

HELL HAWK

DD

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In Many Ways

Peter Carroll

Raven Crest Books



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DEDICATION

For Sharon and Megan

1. The Way To Learn Hard Lessons

The white van pulled up outside the warehouse; a high pitched squeal indicative of dirty brakes. A fine mist of rain hung like grey net curtains, and the clouds obscured any hope of celestial illumination. The headlights split the dark dampness; moisture swirling, glinting and twisting in the beams as if held inside two, recently shaken, elongated, snow globes. This brightening was brief, and the removal of the ignition key soon restored the murk.

What looked like a human wardrobe tumbled from the driver's seat. Pulling his collar up against the weather, he closed the door behind him, and loped round to the back. Like most white vans it was not as white as it might be, thanks to the detritus chucked up from the road. Some jokers had scrawled messages in this layer of grime. Hints like; 'Wash Me!', and 'Also available in white'. One particularly comic correspondent etched 'If only my wife was this dirty!' only for another to inform him that 'She is when she's with me!'

The bipedal furniture pulled the body of a young man from the back of the van. He slung it over his shoulder as easily and as casually as if it had been an empty jacket. Paying no heed to the messages, he carried the unconscious coat into the warehouse.

The warehouse itself was unremarkable - a framework of discoloured girders with paint flaking off in hefty chunks, filled in with grey breeze blocks, and topped off

with waves of corrugated iron. A large, steel, roller-shutter door accessed a concrete loading bay: rusting, and long-since-useless block and tackle, hung from the roof above. Various deposits of post-industrial waste were scattered across the floor, but in the centre an area had been cleared. The lighting was clearly of a temporary nature. Three, small but powerful floodlights, mounted on tripods, and seemingly plugged into the mains: no doubt bypassing any requirement for an estimated meter reading or a standing order. Clearly, this building had once been a hive of small, independent, mercantile activity. Today it was again - although almost certainly not in the same field of commerce.

Once inside, the walking wardrobe tipped the lad into a chunky, high-backed chair, bolted onto the floor in the clearing. The boy wore a white t-shirt under a blue tracksuit top, blue tracksuit trousers, and white trainers. Heavy leather straps circled his wrists and ankles, biceps and thighs, chest, lap, and neck, binding him tightly into the chair. Blood oozed from a fresh welt on the back of his shaven head: a cosh the most likely culprit. His breathing was slightly erratic but did not seem to signify his impending demise.

The van-driving furniture joined two other human fitments, waiting for him to deliver his cargo. A gentle hubbub of murmured conversation struck up between these three, broken occasionally by booming guffaws of laughter. Before long, they were indulging in what all men inclined towards the supreme vanity of body building do - they were comparing musculature. Look at my biceps, triceps, abs, tabs, and cabs - are they impressive, or are they impressive? Who gives a shit? Everybody knows that to get so inhumanly big they needed to eat about six sheep a day, and inject so much steroid that, eventually, their gonads would resemble a nematode attached to a walnut. Oh, and they would probably die of heart failure by age forty. These same types find it amusing to refuse perfectly

harmless kids entry to nightclubs. Clubs their friends have just gone into, thus leaving them stranded and alone in city centres for all manner of despicable things to happen to them. Massive insecurity, inferiority complexes, and homo-erotic yearnings concealed behind a wall of muscle and sinew, machismo, displacement, and tall story telling.

Then again, you might need somebody to intimidate, beat, or harass your enemies. You might require protection for you or your property (or for someone you cared about). If so, then these three hunks of artificially overdeveloped manhood would be your boys. But, these were his boys. His meanest, most ruthless, and morally bankrupt boys. Before the evening was out, they would admirably demonstrate all of those qualities, and perhaps a few less desirable ones to boot.

The building gave a metallic yawn as the roller-shutter door opened.

The car almost floated in, stopping a few yards from the chair. So quiet as to suggest the breath of its driver powered it - black, of course; Mercedes, of course; small countries' GDP for a price tag, naturally. The driver got out, but just how he managed to do that, or get in for that matter, was a mystery - even when the car concerned was like a super tanker with wheels. Perhaps he was like Alice, with bottles marked 'Drink Me' in order to alternately shrink and expand himself? Either that, or someone inside the car was helping to push him out, sitting in the passenger seat and using both feet. This behemoth looked like someone set out to create Mr T and Arnie Schwarzenegger's combined in-vitro-fertilised, bastard, no love lost there then, child... and succeeded. If the three apes making the preparations were gorillas, then King Kong was now in the building. He opened the rear offside door.

Generally, the Mr Bigs of this world are men who no longer do; they are men who have done for them. Guile,

intelligence, entrepreneurial spirit, a silver tongue, and an ability to make (and keep hold of) mountains of cash. All qualities far more likely to see you atop the criminal hierarchy than lashings of mutton and anabolic, and a fondness for playing cruel, practical jokes on teenagers. Danny O'Neill may not have had the physical stature of baby Tarnie and co, but by Christ did those ruthless, beefy bastards cow in his presence.

O'Neill grew up in Easterhouse: amongst the toughest of tough housing estates in Glasgow. One of four children born to second generation, Irish Catholic, immigrant parents, his upbringing was hard and poverty-stricken. His father was an inveterate gambler, womaniser and alcoholic, who pretty much left his mother struggling to raise him and his three sisters on her own. Money, food, clothes and heat were in constantly short supply. These were not his Good Old Days. He despised being poor, malnourished, and cold, and despised his cockroach of a father for allowing his children's lives to be thus.

He was always likely to join a gang because every boy on the estate did. These estates were bereft of any other credible fulcrum of social cohesion for young men. The two main churches' relevance was relegated to providing reasons for partition or footballing allegiances; Huns versus Tims; Nationalists versus Unionists; Papes versus Proddies; Billy boys versus Fenians. They had long since lost their ability to galvanise or motivate them to follow the tenets of their respective takes on Christian faith. There was no iconic work place, like a pit, or a steel plant, to give them a shared sense of purpose or productivity. Indeed, work of any kind was in short supply. Therefore, so was money, and significantly, there were absolutely no leisure facilities. This was before the introversion and selfishness of drugs became the way to counteract the deficiencies of their lifestyles. People still hankered for collective goals and activities. At a very basic level, gangs gave young men something to do. They offered the

promise of comradeship, status, recognition by their peers and exhilaration. For some, gangs meant protection, while for others they would tender nothing more than constant anxiety, brutality, humiliation and even death. They could be as formally constructed as any national army, or as anarchic as the most dissident of terrorist splinter groups. The most ambitious boys on the estate looked to the militarily minded collectives. These gangs offered the structure and opportunity to be recognised; to be unconditionally obeyed. Danny O'Neill was the most ambitious boy any of them ever encountered.

Tough, certainly, but not the toughest of the tough in his gang by any means. However, this was not crucial since, not only was O'Neill the most ambitious member, he was also the smartest and most ruthless by some considerable margin. He joined the most dreaded and pitiless gang with the most militaristic set-up. Rising to the very top came via all the usual routes for promotion in a criminal corporation: drugs, prostitution, loan sharking, embezzlement, robbery, and murder. As he began to make larger sums of money from these endeavours, he also invested in concerns with varying degrees of legitimacy. Property, shares, restaurants, shops, and art. The invaluable ability to manipulate and lead others into doing his bidding was apparent and invoked from a very early stage. Many things marked him out from the average gang member, but an utter lack of compassion, and the relentless pursuit of retribution when wronged, were key components in his success.

At the age of nineteen he committed his first murder - that of his spineless, drunken father. His mother never knew he was behind it. At least, if she did, she never faced it or confronted him with it. He felt nothing other than deep satisfaction at removing the worthless parasite from appropriating oxygen under false pretences. He lured him to a meeting in a pub, plied him with enough drink to render him comatose, and left him in his car with the

engine running and a pipe attached to the exhaust. To the police it was a straightforward suicide, but to all those in the know, it sent out a strong and unambiguous message. This was someone with a sense of purpose and ruthlessness that went way beyond the railings of your average hormonal teenager. This was a young man that you'd be well advised not to cross, or in any way cause him to make you the object of his ire.

Despite a public profile in the East End higher than most TV stars, and amassing a fortune of eye-watering proportions through illegal means, he consistently avoided imprisonment. In fact, he had never been successfully charged with anything that stuck, or found himself on trial. Nemesis did not even begin to describe his status in relation to the Strathclyde Police Force. They tried every tactic they could, but as he became more successful and notorious, he actually spent less time at the criminal coalface. Operations were directed through his chain of thugs and lawyers - some of whom played dual roles. Getting to the actual man himself was easy. Proving he was the one what done it guvnor, was a lot harder.

He held no particular preference when it came to how to make money and wield power. To get where he was, he quickly ditched any sense of empathy or sympathy. Better still, he was almost certainly born without such cumbersome baggage. This unburdening removed the angst that those initial, moral, gangster dilemmas would elicit in most - until they dulled themselves to it. It would always be difficult to judge, in any individual, whether nature or nurture played a bigger part in shaping who they were. However, from an early age, spurred on by the example (or genes) set to him by his father, Danny O'Neill appeared disinterested in any negative effects his actions might have on other people. No matter the conclusions drawn in any intellectual debate as to the origins of his disposition, it was fair to say that if ever a man was born to profit from the misery of others, then this was he, and that

lad in the chair was about to be very miserable indeed.

Wearing an immaculately tailored, black suit, a mauve, open-collared shirt, and black shoes, he stood about five feet seven tall, and was somewhat stocky in build. Although shaven headed, his face was most unlike the classic gangland hard man. No boxer's nose, no scar from eye socket to chin, no mono-brow. In many ways, he looked like a well-dressed businessman making a visit to one of his factory outlets. Reaching into his inside pocket, and pulling out some Gauloises, he tapped the slightly crumpled soft packet in the obligatory manner seen in all good French movies. After removing one and placing it purposefully between his lips, Tarnie stepped forward and lit it for him. He dragged deeply, and after holding in his breath for a second or two, the exhalation was deep and through both nostrils. It almost gave him the appearance of a cartoon bull. The packet returned to the pocket.

In response to some less than obvious order, Bully Beef number one walked over to the lad with a small vial, popped the top off it, and waved it under his nose. The boy responded by shuddering awake, spluttering and coughing, as if choking on some liquid that inadvertently went down the wrong way. It took him a minute or two to gain some kind of lucidity.

'Right son, awake are we?'

His voice had a duality. Gravel, lain on top of deep, heavy loam. It was a voice that imbued the authority, fear, and respect its owner commanded with rumbling resonance. There was an almost hypnotic, serene, quality to it too. Although, this soothing timbre would be unlikely to provide compensation for the consequences of having fallen foul of said owner.

'You appear to have gotten yourself into a spot of bother.'

He inhaled the Gauloise deeply once more. This time, the exhalation formed a chimney of smoke that chuffed upwards, disappearing from sight as the glow from the

temporary lighting dissipated in the roof space. His mannerisms were those of someone supremely calm. Someone in total control of the situation. This was certainly not a man inclined to rashness or nervousness.

'Now, I want to make something quite clear from the outset. I won't accept bein lied to. I also won't accept any sense of divided loyalty. When I ask you a question, I expect a quick, truthful answer - bullshit free and unambiguous. Do we understand each other?'

The boy in the chair clearly began to grasp the gravity of his situation. His eyes darted about as if careering around inside a pinball machine, and his mouth trembled uncontrollably. A pointless and short-lived struggle against the straps pinning him to the chair ensued.

'MMM Mr OOO O'Neill, I, I, I...' he stammered weakly.

'Shoosh now son. You can speak when I tell you to. I take it your answer to my first question was yes?'

He tried to nod but, with his head locked in place, his affirmation was limited to a grunt.

'Now, I hadn't finished tellin you what was gonna happen here.'

As he was speaking, Bully Beefs two and three retrieved a contraption of some sort from the gloom beyond the floodlights. They began to assemble it as O'Neill continued his address.

'I'm gonna ask you three questions. The answers you decide to give, will determine just how bad things are gonna get for you.'

The boy started to sob gently now. Clear, watery, snot dripped from his right nostril and he sniffed disconsolately.

'I have to point out to you, that this is merely about damage limitation. You know you've betrayed me, and I know you've betrayed me. I want to know the extent, and the actions I'll need to initiate to put it right. I don't want excuses or any other wasteful outbursts. I want the truth,

the whole truth and nothin but.'

The boy nodded as best he could, as the BB's wheeled forward the contraption, and manoeuvred it in front of the chair. It looked like a cross between a crane, a welder's bench, and one of those metal frames they screw into the heads of neck-break victims. At this point, the terror contorting his face, entered the boy's bladder, and forced its contents out into his trousers.

O'Neill shook his head and sucked in his breath. To the uninformed observer, it may even have appeared that he did this with some semblance of commiseration.

'That must be a bit uncomfortable and embarrassin, but don't worry about it. I've seen it all before. A lot bigger and harder men than you have done that when in a similar predicament.'

The BB's sniggered like naughty schoolboys discovering the joys of double entendre.

'Fuckin grow up!' snarled O'Neill.

They instantly composed themselves, and continued with the task in hand.

'Where was I? Oh, that's right, I was gonna tell you about this thing.'

He dragged deeply on his cigarette one last time, and stubbed it out in the container provided with almost balletic timing and co-ordination by Tarnie junior. It was this sort of caution and attention to detail that kept him out of jail. Many the lesser and less astute man would have stubbed it out on the floor. However, with modern DNA techniques, it would provide a marker of his presence, should the police feel any need to visit the premises at a later date.

'You see, on telly and in films and so on, torture is normally a pretty tame process. The good guy usually just gets punched, or maybe whacked by the butt of a pistol. Now and again, some light electrocution might take place, or a finger or two might get broken. Loads of things get hinted at, but nothin usually comes of it. You know fine

well they're idle threats coz there's no point mutilatin or killin the good guy, otherwise the film grinds to an early halt - that and the censors tend to stop them showin anythin too graphic.'

