand with the small of my back against the bar top. Rudenko's men pile in.

Here we go.

The first one to have a go is a young skinhead in a green bomber, armed with a carpet knife. I pick up a high stool from the bar and clock him hard in the face. He spins away.

I think the stool will make a good weapon, but it's yanked from my hands by Freddie. He swings a knuckle-duster fist. But the guy moves like he's made of cement.

I duck and drive a fist of my own up under his ribs. He wheezes and lurches forward. No time to enjoy the look on his face as he rests on the bar.

Two more guys wade in. One cracks me on the chin. Another boots me in the side. I grab the second guy's foot and wing him off to one side into a table and chairs. I send the other one packing with a jaw-breaking uppercut.

As Freddie recovers from the rib-cracker, I ram his face with both hands into the edge of the bar. That just about kills him. He crashes to the sticky black floor of the club like a giant redwood.

Rudenko has five more guys. And then there's the boss himself, alongside Frogger, patting a baseball bat in the flat of his palm.

With a second to get my bearings, I notice the club emptying out. I also get a chance to reach inside my jacket and pull out my gun.

The next guy who comes at me is a real ugly bastard. Face like an old potato. I do his wife a favour and shoot him in the chest. Point blank. Fuck you and goodnight. I try and remember how many shots I have left.

Doesn't matter. A big, burly character wrestles me for control. The clip blasts out into the floor. I drop the empty gun as the guy gets me in a headlock. Squeezes the bloody air out of me.

"Hold him still," Frogger says, pulling out a pistol of his own. No silencer. Lining up square between my eyes.

As he's about to pull that trigger, I hear a heavy glass thunk.

Frogger goes starry-eyed and drops to the floor. His pistol spills away under a gap at the base of the bar. I look up and see the kid holding a big magnum of champagne.

Still in the grip of the big guy behind, I hold out my hands. The kid throws the bottle. I catch it by the neck and swing it over my shoulder. The heavy end smashes in my hands, over the big guy's head. He drops off me, covered in blood, bubbles and broken glass.

Right, that's it. I'm officially pissed off.

The remaining three goons surround me. One with a metal bar. I make light work of 'em. A thundering right hook. A snap of an arm. A head butt in an eye and a hand on that metal bar. I pull the owner towards me and crack him with the point of an elbow. I pick him up and drop him on his back on the edge of a dancing platform.

I take a breather and look around me. The music still beating and spotlights spinning. But the whole club empty except for a floor full of bodies.

I turn and see Rudenko. He's got his bat, but he hasn't got the balls to use it. The cocky bastard should have brought a gun, not a lump of wood. He backs up as I walk towards him. I feel a presence behind me. A giant one.

I look over my shoulder. Freddie is on his feet again. Lumbering forward. I pick up a wooden chair and smash it against the nearest dancing platform.

The chair falls to pieces, but leaves me with a broken leg in hand. The end of it sharp and splintered. I turn as Freddie lunges. I ram the sharp end into his guts. He staggers back, the chair leg sticking out of him. Blood spilling all over the floor.

I turn and see Rudenko disappearing through the main entrance. The kid cowers half-down behind the bar. I call him over. For once he doesn't argue. He hops over the bar top and picks his way through the bodies.

He runs behind me as we pass the pay window and up the stairs. The bouncers are halfway up the street with everyone else from the strip club. Girls included. Grabbing onto their naked knockers and shivering in the cold.

I see Rudenko running in the opposite direction. I give chase, but he makes it to one of the abandoned BMWs before I can catch up. He steps on the accelerator, all the doors of the Beemer still wide open. He swings his own door shut and pulls the car around me. Revving hard up the road and almost mowing down the people in the street.

I think about that scumbag, Frogger, lying limp in the strip club. I could return right now and finish him off. Finish 'em all off. Or chase Rudenko and ram him off the road. Set fire to the car and watch him burn.

I feel the old Breaker wanting to bust out to the surface. I take a deep breath and push him back down.

I do this for money now. Not for fun.

Besides, there's no time for all that shit. I've got a witness to hand over to Detective Price.

I tell the kid to get in one of the cars. I throw the rear doors shut and climb behind the wheel. The daft bastards left the keys in the ignition and the engine running. I slam my door closed and tell the kid to belt up.

Won't be long until the cops are on the scene, so I reverse the car at speed and spin it around. I drive the wrong way down the one-way system and force an oncoming taxi to swerve to the side of the road.

I pull out across Portland Street and down a couple of side roads. We enter a concrete multi-storey. I stop and grab a ticket. A yellow barrier rises. I take the ramp up a couple of floors, tyres squealing at speed.

Sure enough, I see a shadowy figure at the far end, standing next to a car. The headlights dipped.

I roll the Beemer slow towards him. As we get closer, I see the car's a grey Mondeo. The pool car kind detectives drive around in.