He paused, as if listening far off for some distant sound, before resuming his speech.

'Thing is, that doesn't actually work all that well in the real world. People are usually not too worried about gettin the crap knocked out of them. They're used to an occasional kickin and even broken bones will heal eventually. It usually doesn't scare them enough to guarantee the truth. Anyway, you can end up knockin them unconscious or worse still, killin them, before you've got what you need. It just takes too long and the results are totally unreliable.'

The BB's were placing part of the thing around the lad's head. Semi-circular, about one inch thick, and looked as if it was made from tempered steel. They placed it across the meridian of his head from ear-to-ear and made some adjustments, tightening it close to the boy's scalp. The crane, securely fastened to the floor with a tripod of bracing struts, held this torturous tiara from above. A leather strap, hanging from the back of the steel band, had a buckle to fasten it to the back of the chair. This meant that the manner of his bondage would allow him absolutely no movement of his head whatsoever. He did not yet realise it, but that would be important.

'To get to the truth, you need somethin more troublesome to the mind and body than a beatin. That's what I developed this wee apparatus for.'

The sobbing became a wail.

'No, pplease, MMMMMr OOO'Neill. I'll do anythin, I'm sorry, I didn't...'

He was teetering on the brink of hysteria, but O'Neill calmly cut in.

'I'm sure I told you not to speak unless I told you to.'

Despite the panic sweeping over him, threatening to

wrest all semblance of control from his emotions and bodily functions, somewhere deep down, his subconscious won a battle in the war for survival. It managed to convince his conscious self that compliance was his only chance of making it beyond the next few minutes. More strangely, that voice, which was as soothing as it was menacing, helped it in its campaign. The gentle, self-pitying, sobbing resumed.

‘As I was sayin, this wee device I’ve had the boys’ put on you is designed to speed up the truth, and make sure I’m not here all night.’

‘Question one. Who did you talk to?’

‘I, I, I, didn’t...’

O’Neill held up his right hand, his left remaining in his trouser pocket.

‘Ok, before you continue down that route, let me just re-iterate for you once more, and for the final time. No lies, no divided loyalties.’

One of the BB’s swung the next bit of kit into place. A kind of circular vice, placed around the boy’s face, and secured to the metal bar behind each ear. Stepping back, he executed a swift, short, and distinctly hefty punch to the midriff.

The boy gasped for air, reeled from both the shock and the pain, and looked at O’Neill almost accusingly.

‘Oh, I forgot to mention that beatin is still gonna be a part of your punishment. Particularly if you continue to make things difficult.’

‘It was DI Smith, the one that speaks with a whistle,’ the boy blurted breathlessly.

O’Neill recognised the name instantly, and alarm bells began to sound. Smith was a copper hell bent on making a name for himself - a gutsy, maverick, bastard with a real nose for the weak spots in his intended targets. Exactly the kind of policeman he had been very careful to avoid giving any encouragement to throughout his long and illustrious career. Avoiding the attentions of such men had kept him

out of jail thus far. As much as it might please Her Majesty, he would not be at all chuffed to be taking up an extended residence in one of her more secure accommodations.

'Good, now we're gettin somewhere. Question two. Did you give him time and place?'

'Aye.'

The sniffing was almost constant now, but made little impact on the flow of snot.

'Question three. Was that the first time you've talked to him?'

'No. It's a few. Ten times maybe, I'm not sure exactly. I never tell him very much, I just do it for the money so I can buy gear, I wasn't thinkin straight, and I know I was a prick for doin it, but I've got a problem with drugs, and if you'll just give me one more chance I promise I'll make it up to you'

He was rattling like a cattle auctioneer on speed.

'Look son, I just wanted to get the info I needed on this policeman. I couldn't give even half of a fuck about your motivation or your problems. We've all got problems, but we don't all go grassin up our employers to the filth.'

O'Neill stood stock still, and pondered. There was a lot to think about. He knew what he needed to do about the whistling bobby, but he was considering his options for the boy. It would probably be best to just kill him and be done with it, but they had not planned a full clean up, or the proper disposal of his body. In any case, he was waiting for an opportunity to try out his new toy, and given the entirely appropriate circumstances, it seemed a waste not to see what it was capable of. He did not stand on the horns of his dilemma for long. He never did. Thinking decisively, on the hoof, and to tight deadlines was an essential skill.

'Question four. I know, I know, I promised you three questions, but I just wanted to ask you one more.'

He paused, rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and addressed

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the boy directly with both hands thrust deep into his pockets.

'Do you think you'll be talkin to the police again?'

'No, no, I promise I won't, I promise, please, I'll do anythin. You don't have to kill me'

O'Neill took his hands out of his pockets, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and cocked his head slightly to the left. He rocked back and forth a couple of times between heel and toe, with knees locked, and the seg's in his shoes tapping metallically on the floor.

'Well, truth is son; you're right, I don't need to kill you to know you'll not be talkin again - ever. You see, I'm not particularly religious these days, but I do really think they were on to somethin with that eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth malarkey. As far as I'm concerned, I really do think the punishment should fit the crime.'

'Right then, if you'll excuse me, my piles are playin up somethin rotten, so I'm gonna go and sit in my nice comfy motor.'

He said this with redundant and incongruent politeness. It seemed reasonable to assume that the boy did not give even the tiniest of jots about O'Neill's shitepipe. Or the apparent surfeit of roughage in his diet. Particularly as he just spent the last fifteen minutes terrorising him, and was about to unleash some unspeakable punishment upon him. Literally unspeakable, as it turned out.

Turning abruptly, he walked back to the car, and climbed into the back seat again. Tarnie stood in front of the driver's door. O'Neill's blacked-out window gently opened, and he sparked up another cigarette.

With their master now sitting comfortably, they could begin.

BB 1 approached the boy with what looked like a set of pliers. BB 2 stood behind him and did something strange - he pinched his nose. BB 3 stood impassively by his right shoulder, ignoring the lad's whimpering and begging for

mercy, hand resting on the crankshaft of the vice.

BB one grabbed the boy's lower jaw with his free hand and forced his mouth open. The jaw has a remarkably strong set of muscles attached to it, but the brute force being applied, combined with the need to breathe, meant number one held a distinct advantage. The pliers were rubberised to help them grip slippery objects. As soon as the boy's mouth was open wide enough, BB 1 grabbed his tongue with them, and pulled it forcibly forward and out. Number two let go of his nose and number three got to work - cranking the vice upwards. The boy was screaming, or approximating a scream given the position of his tongue and, best he could muster in the circumstances, thrashing wildly. His eyes pleaded pitifully, but it was utterly futile. The vice rose relentlessly, as he slowly, excruciatingly, bit off his own tongue. Blood began to ooze, and then spurt from the sides of his mouth, he gargled and choked, and snorted, pebble-dashing BB 1 with bloody snot. A crimson crescent slowly formed around the neck of his once-white t-shirt. After what seemed like an eternity, number one stepped backwards, holding the severed tongue in the pliers. The boy understandably fainted at some point during proceedings.

The window closed silently while Tarnie squeezed his vast frame back in behind the wheel. He gently exhaled, and the limo floated away.

'Now he really is a dumb fuck!' said BB1.

'That's a bit tasteless!' replied BB3 between the sobs and howls of laughter.

Once the hilarity subsided, The Three Muscleteers calmly dismantled the equipment, including the rather difficult task of removing the chair from its moorings in the concrete floor. They cleaned themselves and the area around where the chair had been, before bundling everything (including the lad) into the back of the van that one of them fetched from outside.

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The shutter yawned once more and they drove off into the dark, leaving the warehouse just as unremarkable as when they arrived - save for four rather large bolt holes in the concrete floor.

2. The Way Of The Dragon

They were allegedly following the same route back from the pub as they always did; it just felt a lot longer than normal. This was in part due to their ridiculously inefficient, intoxicated trajectory. However, the time taken to walk well worn paths was not only increased by their meandering gait, but also by an attack of the munchies. Luckily, that perennial purveyor of drunkard's haute cuisine - the all night kebab shop - offered them solace. This pit stop was extended by the bewildering array of potentially life-threatening gastronomic offerings. In combination with their impaired vision and liquored reasoning, it must have made the guy serving them feel like he had undergone ossification by the time they made their minds up. The eventual, painfully drawn-out decision was to opt for fingers of sliced potato, vigorously warmed in a bath of beef lipids, and dressed liberally with a curry jus. Yet more time ebbed away thanks to an entirely unnecessary bottle of lager; a cheeky little aperitif to their al fresco banquet. Still, what was an extra hour to a couple of urbane twenty-somethings out on the tiles? It was not as if they had a deadline to meet.

Upon finally reaching his front door, Tommy fished around in various pockets, searching for his keys. All the while he muttered obscenities regarding what he might do to them once finally located. It mattered little that such inanimate objects would be totally oblivious to his

displeasure with them – saying it made him feel better. After a temper testing delay, he retrieved the offending articles from a pocket he angled at least five times previously. Aimless prodding ensured they failed miserably to find their intended target.

‘Just let yourself in...for it.’

Davie lowered his head and passed his fingers in front of his mouth for the latter part of the phrase. In such a way as to be pleased to have gotten it in, but not so obviously that it would be noticed by his esteemed and steaming companion.

‘What?’

Tommy retracted the key from the general vicinity of the lock and turned to face Davie.

‘I said just let yourself in,’ he part-repeated with casual evasiveness.

Tommy frowned, his head bobbing like a Gerry Anderson puppet, as he tried to steady himself against the door frame. The fresh air had clearly done its worst since they left the pub, and yet annoyingly, it seemed to have furnished him with the hearing of a bat working at a government spy centre.

‘No, what was the bit after that? The bit you mumbled, hopin I wouldn’t catch it. Are you havin another go about my missus?’

Davie was forever giving him a hard time about how under the thumb he was, and how he needed to stand up and be a man as far as his overbearing wife was concerned. Tommy mostly took this as banter between blokes, but with a head full of beer and whisky, decided to take great offence instead.

‘Eh?’

Davie shrugged and very slightly lost his balance as he did so. Righting himself, he pushed both hands deep into his pockets, attempting to look as innocent as possible.

‘Just tell me you dick!’ Tommy slurred aggressively.

‘Whoa there sheriff! Your ears must be playin tricks on

you - I never said anythin about your good lady.'

Good lady was generous in the extreme, and was a description that made Davie feel a tad disingenuous for having used it. But it was too late, and they were too wrecked, to be arguing about this any further. He needed to get to bed. There was the small matter of work in the morning. Correction, there was the small matter of work in a handful of hours.

'Yes you did!'

Tommy shouted - the full force of his inebriation allowing him to forget completely about decorum, his wife, and the time - poking his house keys worryingly close to Davie's face as he did so.

Immediately, the window above them lit up the scene like a WWII searchlight: a great, glaring, accusatory eye, staring off into the night. Out on the pavement, there was no hiding place, and the two men braced themselves for the consequences of their idiotic disagreement. The frame was flung open with no little force, and the considerable bulk of Helen Scott almost blinded the Cyclops she just created.

'Oh shite! You've woken the lioness.'

Of course, the actual fearsome beast conjured up in his imagination was a dragon, but even he normally knew when discretion was the better part of valour.

'What the fuck is going on?'

The voice was deep, threatening, and distinctly unladylike.

'Davie, fuckin, Argyle! I might have bloody-well known.'

'Alright Helen?'

However, it was soon abundantly clear that his cheeky, chirpy, Cockney-barrow-boy approach failed to win her over.

'Don't you alright me, you useless wee prick!'

Helen Scott was a formidable woman - a female Pluto to Tommy's post-operative Olive Oil. She looked like she

spent all her days labouring on building sites, eating children, and wrestling bears (and mostly winning). Not so much Scary Spice as Piss Your Pants In Terror Spice. About five foot eight tall, and fond enough of pies to suppose it was also a fair estimate of her girth. Her blond hair, cropped short and with a black central stripe where the bleach had grown out, was complemented by a tattoo of a spider web on her bull neck. She was wearing some sort of negligee, but even in combination with his alcohol intake that evening, this was nowhere near enough to make Davie find her alluring. In fact, there was not enough alcohol in the world to facilitate that miracle. He never understood how Tommy managed to lumber himself with such a monster through his own choice, but for some bizarre reason their relationship worked. They had been together five years, and despite the temptations on offer being part of the band, Davie never saw any sign of playing away from home on Tommy's part. The stranger than fiction truth was they appeared smitten with each other - albeit in a typically gruff and understated West of Scotland kind of way. However, even if there were clandestine marital issues, only a very brave or very stupid person would run the risk of being caught cheating on Helen. Tommy may have been many things but courageous or dense did not immediately spring to mind.

'Hiy, that's a bit harsh. I'm not useless,' Davie replied, opening his arms wide and attempting to placate her with his boyish charm. Unfortunately, he undermined a great deal of this charm offensive by lurching backwards and almost ending up flat on the seat of his pants.

'Always actin the smart arse aren't you? Can't help yourself - even at two o'clock in the bastard mornin! Do you know what you really are though?'

'No, but I'm sure you're about to tell me you terrifying, toddler-devouring, bear-bullying hag!'

Of course, Davie didn't vocalise this outburst. It stayed within the confines of his cerebral cortex. He valued his

genitals too highly to risk having them violently detached from his person by the Gorgon in the window.

'Well, try droppin the smart. That would be a good startin point. I've got work in the mornin, and I don't need to be late coz I slept through the alarm on account of you pair of drunken wankers.'

That should have been my line thought Davie. Well, the bit about having work in the morning anyway, maybe not the bit about him and Tommy's apparent proclivity for onanism while under the influence.

'Oh, and by the way, Tommy Scott, swayin gently in the breeze down there. Never mind the all-pals-together act, and get your arse in this house - pronto!'

Perhaps in response to his spouse's gentle and supportive encouragement, Tommy finally found the lock, turned the key and let himself in. As he did so, he flicked his middle finger towards his other half in a show of defiance and renewed camaraderie, which he was very careful to ensure she couldn't see. Davie smiled and nodded.

'See you later big man. I'll give you a bell about next week.'

He held up his hand in lieu of a proper wave as the dragon addressed him again.

'And as for you!'

Helen jabbed one of her freakishly strong fingers in Davies' direction - fingers, he imagined, Tommy would no doubt presently be experiencing first hand, so to speak, as they were balled into the kind of iron fist that would have made Maggie Thatcher green with envy.

'You know what Helen? You look like Juliet up there in that window.'

Even combined with a winning smile, this line appeared not to go down too well.

'You better get to fuck you cheeky wee bastard!'

Helen was shouting. The venom with which she delivered this instruction was so powerful, it must have left

the local rodents fearing for the well-being of any loved ones who were out and about that night. He revisited the dragon comparison, imagining flames shooting from her mouth and incinerating him where he stood in the street.

As enjoyable as this jocular banter was, it dawned on him that he may just have reneged on the unspoken deal with the contents of his boxers. Beating a hasty, if slightly unsteady, retreat would definitely be the best course of action now. He was no Saint George, and even if he was armed with a sword, he didn't fancy his chances much. In any case, other lights were beginning to go on in the street. A great number of the other residents of Stuart Drive were just as formidable as the redoubtable Mrs Scott. In fact, several of them were likely to be more familiar with the inside of a cell than they were with the inside of their own houses; on account of their propensity to play rather fast and loose with the accepted societal norms of the day. It did not escape Davie's notice that a prime example of one of these norms would be: thou shall not kick the living shit out of useless wee pricks who wake you up at two o'clock in the bastard morning.

The retreat was beaten. Hastily and very unsteadily.

3. The Argyle Way

Helen Scott had a point when she described Davie Argyle as a smart arse. He was in fact a smart arse of quite biblical proportions. Even this appealed to his smart-arsedness, since he was a confirmed atheist. He was twenty-four, single, working in a record shop, and living in a rented flat. He consistently failed to apply his quick wits, sharp sense of humour, and undoubted intelligence, to any higher purpose than attempting to get the high score on Smart Arse for the X-Box 360 or handsomely exceeding the scale on the smart arse-ometer.

The only child of his Ayrshire born parents, his father Davie Snr. had been a bomb disposal expert in the army. However, some bits of him were never recovered from the scene of his untimely demise while ‘disposing’ of an IRA bomb in Belfast. In his blacker moments, junior formed the view that some of his relatives wore rose-tinted spectacles in regard to his fathers’ prowess in the bomb disposal department.

He saw little of him as a young boy since the job meant long tours of duty all around the world. When he was home, his father was an archetypal man’s man, spending the bulk of his free time playing and watching sport, and drinking at the local pub. He sought solace in the bar, the boys and the bottle from what was undoubtedly a nerve-shredding way to earn a crust.

Davie never intended to join the bomb disposal squad

when he signed up for the army. In a moment of madness, and ultimately fatal folly, he decided it would be glamorous and gallant. He could prevent the separation of life from limb, rather than conform to the accepted army norm of causing this to occur.

It was nice not to have to kill anyone else, but he traded-in the dishing out of peril for constantly working in it. This began to affect his relationships with friends and family, and he developed a rather unsettling disregard for his well-being. He was all too aware of the precarious nature of his employ, and the very high likelihood of his coming to grief while undertaking it. This may have caused a detachment, which in some rather illogical fashion, might have been an attempt to soften the blow of his passing for anyone who cared for him. His drinking became heavier, and his behaviour became less predictable. Some of his friends were convinced that his rather nonchalant approach to the danger of the job was the primary factor in his own dissolution; some less charitable folks thought he was probably pissed. Following the explosion there was not enough of him left to tell one way or the other for sure.

Senior's greatest wish was that junior would grow up to be a professional footballer. Unfortunately, achieving that ambition would have required a leg transplant...or two. Junior loved the game, but was one step removed from useless, and this was a great disappointment to his dad. Regardless of the game involved, it was fair to say most sports were not a forte. Fortunately, he rarely suffered at the hands of bullies because of it, in the way so many do. The one thing he could do well physically was fight. Nevertheless, despite his shortcomings as an athlete, they got along well enough; it was just a rather distant and sporadic relationship. When he died, Davie Jnr. missed Davie Snr. terribly, and experienced genuine grief.

Luckily, his mother spoiled him rotten. Unfortunately, his mother also spoiled him rotten: literally and

figuratively. She descended into an alcohol and drug induced stupor so stupendous as to render most of her internal organs rock solid, and incapable of even their most basic functions, within three years of his father's death. Up until that point, they were very close. His father's distance, both physical and emotional, meant he was his mother's companion, confidant and friend. The thing Davie found difficult to understand was just why she took his father's death so hard. The speed of her decline was terrifying and bewildering for a teenage boy still trying to come to terms with his own problems, and his own loss. He loved her deeply, and when she finally succumbed to her various forms of self-abuse, he was bereft. His aggressive style of humour developed from this situation as a defence mechanism, and it just seemed to stick.

School became impossible by the time the exams that determine futures approached. The death of his father threw him out a bit, but it was trying to cope with his mother's maelstrom of self-destruction that proved much harder to deal with. How could he do homework, concentrate on lessons, or even turn up every day? How was he supposed to take other people's problems seriously, hold his temper, and just act like a normal teenage boy? It was simple - he could not and he did not. It certainly had nothing to do with him lacking the capability to achieve academically. Indeed, in another life, he may even have ended up at University, but whining to all and sundry about these injustices seemed pointless and self-indulgent. He had to get on with his life and nothing he or anyone else did or said could change his past.

Aged sixteen, orphaned, and without siblings, the inheritance consisted of a small house, a few thousand pounds in insurance policies, his father's army pension, and the unwanted attentions of several grasping and deeply unpleasant relatives.

The money put the final nail in the coffin of academia. It also led to a quite breathtaking disregard for his long-

term future. All manner of stupid, expensive gadgets, musical instruments and designer clothes, rapidly depleted his bank account - most of which were stolen or broken during one of the dozens of drunken parties he threw. Most impetuously and disgracefully of all, he sold the house and travelled the world for two years, flying first class and staying in five star hotels all the way. Typical of so many daft, young men, Davie conspired to shroud almost the entirety of this trip-of-a-lifetime in an alcoholic fug that ensured he remembered little of the experience. In fact, all he really ended up with was a good tan. It was his way of living for today because you never know; you might be hit by a bus, get blown up by your own incompetence, or die from a broken heart tomorrow.

Aged twenty, all that was left was the pension.

Davie had friends - sort of. More like a collection of people who through work, geography, or weakness of character, couldn't really avoid him, and in the case of the first two, he them. There had been no emotional Friends Reunited moments for Davie Argyle. Anyone who lost touch with him, tended to stay lost. It was true to say that very few really liked him, and even fewer would have openly admitted to them being good friends. However, it was also true to say that many were happy to be in his company. As with most people blessed with sharp wits, and a penchant for black humour, he could be funny - sort of. So long as you were not on the receiving end of his well-observed and shrewd take on the human condition - more commonly referred to as relentless piss taking. He rarely longed for company, and his bereavements made him cautious about getting too close to others, but he was no sociopath or hermit. In the right circumstances, he enjoyed social occasions. His sense of empathy and his moral compass were still reasonably intact.

Davie's mother nurtured a love of music in him from an early age. As puberty approached, he graduated from

plonking ditties on the piano, and sawing a violin in half trying to get it to sound remotely like it might be emitting Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, to becoming utterly obsessed with the guitar. It provided pain and comfort in equal measure. Hours were spent practising with headphones on, and current rock faves blasting in his ears as he blazed along. Music was sanctuary from his grief and bewilderment. It confirmed and validated his angst, while at the same time, soothed and distracted his ravaged emotions. He was a natural as well as a graft. Somehow, he found the mental capacity and motivation for this instrumental erudition in a way he never could with maths or English or geography or science. It was partly because achieving at school always seemed to be for the benefit of others (principally teachers and parents), while any accomplishments in mastering the guitar were his and his alone. However, it was not merely rebelliousness that drove him to construct those rock-hard calluses on his fingers. It was not just impertinence that motivated him to spend the countless hours he scaled, chorded, and arpeggio-ed. He dedicated this time to it because he really wanted to and because he really wanted to be the best he could be. Eventually, as he got into his late teens, this talent grew to the point that several of his bands flirted around the edges of ‘making it’. He even found himself recording demos on at least three occasions, but with no tangible reward to show for it. Most of these bands split-up due to the well-worn excuse known to all musicians as “musical differences”. At least one disintegrated after a full-blown fistfight between him and the singer.

The latest combo called The Shambolic Sharks included the mythical-reptile-bothering Tommy Scott, who apart from having seriously flawed taste in women, happened to be an incredibly talented drummer. He could hold a rock solid beat, but also had flair and showmanship. These talents warranted a bigger stage than being thoroughly unappreciated, by a musically ill-informed and

mostly drunken audience, in some shitty, little pub every few weeks. The other two in the outfit lacked talent, were far more annoying, and had most definitely reached the pinnacle of any musical achievements they were ever likely to realise. The band had a reasonable following in their hometown and played the odd gig in Glasgow. However, the brutal truth, that escaped at least two band members, was it amounted to nothing more than rather modestly paid recreation. No fat-cat record company exec, with an oversized cigar, was going to wave a five album contract at them, and no industry-renowned producer would be whisking them off to his studio in the Hollywood hills to record their stunning debut album. He was reconciled to this now, and accepted that his musical ship had sailed.

Success with the ladies occurred on a reasonably regular basis. By most young men's standards, he was what many would refer to as a bit of a swordsman. He could make them laugh, was generous with his money (when in possession of any), dressed pretty well, and was more than passable in the looks department - his parents made a handsome couple in their day. He was also the guitarist in a band and, along with the vocalist, nearly always garnered the most attention from the female portion of the audience. These encounters were all about sex though, and proper relationships were conspicuous by their paucity. There was one girl from school he 'went steady' with for about a year, but they were kids, and it was all very tame. There was a girl called Emma that he nearly fell for, and she for him, but that was when his life was a mess of contradictory hedonism and nihilism brought on by his personal tragedies. She still occasionally texted and he occasionally replied.

The death of his parents also precipitated his loss of faith. They were staunch Protestants; forcing him to attend church and Sunday school...well...religiously. Like most kids, his attempted indoctrination occurred at the hands of already brainwashed adults, with their own agendas for

being part of an organised faith group. His parents always steered clear of any serious answers to questions about the nature of God. Questions like: why was it that the merciful God that was supposed to love them and look after them, was content to allow millions of African babies to starve? Why did he let his Granny die in agony from cancer, when she had been to his church every Sunday of her life? They failed to respond satisfactorily to these or any of the countless other quandaries religion raises in intelligent and inquisitive minds. He found the bible almost as tedious and stupid as the turgid minister who espoused its teachings. This human whoopee cushion farted incessantly about how much God loved them, while all the time admonishing them that said supernatural being would smite them, and banish them to eternal damnation, if they contravened any of his house rules. These rules were so bewildering in their array, and so obtuse, contradictory, and unreasonable in their nature that he rapidly gave up hope of ever being able to stick to them. It occurred to him at a pretty early age that the main messages being sent out by this God, were much less like proclamations of love, than they were like blackmail, bullying and threatening behaviour.

The general premise was bad enough, but to make matters worse, Protestants were encouraged to be such miserable gits. Reminded endlessly about how hard work and austerity were the ways to get their rewards in heaven. Bowing and scraping like serfs in the presence of a medieval Baron - thanking him every Sunday for helping them to make their lives so tedious and unfulfilling. Davie might not have been in the running to win the hedonist of the year award. Nevertheless, he was not going to spend eighty years, working like a Trojan, with never a smile on his coupon or a girl of loose morals in his bed, just on the off chance that it might help him avoid Old Nick's sweltering welcome mat when he finally copped it.

When they were both gone, he quickly saw through the

smokescreen that wafted around his reasoning. As far as he was concerned, there was no God, and even if there was, He was a heartless, vengeful, bastard who liked to ruin lives, not salve them. Religion would play no further part in his life, and it was all the better for its absence.

So far, practically no one he encountered in his twenty-four years on earth had caused him to give more than the tiniest scrap of faecal material about them; especially since moving to this latest small town.

The biggest problem with so many small towns the world over, is the overpowering presence of the small-town-mentality. This one had it in buckets and spades. The vast majority of the people in this once thriving, and now semi-derelict, seaside town had given up on hope. There was no hankering, or desire, or thrust, or challenge. They drudged and trudged through life, content to go nowhere, see nothing and achieve two fifths of bugger all. Being so lacking in personal ambition and drive was fair enough - if that was what they wanted for themselves, then so be it. However, there was something about such people that led them to show nothing but bitter resentment and disdain towards anyone who broke free from the dreary little crap-hole. They would transform visits home by such escapees into thoroughly miserable experiences; capriciously encouraging and then rejecting their attempts to do such things as buy a round of drinks. Sometimes this bile, petty jealousy, and feeling of inadequacy would lead to violence. Whatever the exact pattern of the behaviour, it merely served to make the deserters choice to leave valedictory.

There was no escaping one thing: the residents were, almost to a man and woman, dullards, and dull with it. Davie, on the other hand, was a big fish in a small pond. Unlike the drones that swarmed around him all day, he was clever, witty, challenging, ambitious, thrusting, single, working in a shop as a sales assistant, had no academic qualifications to speak of, was living in a crummy, rented

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flat in shitsville-sur-le-mer, had squandered most of his inheritance, and was adrift.

The thing was though, if Lady Luck would just grab hold of the tiller, he could soon be back on course. He was sure of it.

4. The Way To Get On

Detective Inspector Bryan 'Whistler' Smith was no ordinary policeman. Hard working to the point of 'holic. Endowed with ambition that burnt so fiercely it could have started a bush fire if he stood in one place too long during a dry spell. Inexorable in any pursuit. Unstintingly loyal to those he felt had earned it, and a good husband and father. Well, he used to be.