I bring the BMW to a stop a good twenty yards away. I leave the headlights on him. He blinks into the light.

I recognise him from the reception of the Renaissance Hotel. Scruffy beard and hair. His tie thin and loose around his neck. A blue Barbour jacket left open. No doubt he's got a piece holstered inside.

Still, he's good to his word. He came alone.

"That him?" I ask the kid. "That your Detective Price?"

The kid nods. Hope in his eyes for the first time. "Yeah, it's him."

"Thank Christ for that," I say, dipping the headlights. "Let's get this over with."

We meet Detective Price in the headlight beams of our cars. Engines still running.

"You okay, Danny?" the detective asks the kid.

"Think so, yeah."

"Then come on," Price says. "Let's get you somewhere safe."

The kid steps forward.

I pull him back by the shoulder. "One second," I say, talking to the detective. "I want guarantees."

Price seems edgy. He keeps tapping his foot. "Come on, you know I can't do that," he says, taking out a cigarette and lighting it.

"I want to know the bastards in blue aren't gonna be up my arse," I say.

He blows smoke out of his nostrils and laughs. "I'm not the Chief Constable. And you're a kidnapper. Not to mention a cop killer."

"I didn't kill anyone."

"You think they give a shit?" Price says. He takes another drag. "Look, *I'm* not gonna arrest you."

"Damn right you're not."

"But I can't promise another copper won't," Price continues. "If I were you, I'd hand over the kid right now and get out of here."

"If you want the cop killer, I left him sparked out on the floor of a strip joint in China Town. Big pink sign. You can't miss it."

"My job is to protect my witness. Not to round up Russian scum."

I hesitate a moment. Hand stopping the kid from walking. There's an awkward silence. I look Price in the eye. He looks straight at me and smokes. He knows he's said too much.

"Look, what are you waiting for?" the kid says, getting impatient. "Detective Price is witness protection. Let me go . . . I wanna go."

"Shut up and wait here," I tell him.

I approach the detective. I want to test something. A theory forming in my mind.

Price tenses up. A hand straying up the zip of his jacket. He wants to reach for his gun. As I get close, he drops the cig and goes for it. I snatch his hand out empty. I twist his fingers and plant him against the driver door of the car. I take out his service weapon. Empty the clip and toss the piece away.

I reach inside his jacket pocket and find a phone. It's locked. Just a bunch of dots. I twist harder on the hand. He cries out in pain.

The kid walks over. "What the fuck are you doing? Let him go?"

"I'll let you go in a minute. Right off the roof of this car park."

The kid shuts his trap, but he kicks out at the front bumper of the Mondeo.

"How do I get into your phone?" I ask Price.

"Piss off," he says.

I twist harder.

He shrieks. "Alright. Just, do make an *L*."

"Make a what?"

"An *L*, you fucking idiot. You make an *L* with your thumb."

"Oh," I say, unlocking the phone. "I'm a bit shit with these things." I tap through to his call list.

Boom. I knew it. Copper bullshit always smells stronger.

I put the phone on speaker. I hit the call button. The phone lights up.

"Price?" a dazed-sounding Frogger answers, as if he's just woken up from a long nap.

I cut off the call before Price can talk. "You can't have known for sure the killer was Russian," I say, "unless you were Frogger's contact. The inside man."

I let the guy up. He's not going anywhere. He shakes out his wrist.

"You arranged our way in," I continue. "And you told Rudenko we were in China Town."

"You were supposed to be in and out clean," Price says. "How was I to know Frogger would go nuts?"

"*Because it's Frogger*," I say. "And he's Lithuanian. Not Russian."

The kid is furious. He shoves Price back against the car. "So all this time, you've been pretending to be some fucking mate to me. And you were one of them? Why?"

"The universal answer," Price says, shaking his head. *"Fuck-ing money."*

The kid flips out. *"Shit! So what now?"*

"Give me a minute," I say. "I'm thinking."

I'm thinking I'm a fly in a spider's web. The more I fight against it, the more tangled up I get.

"I tell you what he's gonna do Danny," Price says. "First he's gonna hand you over. Then he's gonna help me get you in the boot of my car."

"He's the only one protecting me," the kid says. "Why would he do that?"

"Because if he doesn't," Price says, regaining his swagger, "it means he either goes on the run with you and gets done for kidnapping—"

"And the *or*?" I say.

"The *or* is even better. The kid testifies he saw you pull the trigger on the two cops. Double homicide. A man with your record?" Price clicks his tongue. "Ouch."

"But he didn't do it," the kid says. "I'm not gonna testify to that."

The detective lowers his voice. "You will when we've got your fucking mum tied to a chair soaked in petrol."

Price lights another cig, as if to make the point. The kid starts yelling and swinging at the detective. I hold him back by the hood.

I know Rudenko. The petrol thing is the least of what they'll do. And I can see in the kid's eyes, he'll bleat on me to save his mum and sister. And when he's fingered me for those cops, they'll hire someone like me, but from out of town. And there'll be a tragic accident involving young Danny here. It'll be reported on page twenty of the Evening News. Yep, the pair of us will be tomorrow's fish and chip paper.

"Oh, and Charlie," Price says. "You want to see your daughter again, don't you?"

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"Don't play as dumb as you look," Price says.

Shit, he's really got me.

I pause a moment. I grab a tighter hold of the kid. "Open the boot," I say to Price.

The kid can't believe it. *"What? What are you doing?"*

"Smart move," Price says, stooping inside the driver door. He releases the boot.

The kid fights like hell, so I scoop him off his feet and carry him kicking and screaming to the rear of the Mondeo.

"You got anything to tie him up with?" I ask Price.

He undoes his tie from around his neck. I lower the kid in the boot. I push his face into the black carpet, muffling his screams.

Price binds the kid's flailing ankles with his tie.

He holds him down while I remove my own tie. I use it to fix his wrists tight behind his back. Price has a pair of handkerchiefs zipped up inside an outside pocket on his jacket.

"You got a snuffle or something?" I ask.

"Comes in handy at crime scenes," he says, tossing me one of the hankies.

As he scrunches one up into a ball, I twist the other long and thin. Price forces his handkerchief inside the kid's mouth. He holds it there while I tie mine around the back of the lad's skinny neck. I make sure it's fixed secure.

The kid looks up at me. Big eyes full of tears and terror.

I shrug at him. "Sorry kid, if there was any other way—"

Detective Price slams the boot shut. He extends a hand. "No hard feelings."

I leave him hanging.

Price climbs behind the wheel of the Mondeo. He rolls past me as I walk back to my car. He winds down his window. "I'll square things with Rudenko. Try and throw my colleagues off your scent."

It makes me sick, but I thank him. I have to keep the Rudenko mob sweet from now on.

Price winds up his window and accelerates out of the car park.

I'm not far behind. Heading out of town fast, taking a lesser travelled route out of the shit, where the pigs aren't checking.

I see the chopper hovering in the distance, travelling in the opposite direction.

There's no way I can go home, so I decide to head for the airport. Catch an early morning flight. I'm smart enough to always keep my passport on me. You never know when you're gonna have to skip the country for a while.

Yeah, a nice Spanish break where I've got connections. By the time the sun comes up, this'll all be over.

I'm zipping along easy down the Parkway road. Cutting past traffic and hitting the motorway. The BMW is fast and I see the airport signs already.

This isn't my first emergency holiday. Probably not my last. And I've got a couple of mates at the airport I slip a few quid to.

There are ways to get in and out and bypass customs. Ways to get on a chartered plane rather than one of the regular airlines. Strictly trade secrets.

I turn up the radio. Neil Diamond. *Forever In Blue Jeans*. Well wouldn't you know it? Must be a good omen. I sing along. Might be the lack of sleep, but I feel as happy as Larry.

Nice car too. It's a 5 Series. Tan leather. Sat nav. Automatic.

I glance across to the passenger seat. Cassie's sitting right there, in her jeans and jumper. Tugging at a strand of hair.

I jump out of my skin and almost total the Beemer in the central reservation.

I regain control of the wheel. "What are you doing here?" I ask her.

She gives me one of those looks. "*You know.*"

"Know what?"

"You promised."

"Look, Cass, I didn't kill the kid."

"No you just sentenced him to death, that's all."

"Come on, what was I supposed to do?"

"Oh, I don't know," Cassie says, throwing out her arms. "*The right thing?*"

"You don't know the business, Cass. Options don't come in black and white."

"Watch that car," she says, pointing ahead.

I turn my eyes to the road. Just in time to undercut a red Punto, driven slow by an old woman who looks like Yoda.

I rejoin the outside lane. Glance across at Cass. She's not letting me off the hook.

"If you're gonna have a go at anyone, have a go at your mum. She's already on the hand shandies again."

"God, you're like a couple of kids," Cassie says, shaking her head. "This isn't about Mum. You made a promise, Dad. And now you're breaking that promise. So much for your stupid code."

I look ahead at the airport sign. The exit road coming up fast on the left. I glance at myself in the rear view mirror. I look across at Cassie. Tapping on her phone. Glued to the thing, as usual.

I indicate left and slide the BMW across three lanes into the slip road. I notice a 747 rising into the sky. When I look again at the passenger seat, Cassie's gone.

Damn, the imaginings seem so real when they happen.

I shake it off and get back to reality. I turn up the radio and sing along. This is the right thing to do. The only thing. No two ways about it.

Detective Price called up a number on the speakerphone of the Mondeo.

Rudenko answered. "Tell me it's good news."