Born and raised in Manchester, the transfer to Glasgow came early in his career, and by now he had worked in the Strathclyde Force for nearly fifteen years. Reaching the rank of DI was achieved very rapidly, by dint of his spectacular arrest sheet and detection rate. In fact, he was the youngest DI in the UK at one point, and seemed destined for the most upper of echelons. He was married to a fantastic woman called Emily and had two teenage sons called Ryan and Eric - named after his two favourite Manchester United players.

His greatest career achievement to date was catching and imprisoning an entire family of drug dealing thugs from Mossside. This was a family feared and loathed by all - including each other. Violent in extremis, unremitting in their greed for money, and possessing of an arsenal that really should have been the top priority of the UN Security Council of the day. An unfortunately large number of the police assigned to deal with them developed financially-induced, visual acuity problems, and most of the rest were

just good, old fashioned, shitting themselves.

Whether you thought him imprudent, valiant, or suicidal, Smith neither feared them nor lusted after their money. His eyes were open and his determination was as steely as their nine millimetre Glocks. He hounded, harassed and prodded at them until he found what he needed: a grass. The snake involved was the accountant. A slithering, untrustworthy, and insatiably avaricious little reptile. He saw an opportunity to get rid of his less educated and distinctly unstable brethren, and take their share of the ill-gotten gains for himself. There was no conscience in this mendacity. He was happy to shop every single one of his repellent relatives – including his own grandmother, who was deeply involved in gun-running, prostitution, and human trafficking. Still economically productive at the age of seventy-five, she would have been a fine example to us all if it wasn't for the small matter of the ordinance, whores and modern-day slavery.

The bringing to justice bit of this arrangement succeeded in no small part thanks to the egos and narcissism of the family. They loved to film their exploits, and hours of video footage emerged showing them indulging in every type of criminal activity imaginable – gurning and playing up to the camera, regardless of how violent or repugnant the acts they were perpetrating. Combined with the testimony of Kaa the accountant, it helped Smith end a two-year investigation with the locking up of twenty five people. Four of them got life sentences.

The reaction of the press and public was overwhelming. Congratulations and gratitude flooded over him from within and without the force, and he headed to Glasgow with his career destined for the stratosphere. However, his abrasive manner, unwillingness to stick to orders and plans, an unswerving belief in following his gut, and his disdain for bureaucracy, slowed any further advancement - to the point where he was sure a trail of glistening, silver mucus followed him around the office. It

pissed him off immensely, but it was impossible for him to change either himself or the system. Admiration abounded from the cops who would never get on, while simultaneously, the ambitious body swerved him to avoid becoming damned by association. He grudgingly contented himself with a frankly, historical reputation with the media, and still current notoriety with the criminal fraternity. The bad guys at least, still regarded him as a man to be admired, feared and respected. He clung to the belief that at some point in his life, the wider world would recognise his importance and achievements; even if it would never be while making it as “Britain’s Top Policeman”.

The nickname arose from an unfortunate vocal tick that meant most times he pronounced a word containing the letter S, he whistled. The visitation of this affliction remained a mystery to him and his doctor, but in some respects, it may well have helped toughen him up. A police locker room was no place for the weak and easily put upon. He was thick-skinned, and perceptive enough to realise that most coppers had nicknames, and it really could have been a lot worse. Being six foot five and sixteen stone also helped most potential piss takers come to the speedy conclusion that it might not be a good idea to make anything of it. He was well aware that much hilarity and cowardly mocking went on behind his substantial back. What he did not hear, no longer troubled him. However, anyone who did swallow a bravery pill and pointed out his sibilance to his face, were soon left rueing their choice of medicine, and sent toddling off to exchange the rest of the packet for something to ease the swelling.

The interview room he was heading for was like most others. Essentially, it was a whitewashed box with a one-way mirror on one wall, and a door on another. A Formica-topped table was pushed up against a third wall and four plastic chairs with metal legs were placed around it. On top, sat a tape recording device. There would be no

need for tape or video today as this was not an interview under caution or arrest, and as such, did not require an official record. This was good because official records required official paperwork, and he despised the paperwork. It was designed by the kind of pricks who loved to be part of a committee - partly to ensure accountability to the same kind of pricks who sat on these committees (in lieu of doing a real job), and partly to avoid litigation. It swallowed time like a fat kid let loose in McDonald's, and it probably gave him less job satisfaction than the average Eastern European sex slave. One day, someone would finally realise that having highly trained and highly paid staff, sitting on their arses for untold hours, repeating stock phrases over and over again, in order to cover said arses, was not a particularly good use of time or money. Somehow, though, he imagined that in the same week that this momentous revelation occurred, they might also discover the oft-mooted aerobatic proficiency of curly-tailed livestock.

His interviewee was Alexander 'Zander' McCormack. Seventeen or eighteen years old, and typical of the underprivileged youth that inhabits housing schemes across Scotland in so many ways, but entirely untypical in one – he liked to talk to the police. Smith never took too much notice of his information, usually following it up on his own between real jobs, and mostly finding it was petty nonsense. Things that would cost more in bureaucracy than would ever be recovered and a diversion when he became too heavily embroiled in real cases and felt like easing the pressure. The thing was though, his gut told him this boy would eventually lead him to something significant, and he always followed his gut.

Zander's most recent claim of being recruited as a drug dealer for Danny O'Neill intrigued Smith, because he was most definitely worth the paperwork - or at least the start of the paperwork that he would never actually finish himself. Even if this naïve little squirt was just exaggerating

his insight into the activities of the most feared gangster in Scotland, there was no harm in keeping the bases covered. Sometimes, in the heat of battle, it is the tiniest details, and the most insignificant players that can transform the war.

Entering the room to find Zander already waiting for him, he sat down and placed his coffee cup on one of the coasters provided. The boy had a can of coke and had already eaten a packet of crisps by the looks of things, so it seemed pointless to offer him further refreshment.

'Now then Zander, good to see you again. How are you?'

'Aye, not bad Mr Smith, strugglin on you know?'

This seemed an entirely accurate, if unintentional, summation of the state of the bag of bones and skin sitting opposite Smith.

The boy was scruffy and scrawny, with deeply shadowed eyes, sunk so far into their sockets as to be barely visible any more. With his white tracksuit and black baseball cap he looked a bit like a Ned panda. His clothes were grubby and it looked a long time since a decent meal had crossed his lips. Although, his possession of a height to weight ratio of the average African famine victim could be accounted for by substance abuse, as much as malnutrition. His personal hygiene left a lot to be desired. His teeth were in serious need of their annual brushing, and his breath could have felled a goat at twenty paces. In fact, Smith had to speak to him slightly facing away in order to avoid its full halitotic onslaught.

'Yes I do son, I do. You said you've started working for Danny O'Neill. That's very interesting. He's a big player. When did he take you on?'

Zander shuffled in his seat and twirled the can of coke on the table a couple of times before taking a long slug from it. He put it down, and without a hint of self consciousness or embarrassment, belched like a fog horn. Smith reeled with the stench. It was like something curled up inside the boy's throat and took one last shit before it

expired. In fact, he was reminded of tales from the First World War and the mustard gas used to suffocate tens of thousands of soldiers.

'I don't know. Maybe about three weeks ago.'

Once his vision cleared and his breathing returned to a pattern capable of supporting speech, Smith addressed the one-man chemical weapon, sceptical that anything worthwhile would come of it.

'Hmm. Ok, so what did you want to tell me today?'

'I've been asked to meet him to pick up some drugs, and I thought you might want to know about it.'

'You reckon that Danny O'Neill is making this drop personally do you?'

Smith cocked his head slightly and raised his eyebrows almost instinctively at this rather implausible scenario, presented to him by such an improbable hero of the truth.

'Aye. He told me that I was to meet him, and those goons of his, over by the old St. Margaret's cemetery at six o'clock in the mornin on Wednesday the 20th. I've to go to a bench on top of a wee hill. You know the one don't you?'

'Yes, I know it. So, you're there to do what exactly?'

Smith continued absentmindedly jotting a few notes down on the sheet in front of him.

'Nothin much I don't think. I'm one of about ten lads that are there to get the stuff divvied out to them.'

'Ok, but what I don't get is why O'Neill plans to be there in person. This man's a ghost. He's never been caught doing anything worse than tripping a speed camera and collecting three points. Why's he going to be there?'

Zander shrugged.

'No idea, I didn't ask. I didn't think it was strange. Do I get my twenty shekels now?'

The blunt request for remuneration caught Smith slightly off guard.

'Eh? Oh, money, aye, all right, just sign for it as usual. Off you go, and keep me up to speed if anything changes

won't you?"

It was hard not to feel sympathetic toward the boy. His constant informing seemed nothing more than a desperate bid for significance; to have a man in his life value him more highly than the family pet, and to show him something akin to gratitude rather than the toe of a boot, or the full force of a signet-ring encrusted fist. The money was handy of course, as it helped fund his habits, but Smith found it hard to begrudge him his escape from what must have been a dreadful reality. There was no virtue to be gained in moralising to the lowest of the low. McCormack was not a problem; he was a victim. O'Neill...now he was a problem.

'Aye, of course Mr Smith. No bother. Cheers for the dough.'

McCormack swaggered off to get his money; totally oblivious as to just how much the last fifteen minutes had actually cost him.

Smith stayed sat down in his plastic chair and thought about what McCormack told him. It was so unlikely O'Neill would be there. He tried to think of circumstances that would entice him to such bravado and risk, but was quite unconvinced by any that he could conjure up. The boy was desperate for money and attention, as well as a good wash and a feed, and nothing he came to him with before ever proved to be important or useful. Going to his already antagonistic boss and asking for permission to pursue this tip-off, full back-up, and all that went with it, would just lead to him being told to go and whistle. Probably issuing him with a list of words beginning with S to help the process along.

There was just something nagging at him though. What if this was the oversight, the moment of arrogance that would see Danny Boy wobble on his lofty perch? How much would he kick himself if he failed to be there to witness it first-hand, and record and report it? This was

not just about his ego, or the chance to get back on the rungs upward. Every right-minded person wanted that evil bastard off the streets, and if Smith came in for some plaudits for helping to set up the gallows, then why not? However, it was true that every policeman in Britain, never mind Strathclyde, would love to be the one. The one who caged the animal. If he was being truthful with himself, he would have to admit this was his strongest impetus. It could give him back the status he once had, and ram it right up all the self-righteous pricks that body swerved him at the moment.

Smith decided to be there in the background with his camera, and all being well, gather some incriminating evidence relating to the distribution of drugs. It would be expecting way too much to get enough for O'Neill to be sent down for long, if at all. But it would be a start, and even if it turned out to be a load of bullshit, then so what? Being up that early would allow him to catch up with some of his Ben Nevis of half-finished paperwork, or not, as the case notes may be.

When Smith stepped out of his car at 5.30am on the morning of the twentieth, it was raining lightly. The sun had yet to rise, the first birds were singing half-heartedly, and there was an almost visible chill in the air. Looking around the multi-storey car park, it was a relief to find only one other car on the same level as him. He wandered over to it and peered in through the slightly grimy windows. It was empty, and a bit of an old banger. A newspaper and some empty food wrappers discarded in the passenger foot-well, the ashtray overflowing with butts and ash, and a CD upside down and cover-less on the seat. No doubt, some joy-riding ne'er-do-wells abandoned it after thrashing it to within an inch of its big end. Still, at least they hadn't torched it. He thought he might radio it in later if he had time. Some anxious owner might be grateful for its return.

The car park was no longer a going concern;

abandoned to the vandals, the addicts, the unfaithful, and the wildlife. It reeked of the obligatory evacuations, dampness and alcohol that all such forsaken monoliths do, and was daubed with a quite staggering array of graffiti. Leaves and trash lay scattered all around, piling up in corners where the wind accumulated them. Pigeon guano encrusted several walls, indicating it was a particularly popular roosting venue with the flying rats of the city. He had little doubt that closer inspection would reveal no shortage of the terrestrial version.

Before getting back into the driver's seat of his own car, he shivered vigorously, yawned, and stretched his arms wide with fists clenched. Once back in the warmth of the cockpit, he took out his flask and poured himself a cup of coffee. It suddenly struck him how ridiculous it was that he was actually up at this unseemly hour thanks to a little lout with a drug problem and a need to appear important or useful. Sometimes, he was a fool unto himself. His wife was right - the first chance that came up to get out of the police, and do something where he was appreciated, should be grabbed with both hands. Sipping the warming, brown liquid, he was grateful for his wife's thoughtfulness and forward planning.

After draining the cup, he returned it to the top of the flask, got out of the car, hunkered down behind the retaining wall, and set up the camera. His breath formed clouds in the damp, cold air. He decided to bring his own camera. Booking out the stations' would have involved an arse-numbing paper trail and an explanation to his pedant-of-the-year boss, who would undoubtedly have put the kibosh on the whole idea. In any case, his camera was far superior to the hunk of dung they were expected to use officially. He attached the substantial telephoto lens, and switched it on. It took a short while for the glass to acclimatise to the cold and stop fogging up, but once it did, he stood up and started to scan across the cemetery.

As the gloom lifted slightly, and the rain ceased, he

realised that Zander was in his viewfinder - already sitting on the bench he claimed would be the focal point of the meet. He seemed to be alone, and as Smith zoomed in with his camera, he could see the boy was shivering violently, and his wrists and ankles appeared bound by rope. Shit! They knew the silly little bastard had squealed, and they wanted Smith to know, that they knew, that he knew about the deal.

Muttering under his breath, he jumped back in his car, and raced over to the cemetery. The flask rolled around on the passenger seat as he took the most direct route he could think of. He hurriedly stepped out into the car park and began to run up the path towards the boy and the bench. The red cinder surface squelched as much as it crunched under his substantial frame. He was always a big man, but middle age had definitely spread. As he got within a reasonable distance of the wretched figure, he could see McCormack was in a bit of a bad way. Bruises coloured his face, and it looked as if bloodstains darkly decorated his clothing ... but there was something else. As he got closer, he could see that Zander was trying to speak, or shout maybe? It was just that what was coming out of his mouth was nothing more than a series of strangled moans.

Smith stopped in front of the boy, breathing heavily from the exertions of the run. Clearly, he was not only wider than he used to be, he was not as fit as he used to be either. It was then it dawned on him that it was odd they allowed McCormack to live following their discovery of his betrayal. What was the meaning of staking him out on this bench? He looked around in all directions. At this time of the morning, he did not expect any members of the public would be around. However, his musings on appropriate levels of punishment had him worried it might be an ambush; Zander playing the caged bird on a lime stick, or the plastic duck on the lake. Reaching for the radio, he realised that in his haste to get to the boy, he left

the damn thing in the car. On top of that, he forgot to lock up. He just hoped no thieving gits were abroad at this time of the morning, and his camera would still be there when he got back. The radio could wait. There was a clear view around and the cemetery, which was deserted: dare he say dead? No, perhaps not. In any case, his breathing was returning to normal and he felt it best to free Zander first and ask questions later. The harsh reality: it was mostly because he was not really up to a repeat performance of the dash uphill.

Behind the bench was a statue of an angel, standing atop a square plinth of sturdy proportions. An extravagant marker to the passing of some long-forgotten merchant or doctor, carved from marble in a time when such things were in fashion. Lichen, time and the weather had combined to give it a rather mottled appearance. Standing high above his head, the robes on the figure flowed, its arms were outstretched, and the face had a quiet, soothing expression; fit for one appointed to welcoming the recently departed into heaven. It was hard not to be momentarily distracted by its drama, the craftsmanship required to create it, and its Gothic beauty.

His attention returned to McCormack. What was wrong with the pathetic urchin? He was still making those awful noises and dried blood did cake his clothing. Somebody had clearly meted out some form of aggressive admonishment. As he squirmed and struggled to communicate something to Smith, the ropes binding him appeared to be biting deep into his pallid flesh. Smith was just about to untie him when he felt a dull thud in the back of his head. A brief warm sensation flowed through his body, followed by a shuddering chill. The pictures in front his eyes flickered and static crackled in his ears. As he dropped to his knees, he could see McCormack was weeping, and he was sure the angel was stepping off its plinth. Blackness engulfed him; he fell onto his side, and exhaled for the last time.

PETER CARROLL

In the multi-storey car park, the rifleman carefully collected the empty shell case, dismantled his weapon, walked down one flight of stairs, got into the only car in the building, stubbed out his cigarette in the already overflowing ashtray, and drove off.

5. The Way To Work

There was definitely something buzzing round his head. A fly? No, whatever was emitting this drone was bigger and noisier than a fly. A wasp? Oh please, not a wasp. Little yellow and black, stingy bastards. What was the point of wasps any...

‘Oh shit!’

Davie groaned as the unpleasant truth returned to him - it was another equally pointless yellow and black stripy bastard that was attempting to rouse him. His novelty alarm clock; shaped and coloured like a bee, and quite possibly the most ridiculous gift he ever received. Apart, that is, from the shiny, nylon, generic, red football top his parents bought him one Christmas and passed off as a Manchester United strip. This was a garment so hideous and so hideously uncool that it could still cause his face to match its garish colour whenever he recalled it. He supposed that since he managed to ditch it in his early teens, its most likely fate was re-deployment as a substation for the National Grid thanks to the vast output of electricity it was capable of producing. He had a sudden and mildly distressing flashback to all the times his hair stood on end after he pulled it over his head.

Monday morning, six-thirty, about four hours sleep, a skin-full the night before, and a bus to catch to work at seven-fifteen. Marvellous!

After beating the bee into buzz-less submission, he

swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up sideways. Suddenly, the thick, heavy fog in his head dissipated.

Some unseen assailant must have been hiding in the bedroom all night waiting for the chance to jump out and stick a red-hot poker straight through his temples. A ninja perhaps, with a flashing steel blade forged in a sacred fire by some ancient artisan in Yokohama? If not that, then perchance it was a Jedi Knight wielding a swishing, humming, glowing light sabre? Alas, no such exotic foe or weapon was responsible. It was Mr McEwan and his fiendish pints of eighty-shilling ale that undertook the nocturnal stalking and, upon his waking, so ruthlessly speared his cranium. Although, he had a nagging suspicion that they may just have had some help from someone called Bell and his nippy little sweeties. Staggering into the bathroom, rubbing his throbbing temples, and bouncing off the door frame on the way, he emptied his chronically distended bladder, downed a glass of water, and pulled the cord for the shower.

The shower was the bane of his life. On a cold setting, it produced a raging torrent so fierce it would attempt to pin him flat to the floor of the bath it stood astride. However, and bear in mind this is Scotland we are talking about, the instant the dial entered the red zone, it became an insipid, fine mist - an insipid, fine, Scotch mist even. After ten minutes under this nonsense, a sheweree may just have qualified as damp. However, as if this wasn't bad enough, every now and then it would randomly and inexplicably produce geyser mist. In fact, Old Faithful could only fantasise about achieving such temperatures. It would make him leap backwards, yelping like a puppy in one of those experiments animal rights protesters liked to tell you about from tables set up outside shopping malls. One of the many downsides of living in crappy, rented accommodation meant replacing it at his own expense was a pointless waste of money and the likelihood of the

landlord doing so, was about the same as Led Zeppelin offering The Shambolic Sharks the support slot on their reunion world tour.

After towelling off the soap the mist could not remove, he sank another glass of water, emptied his bowel copiously, brushed his teeth, dressed in his poxy uniform, and headed for the door. Given the time scales involved, it was as well Davie was not really a breakfast sort of person. Most important meal of the day and all that bollocks was anathema at this ungodly hour. Anyway, he worked in Glasgow. You know how they say that you are never more than twenty feet away from a rat in the UK? Well, in Glasgow, you are never more than twenty feet away from a vendor of infeasibly tasty saturated fat. There would be time and opportunity yet for enlardment.

Bus stops are invariably nothing more than a post with some numbers and timetables attached these days. Most local councils seem to have given up hope of ever winning the battle with the youth of today, and their propensity to use shelters to post rudimentary drawings of genitalia, satisfy their carnal desires, abuse substances, and deposit all manner of bodily effluent. Some have tried, rather unsuccessfully, to achieve a halfway house. Next to the obligatory post are a few sheets of Perspex (with rudimentary drawings of genitalia etched into them) forming a backboard and roof. Along its length runs a "bench" that is invariably too high off the ground for most old women. Being too high off the ground for old women to comfortably use seems very short sighted - let's face it, they are still the number one demographic when it comes to answering the question of 'who's taking the bus these days?' The same benches that so discriminate against their primary target market, appear manufactured from a substance diamond would struggle to make an impression upon (although, interestingly, the local youths somehow seemed able to adorn them with the obligatory cock and

sparsely-haired balls logo). To add insult to injury, they are nearly always too narrow to accommodate anything other than the arse of an anorexic whippet. This latter point is made all the more poignant in the west of Scotland, where the average arse could make you think you were experiencing a solar eclipse if you were sunbathing as one passed by. The fact it would be most unlikely you could sunbathe, given the climate, is a moot point - the principle still applied. It was upon such a bench that Davie perched at seven-ten.

At seven twenty five, he climbed onto the tardy bus, feeling as if some covert dentist had injected his butt with a hefty dose of Novocain. He chose an empty double seat about half way up the single-decker, next to a window, and prepared to catch up on some much needed shut-eye; or so he thought.

Some people just do not take hints. Scarf pulled up around his mouth, woolly hat pulled down over his ears and onto his eyebrows, arms folded, and very crucially, eyes closed. Asleep then? Well not necessarily. Apparently.
‘Alright son?’

Next hint was the total lack of any response.

‘On your way to work are you?’

Still hinting – like fuck.

‘Strong, silent type are we? He, he, he.’

‘I don’t work myself any more. Retired welder. Man and boy for fifty years...’

Davie was perplexed as to why these old codgers were on the seven-fifteen bus to Glasgow; and there were always a few of them on every early bus. The Scottish Government provides the bus pass free, so there are no value-for-money considerations to take into account. They are retired, so no one has them on a clock. The bus would be in Glasgow by eight fifteen for god’s sake - nothing of any note would be open, and what relative or friend would welcome an early morning visit from such an inveterate gobshite? Was it force of habit, senility, or boredom? To

be fair though, interesting as that internal debate may have proved, it was much, much, more of a concern as to whether this silly old prick was ever going to SHUT THE FUCK UP!

Buying a car was becoming an ever more attractive proposition. The reliance he had developed upon public transport was backfiring worryingly regularly. Encounters with chuntering, old codgers with a predilection for retelling their entire life story; spaced out hippies with dogs on strings, who stank like they'd been dipped in cat's piss and then rolled in slurry; vomit encrusted businessmen who really should have known better and whose wives were undoubtedly going to kill them when they got home; unsupervised brats with manners that suggested they were subject to less parental discipline than the kids in Lord of the Flies; and any number of other loonies and undesirables, were all too common occurrences. There would be the small matter of the expense to contend with, but that was rapidly appearing a price well worth paying.

After finally escaping the clutches of his geriatric tormentor, and stepping out into Buchanan Street, it transpired that it was raining - heavily. Of course it was raining - heavily. It was Glasgow.

Davie had grown to hate Glasgow in the two years spent commuting to work in the music shop. It was just too grey, too often. Grey sky, grey ground, grey buildings, and grey light. The nine months a year of constant, pissing rain drained the life out of him. He forgot what the sun looked like, and he wondered if maybe God had decided to start hell early for him in retaliation for his apostasy. The devil would have to wait for his go nonetheless, because if the fiery pit was ignited anywhere within the city boundary of Glasgow, it would have been well and truly doused.

People praise the architecture of Glasgow. It undeniably has some truly, beautiful buildings, but too often horrid grey tenements, tower blocks, multi-storeys,

offices, and shops hem them in, and they are scattered widely across its significant sprawl. Typical of a lot of big cities in Western Europe these days, haphazard planning decisions, rebuilding after the blitz, practical limitations and architectural fashion crazes combine to create a hotchpotch of beauty and the beast. Official sources proclaim it has more parkland than any other major European city, and it has parks right enough. A fair few even. However, Davie so rarely found himself walking through these oases of foliage and fresh air, that he was healthily sceptical of the City Fathers' bold claims of European chart topping.

The people are allegedly the salt of the earth. The friendliest city folk you could ever wish to meet, and much nicer than the haughty snobs over in Edinburgh. The reality is that Glasgow is a friendly place, but it only seems to have more friendly people because it is so big in a small country with a small population. All Scottish towns (including Edinburgh) are inherently friendly, and the 'Glaswegians are the friendliest of them all' mantra, emanates from a distinctly west coast-based enchanted mirror. It has more to do with daft rivalries over status, and a hook to attach banter to, than any basis in fact.

Glasgow and Edinburgh are also more alike in some other aspects than they would freely admit or that urban myth would support. The capital and the capital elect, have a mutual dirty little secret, which they try and keep from their transient visitors for as long as they can possibly manage it. Both of their city centres, commercial and financial areas, posh west ends, and trendy student flat districts, are ringed by housing estates. Estates that suffer from the effects of horrendous social deprivation, long-term unemployment, drug addiction, gang violence and (particularly in Glasgow) religious bigotry centred on football teams. Take the wrong bus out of town, or cross the River Clyde in the dark, and the uninitiated, unlucky or ill-prepared might be shocked, or even brutally assaulted,

by what crosses their path.

Chief protagonists are the Neds. The closest English equivalent is the Chav, while the Yanks might call them white trash. However, for Chav or white trash, read Staffie, while for Ned, read Pitbull. This is a crucial distinction because although the Staffie is a feisty, aggressive, and impressively muscular little fellow, very capable of doing you damage, a Pitbull would kill you if you looked at it the wrong way.

Davie loathed Neds. The loathing partly stemmed from the fact that they prioritised drugs so highly - sometimes over food or clothes for their kids, which he certainly never felt good about as he went about his illegal distribution of the herbal complement they liked to sprinkle on their roll-ups. They reinforced his repugnance in the way that almost every facet of their behaviour was unpredictable, aggressive, and loutish. Tragically, the canine associations do not just extend as far as their murderous bad temper and a fondness for urinating on street furniture; they also extend to their tendency to sire a litter as soon as they are old enough to breed. Their progeny are raised in appalling conditions, by people so ill equipped for the job of parent, that sometimes he thought eugenics to be the only answer. Even so, he knew deep down that this was not the answer - it was a scientific euphemism for extermination, and it was the domain of the easily led simpleton, the impatient reactionary, and the power hungry fascist. The only real way to change them lay in decades-long efforts to break the patterns of behaviour and culture they had developed, re-education, and the creation of realistic hopes and aspirations that appealed to them more than chemically induced oblivion or the adrenaline surge of violence.

Unfortunately, for now, his dabbling in the supply of cannabis brought him into regular and regularly depressing contact with them. Nevertheless, he was no martyr. It was his deliberate choice to deal drugs. He did not really have

any legitimate grounds for complaining about how they behaved since, right now, he was not part of the solution, he was part of the exacerbation. First stones and all that.

Davie huddled into his coat, trudged down the long hill that was Buchanan Street, turned left onto the flat and into Argyle Street. His parents did not name him after the street, and clearly, the street had been around a lot longer than him, but it was a slightly strange co-incidence that his place of employ was located there. Make you smile enigmatically, hmm with raised eyebrows, or think up a clever quip strange - but definitely not significant, or pre-ordained in the way that those inclined to superstitious buffoonery would make a total meal of at a dinner party.

As he neared the corner with Queen Street, a reasonably well dressed black guy approached him. He wore a decent pair of jeans, fairly expensive trainers, and a black bomber jacket. He was clean, tidy and really rather unremarkable.

'Excuse me sir.'

A difficult to place foreign accent tinged his voice, but no matter the origin, it was refined and smacked of a good education.