"It's good news, Mr Rudenko. I've got the kid."

Rudenko breathed a sigh of relief on the other end of the call. "And Breaker?"

"He handed him over. Just like you said."

"Good. I'll deal with that fucker when this is over."

"You want me to bring the kid to you?"

"No, I'm on my way to court. Meet Frogger at the usual place."

"And the money?" Price asked.

"Frogger will bring it. Then don't make contact with us again, understand?"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that," Price said.

Ending the call, the detective drove to a deserted part of town. He steered the grey Mondeo along a hidden backroad where prostitutes lurked. A couple were still out, attempting to flag him down.

The old abandoned mills rose high to the left. Pigeons breaking out of smashed windows across a grey morning sky.

It had been a long night. A stressful one. But Detective Price could relax. He'd hand over Danny. The kid would disappear. And so would he, once he got that money.

He was tired of the police force and who needed the full pension when Rudenko was handing over half a million in cash?

Yes, one more little job and he'd be done with the force. The babysitting of witnesses. The criminal scum. The lot of it.

As he pulled off the road onto a stretch of wasteland, Price thought he heard the sound of a speeding engine. He turned his head to the left in time to see the dark front end of a car. It came at him fast, ploughing into the front passenger side.

The wheel jerked out of Price's hands as the Mondeo came to a sudden stop. He lurched forward in his belt and back against the headrest.

The engine was still running, so he shook off the impact and put the car in reverse.

Rudenko had screwed him over, Price thought. They were going to snatch the kid by force and keep the half a million.

If he could escape the scene with the witness in the boot, he still had a chip in the game.

But too late. Before he could back up the Mondeo, the driver door swung open. A huge gnarled fist introduced itself hard and fast to his right cheekbone.

As soon as the punch landed, Price's lights went out.

Danny Platt had only just found a bearable position when he was thrown sideways across the boot. He hit the rear of the backseats and bounced up into the parcel shelf.

He landed on his right arm, pain shooting up into his shoulder.

The car had come to a sudden stop. He waited in the dark, listening to the chug of the diesel exhaust. He'd heard a crunch of metal and a smash of glass. Had Price totalled his car?

Danny hoped he'd died at the wheel. His mum had taught him to forgive other people. No matter what. Even the gangs on the estate who'd forced him into dealing, down in the tunnels. The place where he'd seen Rudenko's man shoot Ken, the local bookie.

"Hate is like throwing dust into a strong wind," his mum always said. "You *know* where the dust is going to end up,"

He knew his mum was right. Yet right now, he hated Price. And he hoped the guy burned alive behind the wheel. Even if it meant he had to burn too. It was probably better than whatever lay ahead.

Panic rose inside Danny's chest again at the thought of what Rudenko's men were going to do to him. The boot was claustrophobic. There wasn't any air. And the handkerchief stuffed inside his mouth made it feel like he was suffocating. His whole body ached, the ties so tight he felt sure they were cutting deep into his skin.

Danny tried to compose himself. To listen. He heard boots on concrete. The driver door opening.

A pause.

Then the boot lock popped. Footsteps approaching the rear of the car. The cop? No, sounded bigger. Heavier.

One of Rudenko's guys then. Coming to get him.

Shit. This is it. This is fucking it.

The boot of the Mondeo opened. Early morning light spilled in.

Danny squinted. He saw a large figure stood over him. A gun in his right hand. The man reached in with his left. Ripped the handkerchief ties away from Danny's wrists and ankles. Followed soon after by the tie around his mouth.

Danny spat out the wet ball of cloth.

His brain screamed *run*, but his arms and legs were too numb to carry out the command.

The man reached in again and grabbed him by the front of his hoodie. He hauled him out as if he weighed nothing. He put Danny down on his feet. Legs like jelly.

Danny looked up at the towering figure. It was Charlie—Breaker—or whatever he was called.

"What are you doing here?" Danny asked.

"Thought I'd finish you off myself," Breaker said. "Just to make sure."

Danny swallowed hard and stepped back. "Make it quick, yeah?"

Breaker paused a moment. He burst into laughter. "I'm pulling your leg, you soft bastard." He held up the gun. "This is Price's backup."

Breaker guided Danny around to the front of the car. The black BMW they'd stolen in China Town sat sideways across the front of the Mondeo. Its righthand side crumpled. The front end of Price's car even worse.

"Get in," Breaker said. "We don't have long before he wakes up."

Danny looked through the windscreen of the Mondeo. Price's head was off to one side, moving slow and groggy. "Where are we going?" he asked Breaker, walking around the passenger side of the BMW. The feeling returning to all four limbs.

"We're going to court," Breaker said. "That's if you still wanna testify?"

Danny looked at Breaker, fear replaced by an anger coursing through every vein. They'd threatened him, his sister and his mum. "*Fuck yeah*," he said.