'I wonder if you could help me?'

'Aye, sure what's up?'

'I am trying to get back to my house but I have no money to pay for the bus fare, and I wondered if you could help me out by giving me one pound?'

It was at this point Davie smelt the alcohol on the guy's breath, and cringed at this most obvious and well worn of begging techniques. Clearly, any monies provided by Davie towards his bus fare fund, were going to be boosting the profits of the nearest all-day-opening bar or off licence as soon as the appeal totalizer reached its target. It was just rather surprising - given the guy's appearance and obvious refinement. Usually, the types who laid this particular sob story on you were unkempt, fucked up junkies, or were

swaying as if they were crossing the deck on a tall ship in a hurricane. Still, he was onto plums here; regardless of his reasons for tapping strangers in the street.

'No mate, sorry, I don't have a quid for you.'

The guy gently laid his hand on Davie's shoulder and patted it three times. This should have been threatening but somehow Davie knew the guy would not be violent.

'I know sir, it is because I am black isn't it?'

Davie was incredulous and indignant at this cheap and rather pathetic attempt to embarrass him with the race card.

'Listen mate, it's got fuck all to do with you bein black! It's got everythin to do with you beggin money off me for a bus, when you quite clearly intend to piss it up against a wall!'

The boy was already moving off as Davie began saying this and he turned and shot him a cheeky grin, before wandering off down the street to accost some other passer-by. Doubtless, this game must work often enough to make it worthwhile playing. Nonetheless, it must have taken a quite colossal amount of bottle to be so brazen in your lies, and face the inevitable physical and verbal backlash from the less reasonable or enlightened amongst those you approached.

Shaking his head ruefully, Davie walked the last few yards to the doors of purgatory.

The shop was big (the third or fourth biggest in the chain) and as usual, he got there just before the assistant manager arrived to open up.

'Alright Davie?' Jon said jauntily as he approached.

Jon Robson, or JR as he liked people to call him, was one of the few managers Davie ever worked with in this place that he actually liked. It was a relief that JR greeted him in his probably-still-pissed state, and not the testosterone fuelled general manager Iain Douglas. If it had been, Davie would have found himself on the

receiving end of a lecture on professional standards, and possibly even dragged into some form of disciplinary action. They did not get on at all, and even the most tenuous of excuses would result in him getting on Davie's case. Being of a determinedly macho persuasion, and taking all his inspiration from his namesake at the Gordon Gecko School of Business Management, Douglas hated the fact that Davie was funnier than him and vastly more popular than him. Ironic, given Davie's rather lacklustre and shallow popularity, and gave some indication as to the regard Douglas was held in by the rest of the staff. In particular, he took great umbrage to Davie's rather laid back approach to work. He also hated his quips during team meetings - mainly because they were so often at his expense. Most infuriating of all for Douglas was that one of Davie's greatest pleasures in life was to clock off on the dot when the tosser was under the cosh from HQ, or some equally macho area manager, to get a job done out of hours. The pursuit of profit may well have been the be all and end all for them, but it most certainly was not for Davie.

Dressing-downs and bawling-outs were commonplace. It was wearing, but Davie was such a stubborn prick, he refused to bow to anything the man had to say and was determined to see him off.

'Knackered like, but apart from that, not bad.'

'Jesus, were you on the sauce last night?'

JR chortled as he opened one side of the double doors on the front of the shop. One lock was located at the top of the door, and another at the foot.

'Aye, we had a gig last night. I was wrecked, and didn't get home until about two-thirty.'

They slipped inside. JR cancelled the unnecessarily loud beeping of the alarm (just before Davie fetched a hammer to coax it toward silence), re-locked the door from the inside, and switched on some lights.

'Put the kettle on Davie. Tea with milk and one for me,

ta. A gallon of water, two paracetamol and a family size bag of mints for you!'

The day passed without much in the way of incident, until an encounter with one particular customer, which almost led to the hospitalisation of Davie and two of his colleagues.

The guy was not much to look at; thin, bearded, wearing glasses and dressed like a 1950's schoolteacher. His chances of seducing a supermodel seemed slim. Upon handing over his two CDs - Meat Loaf 'Bat Out Of Hell 2' and Dire Straits 'Brothers In Arms' - the weirdy beardy also provided irrefutable proof of a complete lack of taste in music. Davie scanned the appalling discs into the till as per usual procedures, and asked for the obligatory disbursement. Kenny Moffat stood at the till to his right, and Jenny Stephens to his left.

One Visa card was like any other, and he swiped it through the machine without a second thought. However, on this particular day, the machine was playing up, which obliged customers to sign for authorisation instead of entering their pin number. This gave him reason to look at the name and signature on the card, and what he saw took a monumental effort not to react to instantly.

The name embossed in silver, capital letters was Mr R. A. SHITS! Of course, in colloquial Glasgow parlance, RA is a substitute for THE, and so, as the bloke bent to sign on the appropriate dotted line, Davie took his chance to flash the card left and right, while practically turning purple with suppression. All three of them managed to hold it together until the nanosecond he was out of earshot, before exploding so violently with laughter that Davie was sure there would be a round of double hernias followed by a chaser of strokes. They were lucky it was so quiet that day, because it took them a full ten minutes to sober up, and throughout the rest of his shift, they all took giggling fits. These were most commonly induced by merely

looking at each other.

What amazed Davie most was that the guy had not changed his name by deed poll. Surely, that would have been his number one priority as soon as his sixteenth birthday arrived? In fact, if it had been Davie, he would have demanded the whole family marched down to the Registrar's Office and be renamed long before that significant anniversary. The most likely date he could think of that might trigger his insistence, would be the day after his first day at school. He shuddered to think of the inevitable and colossal levels of abuse this guy must have endured throughout his childhood. Family introductions must have been like some warped, scatological version of Goldilocks. Imagine it: hello, this is Daddy Shits, this is Mummy Shits and this is Little Baby Shits! He didn't fancy the porridge much though.

The career in music retail was nothing of the sort; almost entirely motivated by the thought it might make him seem a tiny bit more rock 'n' roll, which might in turn impress a girl or two. Crucially, it was one of a very small number of jobs he actually felt qualified to do. Along with a genuine love of music, no academic papers were needed, and it seemed reasonable to assume some of the perks might be interesting. Some were. Occasionally, free promotional CDs, DVDs and concert tickets were handed out, and in a very devious move by the company, he was entitled to 25% staff discount. This discount ensured employees (mostly obsessive, young, music fans) would be enticed into giving back a sizeable chunk of their wages every month, effectively helping them to reduce the labour costs. Now and again, a band he really admired would make an "in-store appearance". This could be a double-edged sword, with at least two of his musical heroes turning out to be obnoxious wankers in the flesh. However, small moments of brevity like this card incident and some freebies aside, it was a dull, monotonous, and uninspiring

job. It was a corporate and professional workplace, with no soul or any real feeling for music. The music was just a commodity to be bought and sold like any other, and was only valued if it was generating huge profits. Added to that, Davie was too intolerant to give good customer service consistently, and too lazy to strive to get on as a manager. It was hard work being a music shop manager. Essentially pretty low paid to begin with, you were forced into doing hours and hours of unpaid overtime. Overbearing and negative superiors picked holes in everything you did, and a bunch of stroppy teenagers and 'cool' students for staff made getting anything done like pulling teeth.

Part of his problem was that the salary on offer to a manager, would increase his take home by a relatively small amount, and would seriously reduce the time available for his extra-curricular activities. Activities which were steadily becoming more lucrative. In any case, that particular method of income generation was essential - it would be the thing that would provide the opportunity he had been waiting to take for the last eight years.

Petty dealing is a precarious way to earn a relatively small amount of money. Davie knew that in order to make serious cash one really needed to cut out as many intermediaries as possible. It would also be a great relief to stop having to deal directly with Neds. In so many ways, they were a tribe to be incredibly wary of. So much so, that for the past two years, attendance at self-defence lessons and a few rounds of boxing became part of his weekly itinerary. This did not exactly render him a fearsome fighting machine. It was doubtful the description of 'hard nut' could be applied to him consequently either, but at least he could look after himself if push came to stab, since the preferred weapon of choice of the Ned is the 'chib'. Apparently, this is most likely a charming colloquial take on the word shiv, but whatever the derivation, it is jaggy

and dangerous. They are distressingly free-and-easy with dispensing it, but a reason to dispense can nearly always be relied upon to be entirely arbitrary, and almost as frequently as a result of over-indulging with Buckfast tonic wine. The sooner he could give up running the gauntlet of a potential chibbing the better.

To the rear of the building where the music shop plied its utilitarian trade, was a subterranean network of passages. These linked stock rooms from the various retail outlets in the block with the loading bays where the stores received deliveries of stock. The loading bays were accessed from outside by a road provided solely for this purpose, were surrounded by the mostly windowless back walls of another separate shopping centre, and faced away from any of the main pedestrian thoroughfares. The access road did not make much of a convenient pedestrian short cut either, so very few people other than employees or delivery drivers ever strayed there. It was from these bays and passages that he conducted his main pick-ups, and on this particular fateful day, he was standing as usual in the loading bay, waiting for his dealer to arrive and stock him up. The guy was a bona fide delivery driver, with a legitimate reason for being there, and no reason to raise either suspicion or eyebrows.

Arriving at the allotted time, as expected, the driver got out of his van and hopped up onto the bay, where Davie stood waiting.

‘Alright my man?’

‘Aye, not bad. You?’

Davie replied in that stilted, we probably need to make small talk to make this look convincing, but let’s not kid ourselves that this is anything other than business and just get on with it, kind of a way.

‘Aye, fine and dandy. I have your usual delivery and a wee proposition for you,’ the driver said intriguingly.

It was then that Davie noticed the Maybach sitting silently on the access road. A gleaming, black, hulk of a car

that simply screamed to all onlookers how wealthy, important, or thoroughly unscrupulous its occupant was. It soon became clear that this occupant was possessing of all three qualities in abundance.

'Mr O'Neill was wonderin if you were interested in earnin a few more shillin's than you currently are?'

'Eh?'

This caught Davie off guard. Everyone in his 'profession' knew who Danny O'Neill was. The meanest SOB in Scotland and certainly one of its most prolific purveyors of pharmaceuticals deemed inappropriate to put on sale at your chemist, or to make available on prescription from your General Practitioner. This was exciting - could it really be that all the time he was dealing with the straggly delivery boy, he was actually dealing with him of all people?

However, common sense dictated incredible wariness. Exchanging small talk with this tousled courier was one thing, but he didn't even know his name, never mind whether he could be trusted or not. Trusted? The man was a drug dealer for fuck's sake; of course Davie couldn't trust him. Nonetheless, there was every reason to believe the monkey was telling the truth, because the organ grinder himself was parked not fifty yards away.

'He said to give you a wee bit extra free this time, as a bonus for all your good work shiftin gear, and I think he's put a wee note in there for you as well.'

A greasy little character, with a somewhat dishevelled appearance, it was like receiving the news from the chef of a one star hotel, replete with cigarette hanging out the corner of his mouth. A cigarette with an inordinately long column of ash, that appeared to be defying the laws of physics by remaining attached to the butt. It was distracting too: hanging there like an ashen sword of Damocles. Why didn't he just flick the bloody thing off? The uniform probably fitted him once, and Davie thought the scruffy little git looked far more likely to be a

consumer than a distributor.

'Right. Aye. No bother,' Davie replied eloquently.

'I'll see you next week then?'

'Right. Aye. No bother,' he repeated, with equally impressive oratory command.

Across the street, Danny O'Neill was watching from the comfort of his mobile office. This lad had shown a lot of promise. He consistently cleared a reasonable amount of gear each month, and in the past few weeks, seemingly increased his sales by a highly creditable forty per cent. Such embers needed blowing upon. A go-fer did a bit of digging, and it seemed the boy was an orphan, without siblings, and to all intents and purposes, a loner. After seeing him in the flesh, O'Neill decided to throw this Davie Argyle a bone, and see if he turned out to be a faithful pooch, or just another one of a long line of wasters that were only fit for a Korean banquet. New and reliable foot soldiers were very hard to come by these days. Ruling by absolute fear and unholy terror is not always as foolproof as it may superficially appear - as with all men in his type of position, O'Neill was naturally, and mostly justifiably, distrustful of all those around him. Not only that, but such a reputation also has a tendency to arouse trepidation and the wetting of undergarments in those presenting themselves for interview.

The young ones were usually the most gung ho, with the least to lose: no wife and kids or mortgage to worry about, and a point to prove to the world about how much of a man they were. Unfortunately, they were also the most impetuous, egotistical and unreliable. It was a tricky balance to strike.

There was something else occupying his thoughts though, something he would not articulate, something that would remain an internal musing. He knocked on the glass partition and signalled to his driver to get them on their way.

Davie, for his part, was still feeling a bit giddy as he

IN MANY WAYS

sloped back to his locker to secrete the packet he collected. There was indeed a small note attached, which he removed carefully, before retiring to the privacy of a toilet cubicle to read it.

It was brief and to the point.

*Like what you are doing. Would like to talk.
Meet my man at six in Horseshoe Bar on Friday.
He knows what you look like, so sit tight.*

He must have read it a hundred times before he returned to work.

The Horseshoe Bar is famous for having the longest continuous bar in Europe. How they know that for sure is a bit dubious though. It seems highly unlikely that the Guinness Book of Records sent their man to every bar in Europe with a tape measure to authenticate their claim. Saying that, if they did want someone to check, Davie would be willing to put himself forward as a volunteer. It would be a difficult job to take on, but in order to reach the higher plane of truth, and to extend the frontiers of human knowledge, he would be willing to do his bit. Of course, the more cynical may have supposed the prospect of free samples in every bar in Europe would have been his main motivation - he would refute that for as long as he could stay sober. Still, however much certainty there was in the story, it made for an interesting marketing hook, and since when was complete veracity required for such fishing expeditions to be successful?