The driver door on the BMW is crumpled stiff. I force it open through brute strength. I jump in and pull it as closed as it'll go. Before the kid can buckle up and I can put the car in drive, two more black BMWs appear on the scene. They speed along the back road to the mills and bump their way onto the stretch of weedy concrete.

Frogger's head and shoulders pop out of a passenger window on the lead car. An Uzi submachine gun in hand.

"Get down," I tell the kid, slamming the gear lever in reverse.

The first round of automatic fire rattles the grill of the car as I back it up fast. The kid cowers low in his seat, hands over his head. My door swings halfway open as I spin the BMW one-eighty and stomp on the accelerator pedal.

The two cars give chase across the bumpy slice of industrial wasteland. I cut a diagonal path back onto the road, flying off the pavement and hitting the tarmac heavy.

As I punch it down blowjob alley, Frogger and Co. are still hot on my tail.

The good news is we've got time.

It's eight-twenty and the trial recommences at nine.

The bad news is it's rush hour. Even out here in the arse end of nowhere, traffic is stacking up.

"What time are you supposed to be on the stand?" I ask the kid.

He looks up at me from his brace position. "Uh, what? I dunno. First thing, I think."

More gunfire rips through the air. Cuts into the back of the BMW and punctures the rear windscreen and passenger wing mirror. I steer left and right, weaving through slow-moving morning traffic. Up a ramp that leads onto the M60 motorway.

I squeeze every drop of juice out of the engine and fly off the slip road onto the main carriageway.

I slice between a pair of HGV trucks and into the middle lane. I undertake the traffic on my right before jumping into the fast lane. I lean on the horn and flash my lights at the cars ahead. They're already doing a hundred, but I'm pushing past one-thirty.

The two chasing cars are making a good fist of keeping up, so I dive back into the middle and slalom left to right. A whisker away from writing the damn thing off. A stiff, roaring wind coming in through the gap in the crumpled door.

A police chopper appears overhead in the distance. Blue flashing lights head down the next slip road. Price must have woken up and called it in.

The traffic's snarling up as we head towards the city.

I'm forced to brake hard, down to sixty. I lurch forward in my seat, no belt to hold me in place.

The chasing cars soon catch up. One on the left, ramming into the passenger side. The other approaching fast on the right.

Up ahead, we're bearing down on a creeping wall of cars. I see Frogger leaning out with that Uzi. Gurning at me, with those bulbous, weirdly-spaced eyes. Ready to fill me and the kid with holes.

Yeah, that's it, Frogger. Closer. A littler closer.

Boom!

As they pull alongside, I emergency brake. I throw my shoulder into my door. It flies open at the right time and snaps clean off the hinges as it slams into Frogger's BMW.

Frogger drops the Uzi as he ducks out of the way. I keep braking and let the chasing cars fly by. I turn a hard left, minus a door. We cut across a honking truck, onto the hard shoulder.

I give it the full beans. Flying down the inside of three jammed lanes of traffic.

The cop car that joined the party earlier is right up my arse, with Rudenko's goons not far behind. But I'm doing fine. Thinking we might make it.

That is, until I see a broken-down box truck ahead of us, the driver on the grass verge. A metal barrier on the inside of the truck, with a queue of cars lined up on the outside.

Is that gap big enough?

"You've gotta brake man," the kid says. "*You've gotta brake!*"

The hell I do.

I go for it, veering through the tightest of spaces between truck and traffic. I snap off a line of wing mirrors, including both of my own. I bump and scrape a fair few cars, but we make it out.

The police patrol car tries the same, only to scrape to a stop as it gets wedged in the narrow gap.

I'm thinking that'll block the others behind, but in my rear-view, I see 'em fly around the inside of the truck.

The bullets in the rear of the BMW confirm it.

Now it's a straight race to the courthouse. We break off the motorway and onto the start of the ring road back into the city.

I pull left up a slip road, overshooting a line of traffic queueing to make a left at the large roundabout ahead. I take the right lane and cut across the nose of a silver Honda. I swerve off the first exit on the left, causing a pileup.

For once, there's a stretch of clear road ahead.

It soon runs out. A long line of bright orange cones in the lefthand lane forces traffic down to a funeral pace.

Fuck that.

I plough straight into the cones. They bounce up and over the windscreen, thudding off the roof. They rat-a-tat-tat into the windscreen of the BMW behind. A couple get caught under the front bumper of the car. The driver panics and slams on. Frogger's car shunts into the back of it and it swerves off onto the pavement, smack-bang into a lamppost.

In my rear-view, I see the lamppost snap in two and smash into the roof of the BMW.

One down. One to go. And only a short stretch of Deansgate road left now, as we enter into the thick of town. Buildings rise high. Suited and booted pedestrians flood a busy crossing with the man on green.