Located in the heart of the city, the building sits in a small lane connecting two of the main thoroughfares: Renfield Street and West Nile Street. The premises consist of a bar downstairs and a lounge upstairs. The upstairs lounge is for eating cheap food, and partaking of karaoke and the like, while the downstairs bar is definitely for drinking in. Unsurprisingly, the actual wooden edifice that

is the bar itself, is shaped quite like equine footwear, and it attracts a wide range of clientèle. Most nights it is very busy. If there is the slightest provocation from a social event or football fixture, one can expect to find it full to bursting point. A visit to any website that recommends places to visit in Glasgow for a beverage will almost certainly refer to it, so it has also become part of the tourist trail.

When Davie arrived, it was busy, but not stuffed to the gunwales. Making his way to the bar and ordering a pint of eighty, he tried to act casually, but it was no good. He was more apprehensive than a prisoner who had just been handed their inaugural bar of soap. To pass the time waiting, he glanced around at the other characters frequenting the place that evening, and tried to guess which one of them might be O'Neill's henchman.

He was fairly certain it was not the five-foot tall septuagenarian, tending the latest in a long line of half and a half's, and who would have difficulty biting his own lip. Nor was it the rather rotund girl, who clearly had no sense of self worth, or what clothes might best suit her particular body shape. Apple was probably the kindest approximation, while hippo would have been among the cruellest. Nor was it the boy drooling over her, although, he may just have been drooling on her. It was 5.45pm on a Friday in Glasgow after all. It was just as unlikely that the three students trying to win Who Wants To Be A Total Wanker in one corner were gangland enforcers, and try as he might, his normally infallible people-radar did not seem able to detect his contact.

Six o'clock came and went, and uncertainty started to take a grip. Already on his second pint, despite trying to nurse the first one for as long as humanly possible, the wait was becoming torturous. He really hoped he'd not been pointing Percy at the porcelain when the guy came in, and that he had not turned on his heel and gone off to tell O'Neill that his new prospect was a no-show. He knew he

should not have started that second pint, because once the dam broke...

Was this whole thing some kind of hoax? Was the unsavoury little delivery guy about to jump out from behind a pillar, gesticulating wildly as to how fond Davie seemed to be of masturbation, and swiftly claiming his winnings from the co-workers he took bets with as to his gullibility?

At six-fifteen, a burly, shaven-headed man, dressed all in black (natch), tapped him on the shoulder, and without a word headed for the door. Davie followed obediently and instinctively. In the street, his inscrutable guide opened the door to a black cab, and if it hadn't been for his hands and face he might have disappeared from view. Davie nodded his appreciation at this show of good manners and got in. The door was closed behind him, and the cab set off. It did not take very long to discover that the cabbie's conversational skills were similarly limited but his manners non-existent.

The journey was interminable. Davie knew Glasgow fairly well, not just from working there the last two years, but also thanks to more than the occasional early morning exit from a young ladies' abode. However, this was stumping him. It was no doubt deliberate; an attempt to keep him confused and on the back foot. It was working admirably.

The cab stopped in front of a small pub. The Patriotic Scot was a one-storey, whitewashed affair, with two heavily framed windows and an oak panelled door to the front. It had a slate roof and a brick chimney on the right hand gable. The sign above the door was in need of some touching up and featured some ginger haired, kilted character planting a Saltire into a hillside. What looked like the remnants of two recently demolished buildings flanked the pub on both sides, and the rest of the street was residential.

'Do I owe you some money?' Davie asked the cabbie

tentatively.

'No. Get out,' he replied tersely.

Complying with the cabbie's wish, and relieved to have escaped a potentially six-figure taxi fare, he stepped out. Looking left and right, revealed not another soul abroad in this part of town. The ground was glistening from the rain that slicked across its concrete and tarmac jacket earlier in the afternoon. Street lights burned with a cold, orange glow - providing that bizarre half-light that so embitters astronomers straining for a decent view of Betelgeuse, and yet at ground level, hardly seems to have illuminated anything much beyond four feet from the bulb. The air was still laden with a substantial burden of moisture, which threatened to break loose from its temporary moorings in the sky every time the chilling breeze nudged the clouds. The full moon was obscured and only visible as a pale eerie circle. The cab drew away hastily. He lifted the latch, pushed at the door, and entered the pub.

Davie saw him right away. The pub was not big, but the man would have been instantly visible if he was sitting in the main stand at Hampden during an Old Firm cup final. Some people just have a special kind of presence; the kind of presence that marks them out as different, or important, or dangerous. O'Neill was all of those things and more. Sitting imperiously in the back corner, flanked by two slabs of flesh and bone that were practically spilling off the seats, and sucking the light out of the room, he somehow managed to make them seem insignificant, small, part of the background.

O'Neill beckoned casually for him to approach. The barman flicked his head upward indicating he expected Davie to place an order. Other than that, there was no attempt to communicate with him. A pattern was emerging amongst the O'Neill acolytes.

'Eighty, ta.'

The barman poured ungraciously and resentfully

shoved the drink toward him, returning to whatever business he had been about before Davie had so clearly, and unreasonably, interrupted. Davie picked it up, and took a deep drink from the glass, hoping it would help steady his nerve. All the way to his seat he worried about shaking and spilling it like some cack-handed baboon. First impressions and all that.

'Davie. Right?'

'Eh, aye.'

Why it surprised him that Danny O'Neill knew his name was weird, he invited him here for Christ sakes, but somehow it did.

'I, mean, yes Mr O'Neill,' he stuttered, rediscovering his nerves all too quickly.

'No, no, Danny's fine. No need to be overly formal. I'm not your teacher!'

His eyes were the kind of blue that almost hurt to look at; so incredibly intense in colour as to be almost otherworldly. The voice....

'I suppose you're wonderin what I asked you here for?'

'Aye, well, I suppose I was.'

'Well, I like to keep a close eye on all aspects of my business. From the biggest things, to the tiniest wee things - it's always stood me in good stead.'

Thoughts were racing through Davie's mind as if involved in some mad game of neural tag.

'You're turnin in really steady figures, and you seem to be reliable according to my sources. I was wonderin if you were interested in steppin up a bit from the dealin on street corners and hangin about in pub liffies?'

'Aye, as appealin as you make my current activities sound, I suppose I would be interested in somethin else. What sort of thing did you have in mind?'

O'Neill paused, but there was no acknowledgement of (or reciprocation of) this attempt to engage in good-natured banter. He sipped his drink - something with coke, or maybe just coke - tapped the table in an almost

distracted fashion with the fingers of his left hand, and ran the right from the back of his neck, up and over his bald pate.

'Let's just say there could be a vacancy about to crop up on the delivery side of my business, and I need somebody to pick up and drop off some merchandise around the city. You can drive can't you?'

This menacing inference to the impending demise of his main contact should have bothered him. It should have made him very aware of just what he might be getting into. It should have, but Davie was distracted by the very dangerous idea that started to form in his head while sitting waiting in the Horseshoe. An idea that was so audacious and ridiculous, that he should have chased it away instantly. The thing was though, this idea did not actually start in the Horseshoe; it started long before that. It just never seemed at all likely that it would ever be anything other than a vague, skeletal fantasy - until now. Now he was rapidly adding flesh to the bones.

'Aye, I can drive fine, but I've already got a job.'

The frown and narrowing of eyes were forbidding.

'Workin in a shop! I'm pretty sure you'll be significantly better remunerated workin for me son, but, if you're happy where you are, then fair enough. Sorry to have wasted your time.'

O'Neill growled in a manner that if Davie didn't have him in plain sight, he might have suspected a bear had managed to find its way into the bar. This ursine utterance clearly indicated a very high level of annoyance at the almost moronic answer Davie had given him.

Davie's distracted thoughts led to a distracted answer. Damage limitation was the order of the day now.

'Danny, I can't believe I said that! I'm really sorry. I didn't mean I wasn't interested coz of my job. What I meant to say was I'll need to make arrangements to leave my other job to do this one; which is no problem by the way! I can give a week's notice and be out of there by next

Tuesday if you need me that quick.'

O'Neill lowered his bristles and took another sip.

'Ok, I'll put that down to the novelty of the situation, but just try and think before you answer me in future. Right?'

Davie nodded earnestly, but the idea was getting more powerful. A plan was already taking shape. Reining in his natural personality was critical, or this was all going to end long before he could implement anything worthwhile.

'Next Tuesday might be a bit soon. I have some other arrangements to sort out first, and once they're boxed off I'll let you know. You'll need to turn up for an interview in the next few days, but it's on a nod; purely window dressing to satisfy the company that a procedure has been followed. One of my men will drop off a wee note for you at the shop with all the details sometime in the next few days.'

Another sip.

'On your way. There's a taxi outside. Take it where you need to go.'

'Thanks Danny. I'll not let you down.'

He looked directly at Davie with two scarily cobalt lasers locking onto their target.

'I know that son.'

Davie stepped into the street, elated, terrified, and supremely confident. His life was going to change, and he was ready for it. He wondered if Danny O'Neill was.

6. The Way It Could Be

Billy Davidson had been driving for Danny O'Neill for almost two years. Starting as a small-time dealer on street corners in Easterhouse, his promotion was a lifeline because all the driving stopped him dipping into the merchandise - most of the time. A year or so earlier he got a slap for taking some gear for his own use, warned that it was his last chance, and set back to work. O'Neill tolerated a minimal level of skimming, but lately, his levels of indulgence were creeping up from minor skimming to serious depletion. This chemical over-indulgence caused two missed runs this month, and Danny's man seemed less than convinced by his rather lame stories regarding food poisoning and man flu. Crap excuses for throwing sickies were no more imaginative in the cut and thrust world of drug dealing than any other workplace. These delivery faux pas accompanied a couple of near accidents, and the last thing he needed was to have the police all over him like a rash. Billy really needed to get a grip.

At twenty-two years old, his life really had not amounted to much. In fact, that was being generous; his life had definitely amounted to nothing at all. He shared his bed-sit (or bed-shit as he affectionately referred to it) with his hopeless, junkie, girlfriend Elaine. They had been together for four years, and she was an addict when they met, but this had been mostly irrelevant and partly convenient. Some changes in behaviour aroused his

suspicions that Elaine may well have gone on the game in the past few months. She was avoiding sex, and her incessant tapping for money reduced dramatically. Turning to prostitution as a source of funding the habit was classic junkie behaviour of course, but he was hardly a paragon of virtue himself. Cheating on Elaine had been a constant theme since they got together, and he was probably less likely to indulge in safe sex than she was.

The alarm went off at six o'clock. He dragged his emaciated carcass into the bathroom, and completed the necessary ablutions, which were many, but actually consisted of a piss, and running water through his greasy mop of hair with his fingers, in an attempt to control it and make it look cared for. Nobody would be taken in. Soap, a razor, deodorant, and a comb were all studiously avoided despite the pressing need for their deployment. Even his boxers were the ones he had on yesterday...and the day before. Breakfast consisted of a cup of tea, two fags, a spliff, and a line of speed, and by six-forty, he was on the road. He would start getting a grip tomorrow. Well, no, he would probably start getting a grip tomorrow: no point making promises he was very likely to break.

The first stop was to meet Danny's man and stock up for the morning, before heading to the depot for the legit cover part of the operation. After pulling up outside the shop, removing his parcel from the boot, and taking a jaunty little skip toward the door, he knocked and waited.

The ache in his neck was severe. His memories were vague and confused somewhat, but he distinctly recalled knocking the door. The part man, part ox, normally present to greet him stepped forward and grabbed him. The lights went out, and he thought he could remember moving in a vehicle, but perhaps not. The lights came back on again, and he screwed his eyes up as coloured circles danced and spun in front of them.

Gravel, laid upon heavy loam.

'So, you've not been well then Billy? Seems your ill health has been stoppin you doin the rounds I pay you so handsomely for.'

Every nerve ending in his body abruptly switched to full power. The colours dissipated and his surviving neural pathways all led to one destination. How could he have been such a twat? How could he have been so fucking weak? How the fuck was he going to get out of this?

'That's a shame. I hope the doc managed to sort you out with some drugs?'

Billy surveyed the situation - untied, which was a pleasant surprise, and sitting on a chair, in the middle of what, logically, had to be the front room of a flat. A horrible, filthy, squalid flat that even sewer rats would have turned their noses up at if the council offered to re-house them there, in lieu of extermination. Danny O'Neill stood in front of him, flanked by one of his regular minders, and the guy from the shop. Behind the chair was another minder he didn't recognise.

'Oh, but he didn't have to did he Billy? No, there was no need for him to do that coz it appears I was supplyin you with them!'

'No, I'm not that stupid Danny, I wouldn't, I...' his spluttering and incoherence were not helping him sound convincing.

O'Neill raised his right hand, and put his gloved index finger to his lips.

'Quiet Billy. You're a big disappointment to me. I gave you a chance, I got you off the streets, and then I got you on a cushy number, earnin good money. A wee while ago I gave you a second chance when you fell off the wagon. Now, it turns out you're throwin it all back in my face. Why would you want to do that Billy?'

He shook his head ruefully, but before Billy could respond, the hand gesture was repeated.

'Tut, tut, son. It's just plain rude and ungrateful. You know, and I know, that I can't just let this go. So, you can

consider your employment with me terminated.'

Billy visibly relaxed at this. This was fine. Danny was going to let him off lightly for being a fuckwit, and allow him to get on with his life. It was a reward for all his faithful service. After all, anybody could make a mistake. Even a vindictive, sadistic bastard could see that these were the actions of a stupid loser rather than an arrogant chancer. Anyway, who could really believe the stories of O'Neill's retribution that did the rounds of Easterhouse; they were mostly embellished and several had to be apocryphal at best. Another hiding was on the way now, and Billy knew he deserved that. Probably a lot more severe than the last pummelling and he would spend a few weeks changing colour from the heavy bruising, or maybe even getting his multiple stookies signed. Injuries he would recover from, and then return to being unemployed and addicted.