Some of 'em might be lawyers, I think. I don't mind mowing them down one bit. But I promised Cassie, so I thump the horn and flash my lights full-beam, scaring them out of the way.

Most of 'em move in time. A few others I swerve around.

Now I see it's Tony behind the wheel of Frogger's car. Tony's a damn good driver. He weaves through the gap I just made.

The court is coming up soon on the left. It sits behind a place called Spinningfields. A big swanky gathering of glass buildings full of offices, bars and snooty restaurants.

An Armani store takes pride of place out front, with an open square where they sometimes set up markets. I keep beeping the horn and veer off the road onto the stretch of perfect paving in front of the Armani store. I cut down the left of it. People scramble out of the way.

The kid shouts and swears as we come up to a large set of stone steps leading down to a lower level.

"No-no-no. Don't do it, man," he says.

"Shut up and hold on," I say, braking hard.

As the kid braces, I lock my arms stiff against the wheel.

I am fucking Jason Bourne.

We fly off the top step and bounce down the rest of the staircase.

It doesn't go well. The impact mashes the front end of the car to pieces. I jar half the bones in my back.

Yeah, we make it to the bottom, but in one written-off piece that won't steer straight. The engine dies too and we cruise left, straight through the plate-glass window of a handbag store.

Shattered glass rains down over the bonnet. We lurch to a stop, parked halfway in the store.

I eject the belt off the kid and drag him out of his seat, through the empty driver door frame.

Our feet crunch over the glass. A young shop assistant with a ginger ponytail stands open-mouthed.

I shrug at her and shuffle low towards the rear of the car.

Behind us, a corridor of glass buildings leads to an open courtyard. Beyond that courtyard sit the courthouses. The old part and the new part.

The new building rises highest. Glass shipping-container-shaped pods stacked on top of one another. The older and more pompous Crown Court sits in front. A long, wide stone building with a set of huge wooden doors and high-rising windows all the way along it.

I know it well.

The inside *and* the outside.

It's tempting to make a run for the court right now. Sirens are wailing again and the media are already out on the stone steps. Waiting for Rudenko no doubt, but with cameras now angling our way.

I motion to the kid to stay down and stay put.

I edge out around the boot of the BMW.

Frogger's car didn't make it either. It lies on its roof at the bottom of the stairway. Wheels slow-spinning.

I see Tony in the front. Bloodied head in the steering wheel. The airbag deflated. The windscreen smashed. The bonnet crumpled and smoking.

But there's no sign of Frogger.

Just an open passenger door.

I tuck Price's spare piece behind my back, in the waistline of my suit trousers. One hand on the butt. The other hauling the kid up.

"Move your skinny arse," I say, running him through an alley of stores and across the courtyard.

I keep my head on a swivel all the time. The kid held close. I keep expecting gunfire from behind. But it looks like Frogger's done a runner.

And here's Mr Rudenko on the steps of the court, with his legal team. Face the colour of ash.

The doors to the court are open. A handful of police are filtering out. To my right, I see two cop cars pulling to a sudden stop. Uniformed pigs piling out.

I run the kid up to the steps.

"Danny!" a podgy redhead in a suit calls out. She stands with a bald man in glasses. Both middle-aged. Briefcases in hands.

"You know them?" I ask the kid.

"The prosecutors," he says.

"Good," I say. I push him towards them as the prosecution team call for security.

The police won't do anything here. No matter how crooked.

Rudenko knows it. He knows he's done. I can see it in his face.

But the kid hesitates a moment. He turns towards me. "I can tell them you helped me," he says. "Come in with us."

"In there?" I say. "No thanks." I back away. Hand on my weapon. Eyes on the cops. "Get him inside," I shout to the lawyers.

They pull him away and up the steps.

"Thanks," he says, as he's led up the stairs.

"Make it count," I say.

The kid nods. I back up along the left of the courthouse. Cops coming running. Shouting for me to stop.

I pull out the gun and let off a couple of rounds in the air. The cops scramble for cover. I know their moves. They'll wait for the armed response.

It should give me enough time to make it out.

So I leg it down the side of the courthouse. But as I break into a side street around the rear of the building, I almost take a bullet. A pistol shot twice.

I reverse up against a wall and peep around the corner. I see Frogger. I jump out and return fire. He moves fast and low behind a parked car. A red Astra with a fresh bullet hole in it.

Frogger dashes round the back of the building.

My instinct is to run. To clear the scene and put some distance between myself and the cops. But something stops me. I'm in this mess because of him. I can't let the dickhead get away.

So I go against all my better instincts.

All common sense.

I go after Frogger.

I give chase through a maze of glass buildings. Empty paved corridors with no sign of Frogger. Only the echoes of his footsteps. I follow the sound to a blind corner. The rear of the courthouse. The hum of an air conditioning system coming out of the vents.

I wait and listen. But the beat of a police chopper drowns out everything else.

I move slow around the next corner. Just another empty passageway. The tinted green glass of the new law courts rising up high in front of me.

I wait. Both hands on the gun. Finger on the trigger. The chopper beating louder and louder as it searches me out.

I've got nothing.

Yet the sun comes out from behind the clouds. A thick wave of light travels up the passageway and casts everything in a bright yellow glow. The sun is warm and lights up the glass in front of me. I see my reflection, crystal clear. And another behind me. A tall, lean figure with a white bandaged hand. Coming out of hiding. Raising his weapon. I whirl around and fire twice. Frogger gets a shot off, but it's lost to the sky.

He hits the deck. The gun spills from his hand. Blood seeps through his dark-grey hoodie. I think I got him in the heart.

As I stand over Frogger, he coughs up a mouthful of thick blood. "I know you like Neil Diamond," he says.

His eyes roll white as he takes his last breath. I linger a moment in the warm sunshine. I've never been the Bible-bashing kind. But it almost feels like God is talking to me. Helping me out. Telling me I did good.

He speaks to me in a Manchester accent. Screams at me to drop the weapon. To get down on the floor. I turn to my right. I'm faced with four semi-automatic rifle barrels. High-powered kit pointed square at me.

No, it's definitely not God.

Four plainclothes cops stand in a line in dark-blue Kevlar vests. They yell at me again to put down my gun.

"Yeah, yeah," I say setting it down slow. These armed response guys are so bloody twitchy.

They keep yelling, but I know the drill. On the floor. Hands on head. Blah, blah, blah.

Looks like I'll be joining Rudenko in the slammer. Which means I'll have to kill him before he kills me.

The cops have me cuffed and on my feet in no time. They march me round the front of the courthouse. The place has emptied out. Cordoned off with all the main players inside. The doors locked shut and an armed guard outside.

They shove me on past the courthouse, to where a police van waits on the street with its doors open. About a dozen cops stand around looking smug. As if they didn't shit their pants five minutes earlier.

"Soft lads," I say to 'em.

I lunge at one of them, just for the fun of it. He shits his pants all over again.

Just as I'm about to step up into the van, a dark Range Rover pulls up with a blue and red flashing light on the inside of the dash. An unmarked pig-mobile, with the rear windows blacked out.

A pair of suited detectives get out. A big ginger bloke and a leggy, slender woman with black hair. They have their badges at the ready, pulling rank.

The other cops aren't too happy.

"What's all this?" one of them asks. The senior officer by the looks of his silvering hair and swagger.

"NCA," the woman says.

Also known as the National Crime Agency. The people charged with bringing down organised crime in the UK.

"This is our arrest," says the senior officer.

"Was," the woman says, turning her nose up at him.

A female copper with short black hair sighs in frustration. "Where are you taking him?"

"It's above your station," the woman says, as her partner takes me by the arm.

"This is a fucking joke," says a squat copper with a face I'd like to punch.

I cock my head to one side. "Do I hear stolen thunder?"

I laugh as I'm led away. The male detective opens the back door of the Range Rover. He pushes me up inside.

The Range Rover pulls away from the curb. Police vehicles and traffic making way. The female detective sits behind the wheel.

In actual fact, it's Laura. Her ginger sidekick is one of Murphy's new goons.

Speaking of the silver-haired devil, he sits to my right on the backseat. A big grin on his face. The cat who got the double cream.

"Sorry we were a bit late," he says, undoing my cuffs with a small key.

"Ah, it was short notice," I say, shaking my hands free of the cuffs. "I would have called earlier, but it was a last minute thing."

"I take it you got the young man to the courthouse on time?"

"He's in there now. Rudenko too."

"I would have paid a lot of money to see his face," Murphy says.

The Range Rover cruises through the city streets. Rush hour traffic thinning.

"So where to?" Laura asks.

"Your place?" I ask.

It bounces right off her. No, I'm never getting anywhere there.

"Can't go home," I say. "Don't suppose you could sort me out with a new passport and a change of clothes, could you?"

"Shouldn't be a problem," Laura says. "You leaving for good?"

"Why, you gonna miss me?"

Still nothing. That woman is dead inside.

"You know, my offer's still on the table," Murphy says.

"Can't hang around here any longer," I say.

"I'm sure all that can be made to go away," he says, as we pass by the tall, glass monolith that is the Hilton Hotel.

"You know me, Mr Murphy. I'm like Switzerland."

As I say it, Murphy choruses with me. Like he's tired of hearing it. "Well, whatever your philosophical leanings," he says. "You're not neutral anymore."

He holds my eye. I guess he's got a point. Working for Murphy would be the common sense option. Protection from the cops

and Rudenko's mob. A change of pace. And plenty of cash in my pocket.

But I promised Cassie.

"Well, Charlie?" Murphy says, raising a silvery eyebrow. "What do you say?"

It's a typical Manchester afternoon.

I walk with a rucksack over one shoulder. Collar turned up to the wind. A few hundred quid in one pocket. A fake passport in the other. I see a bus approaching behind me. Lime green. One of those small electric ones with its wipers on.

A fine drizzle hangs in the air. The bus shushes past in the wet, straight past the bus stop. An old man just misses it. He sighs and takes a seat inside the shelter, opening the local paper.

On the front page, there's a headline next to an image of Rudenko: *Surprise Witness Condemns Mafia Boss to Life Behind Bars*.

The kid did good.

Christ knows where they moved him. I hope it's somewhere better than the estates.

I heard on the radio that Detective Price was on the run from the cops.

They'll soon catch him. You know how I know? 'Cause he thinks he's smarter than he is.

I smile to myself at the thought of him in the slammer with Rudenko. I round a corner, into an alley. Something about helping that kid. I dunno. It felt good. In a way no amount of booze, money, women, car-nicking or skull-bashing ever has.

It's like after forty-odd years, I suddenly woke up.

I *want* to go straight.

And not just 'cause I promised.

You feel lighter when you do good. You know?

I walk halfway down the street and stop at the side of a blue Mazda 6. I look around me. The coast is clear.

Yep, today feels like the start of a new journey. Wherever I'm headed, I'm gonna attempt to make a positive difference. Do something meaningful with my life.

Be a good citizen.

A good father.

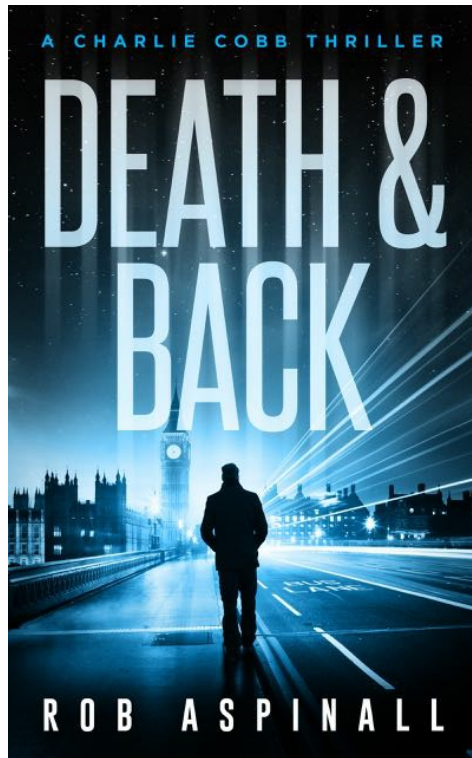
A good human being.

Right after I steal this car.

GUIDE TO CHARLIE COBB SLANG

Beemer - BMW
Bent coppers - Police officers who accept bribes
Bloke - Man
Brew - Cup of tea
Chops - Mouth / Cheeks
Cig - Cigarette
Crown jewels - Testicles
Fuzz - Police
Gob - Mouth
Hand shandies - Pleasuring a gentleman by hand
Jizz - Semen
Knackered - Exhausted or Broken
Knockers - Female breasts
Nick - Steal
The nick - Prison
Pig(s) - Police officer(s)
Prossies - Prostitutes
Sally - Crudely behaved individuals fond of leisure wear
Slammer - Prison
Strangeways - High Security Prison in Manchester
Tea - Dinner / Evening meal
Toss - Semen / Masturbate
(Don't give a) Toss - Don't care
Tossing - Pleasuring oneself
Tosser - Foolish or tiresome individual
Wank - Also pleasuring oneself
Wanker - Extremely annoying person

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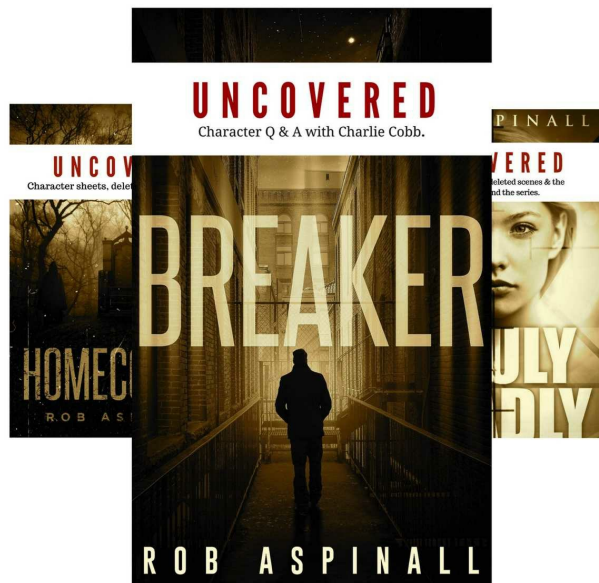
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Phew. Now time for a lie down.

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