'Now, Billy, you may or may not be aware of my belief that the punishment should suit the crime. If not, then take it from me that I do. You probably think you didn't really do anythin too bad. You probably think that you're not worth me botherin with really.'

Billy began to shift in his seat, fidgeting with his fingers and biting his nails; steeling himself for the incredibly painful beating that was inevitably going to follow this frankly unnecessary preamble.

'Well, I disagree I'm afraid. You see, I can't show any weakness. I need to discourage others from followin in your footsteps, and so, I've come to a conclusion about you.'

This was really dragging it out now. Why didn't he just get on with ordering him beaten to a pulp?

'As you appear so fond of my gear, I'm gonna give you a wee farewell gift. A last free sample so to speak.'

Taking his cue, the minder on O'Neill's left pulled a syringe from his pocket. Removing the rubber cap from the needle, he handed both items to Billy, who took them

and instinctively slipped the cap into his trouser pocket. Trembling with fear and anticipation, it was slightly baffling as to why there had been such a lack of violence meted out so far, and the drugs were out of left field.

'Pre-cooked and ready to go. Help yourself Billy. You already have on several occasions from what I can make out.'

Suddenly, O'Neill's words sunk in and Billy sussed what was happening. He turned a shade so sickly that most priests would have issued the last rites there and then.

'Danny, I'm sorry. I'm weak, I've got a problem.'

The finger returned to his lips.

'Is it smack? If it is I can't take it. I've not taken that for years,' came the pitiful delaying tactic.

All three stooges stepped in closer, and one of them gave a sort of guttural grunt.

'Take it!'

'Danny, please, I promise I'll disappear. Nobody needs to know about it. I'll pay you back every penny.'

O'Neill looked on impassively. He pursed his lips, and ran his hand from the back of his neck to his forehead. He leaned close to Billy's face.

'Too late Billy, I really don't care about your problems and your excuses. You should have listened to Gary when he warned you a couple of weeks ago about missin a delivery coz you were full of drugs. Now take it!'

Billy started to sniff. His bottom lip wobbled, and a tear escaped from the corner of his eye. He looked imploringly around, but there was no flinching, no fleeting glimpse of compassion. Taking the syringe in his right hand, the instinctive action was to press the plunger slightly to test it. A spray of brownish liquid arced onto his jeans. As he half-heartedly wiped it dry with his left hand, Curly handed him a length of rubber tubing, while Mo and Larry looked on. After placing the syringe between his teeth, he tied the tube around his left bicep and tapped at the veins in the crook of his arm, pumping his fingers in

and out of a fist and performing wrist curls with unseen weights. Retrieving the syringe from his mouth, the routine was practised and Pavlovian. As he gently pressed the needle against his distended skin, it was clear from the bruises and pockmarks already there that Billy was no stranger to this process. He hesitated, knowing what was about to happen, and knowing there was nothing that could alter the chain of events he found himself bound to.

There was an option to struggle and fight, and an option to try throwing the syringe away, or even fully depress the plunger and send the deadly cargo splashing to the floor, but ultimately the less than comic trio would ensure its proper administration. It was better to do it with as much dignity as someone like him was capable of mustering and without the accompaniment of multiple fractures. In many ways, it was a relief. It was very likely this day would have arrived without Danny O'Neill - he merely made it happen sooner.

Billy pierced his flesh and pumped the contents of the syringe deep into his bloodstream. A warm tide washed over him, and as the lights danced off down the paths and the pain in his neck dissolved away, he went to sleep: forever.

7. The Way The Other Half Live

Henry Gordon dropped his umbrella into the bottom of his coat stand, took off his raincoat and hung it on a peg. He shivered, walked to his desk, and sat down heavily in his chair. His young partner DC McFadyen opened the door, and while hanging onto the handle, leaned into the room with a look of sympathy and concern.

‘Cup of tea boss?’

‘Yes, that would be good thanks. Just milk.’

The funeral was a tough one. The rain fell from the solid, charcoal sky with an incessant thrum throughout the proceedings - as if people’s spirits needed any more dampening. Whistler’s widow Emily, held up by his two teenage sons at the graveside, and tears flowing as freely as the precipitation, set the tone. The battalions of press, all over it like a cheap suit, bolstered the already impressive turnout.

At any time, the killing of an anonymous beat bobby would be big news. The killing of this high profile, drug buster supreme of a detective was the kind of big news that only came along once or twice a decade. Mere rarity value alone did not cause their determination to wring every moment of newsworthiness from it - crucially, they have twenty four hours available for them to fill these days and nothing helped fill that better than bad news. Well, apart that is, from terrible news or catastrophic news. For now, Smith was the hero cop, friend of the community

and defender of the wronged. The man who single-handedly brought a criminal gang to justice and restored peace to the streets of Manchester - even if it was only a brief respite. Well, that was how they would portray him until they could dig up some dirt on him or one of his friends or family. Then he would be scandalised and his reputation ground into dust in order to maintain sales, ratings, salaries, bonuses, share prices and career paths.

As wakes go, it was a sombre and depressed affair. The shock of what happened seemed to permeate every action of the attendees. It was hard to celebrate his life, as the startlingly violent and abrupt way his assassin wrenched it from him seemed so wrong. Laughing and joking, so often the feature of Scottish funerals, were largely absent. The unwelcome intrusion of the media probably helped to stifle people's natural behaviour.

It had been a thoroughly unpleasant day altogether.

Like most other guys in the station, he was guilty of taking the mickey from time-to-time, but as much of a pain in the arse as Whistler could be - he was one of their own. A scourge of the thieves, drug barons and law-breakers, and some cowardly bastard had shot him in the back of the head.

A career as a police officer was amongst the last things Gordon hoped to pursue, but continual academic failure, and the insistence of overbearing parents, led him down the crime-fighting path. His father was the current Home Secretary, and as such, he had a very strong influence on his achievements in the force. He was not much more than an adequate detective, unburdened by a bloodhound's nose for a lead or the infallible sixth sense of his gut in the way Whistler was. Many of his colleagues considered him perfectly well meaning but essentially incompetent. His career advancement and allocation to big cases, felt unearned and unsatisfactory - too often inextricably linked to those seeking favours and political influence in the

highest office of the land. It drew more than the occasional snide comment or sulky blanking from his peers, but it was impossible for him to have any control over the situation. Even moving as far away from London as Glasgow did little to quell his father's enthusiasm for extending him a 'helping' hand.

The Right Honourable Harry Gordon was about as intimidating and assertive a human being as had ever drawn breath. Nobody refused his bidding, and the accepted political wisdom was that he was the real Prime Minister. His presence and charisma made others comply and follow: remarkably similar to O'Neill but in a different sphere of influence, and without the tendency to remove body parts or lives when things did not go his way. Probably.

Assigning the son of the Right Honourable Harry Gordon to this case had been as steeped in favour currying as ever, and as such, it was a blessing and a curse. Several colleagues genuinely wished Henry all the best and several others did so sarcastically; a few refused to speak to him, so deep was their resentment at the blatant nepotism on show. For his part, Henry's dilemma was clear - find the killer of the hero cop and be a hero cop yourself, come up blank and prepare to cop a transfer to a desk job a few miles away from the arse end of nowhere - regardless of familial influence.

No matter the limitations of his instincts, Gordon suspected it had something to do with O'Neill. There was only one scumbag in Glasgow with a scrotum big enough to hold the testicles it required to entertain the notion of wiping out a copper in public, in broad daylight.

As far as he was concerned, there were two conundrums. What was Whistler doing in the cemetery in the first place, and secondly, why the shooting? Evidence was a bit thin on the ground. The trip was clandestine and he told no one about this rendezvous with person(s) unknown. Frustratingly, despite looking through piles of

paperwork - admittedly the majority of it incomplete or scant in its content - Gordon, and the team working with him, failed to find any reference or clear indication as to what, or who, it might have been about.

An early morning dog-walker found his body, lying prostrate and bloody in front of a bench, on top of the hill, near the centre of the graveyard. It appeared that the murder took place only a matter of a couple of hours before this discovery. The finder of the body was deeply traumatised by their experience, and unable to offer any further help.

There was little or no physical evidence to go on either. The only third party Smith made mention of the cemetery visit to, was his wife. A very early job outdoors required a flask of coffee. Emily Smith was sure his very expensive and fancy camera was missing, but there had been no discussion with her about why he left so early in the morning. Apparently, this was typical and he rarely shared details of his work with her. If he was attempting to gather some covert shots of a crime, then whoever killed him must have disposed of the camera. His unlocked car sat outside the gates in a designated bay, with his radio on the front passenger seat next to a flask, but no accompanying camera. Some footprints were left on the path between the car and the spot where he fell, but apart from a couple that were obviously left by Smith himself, and one or two from the dog-walker, there were so many as to render their analysis a prolonged waste of lab time.

The bullet was a high calibre rifle round: a single, incredibly accurate shot from a pretty long way off. The shooter was clearly an outstanding marksman. The bullet entered Smith's skull, pulping the contents in such a comprehensive way, that it was clear he died almost instantly. The forensic team thought it most probably came from a nearby car park, but a thorough search there revealed nothing. It was semi-derelict, and so there was no CCTV to look at. It was a very bad error of judgement

from Smith to not take a junior detective with him or not to have left some form of record behind. However, the fact neither course of action had been adopted was just absolutely typical of the way the man operated. It did suggest that the reason for being at the cemetery was initially low risk and innocuous, but something happened to change that, and Whistler was killed as a result.

Even though Gordon suspected the hand of Danny O'Neill was the most likely behind the killing, it was hard to find any concrete lines of enquiry that might indicate why he would have decided on such a murderous course of action. This was a very carefully planned assassination, a set-up, which looked as if it was constructed specifically to lure Smith to his death; not a random act of instinctive violence. What threat could Smith have posed him to earn this level of concern?

Amongst Smith's immense pile of unfinished work, the only thing that piqued Gordon's interest so far were his dealings with a wee Ned called Zander McCormack who appeared to be an informant. On checking with the desk Sergeant, it became clear that this McCormack had indeed been paid a few times for information. It mostly seemed innocuous stuff, and something told Gordon that either Whistler felt sorry for this boy, as much as actually gleaning any worthwhile information from him, or he knew that one day he was going to be the sprat that caught the mackerel. The one thing that did jump out from the incredibly sparse notes confirmed this. If only Smith had been a fastidious and procedure-driven type, they would have an awful lot more to work with. Whistler believed McCormack was working for O'Neill. This may have been tenuous, but it was a scrap, a bone left part chewed, and it would do no harm for Gordon to follow this up and have a word with Zander McCormack.

His was a very sad case by the looks of things: broken home, dropped out of school, and constantly in trouble for minor infractions of the law. He also appeared to have

suffered horribly at the hands of a drunk and violent father, until his mother finally managed to ditch him, only to fall in with a drunk and violent boyfriend who maintained the onslaught.

Gordon was not expecting to get much in the way of useful information when he pulled up outside the house. It was a tenement block like so many others in Glasgow. An imposing, red sandstone façade, which harboured several flats, all accessed from a communal staircase known as a ‘close’. The nearness of each neighbour presumably responsible for pronunciation as if referring to proximity as opposed to implying it shut. Weeds and foot-high grass smothered the shared garden to the front, the slats on the wooden fence were distinctly intermittent, and the Council had boarded up a number of the windows in the neighbouring blocks. Litter tumbled and chased itself around in eddies at the foot of the buildings, adding an entirely apposite frisson of grubbiness and neglect.

No matter how many times Gordon visited a place like this, he was still astounded that the fourth largest economy in the world was incapable of providing all its citizens with a decent, safe place to live and bring up children. He tutted and shook his head as he got out of his car, narrowly avoiding standing in a pile of shit he could have sworn must have been deposited by something a lot bigger than a dog. He feared for his car’s wheels, and made a mental note to make this visit snappy, lest he returned to find the beginnings of the strongest of the three little pigs’ houses propping it up.

The main door to the McCormack’s close was hanging off its hinges and a panel cut into it was missing the glass that once occupied it. At some point the door attracted the attentions of a fire-bug, or errant firework, which blackened and scorched the bottom half. The intercom had long since ceased to either inter or com, and on stepping over the shattered threshold, the aroma that

greeted him was simply grotesque. Climbing the stairs meant dodging the litter and attempting to minimise his inhalations. Typically, the McCormack family lived on the top floor, which maintained his ordeal for a full six flights of uneven, reeking steps. Upon finally reaching the summit, he paused, before knocking firmly on the door.

There was definitely some sort of movement within the flat, but the occupant made him stand for a full three or four minutes without actually opening up. He knocked again, and this time held up his ID in front of him. The door held a spyglass, so whoever was contemplating the merits or otherwise of responding, would now be able to ascertain his profession. It seemed wise to refrain from shouting 'Police! Open up' since it was very likely this would have solicited an unnecessary, and potentially violent, level of interest among the other residents in the block.

After a further two minutes, and one more knock, the door opened a fraction and a tiny, mousey, woman with sharp features peeked through the gap. The smell of some kind of soup that wafted out of the flat was a blessed relief. The respite was short-lived as she blew smoke from her cigarette in his direction, but to be fair, even that was preferable to the stench emanating from the stairwell.

'Mrs McCormack?'

She was haggard, and looked beaten down by life - physically, emotionally, and psychologically. She was wearing a cardigan that looked older than she was and a long, faded, denim skirt that reached almost to her pink, tatty slippers. Gordon was never comfortable moving in these circles, and struggled to understand how people could cope with such deprivation. Not so much of the material variety, although god knows that would have been hard to deal with, but his disquiet lay more in the seeming paucity of any succour or approval. It was depressingly easy to imagine that this woman probably never knew what it was like to have somebody truly love and care for

her.

'Aye? What do you want? Is it about my Zander?' she replied tensely.

'Actually, it is. My name is Detective Inspector Gordon. Can I come in?' he said politely, slipping his ID back into his inside jacket pocket.

She sucked nervously and deeply on her ciggie, and flicked ash out toward Gordon. Stepping back instinctively to avoid it did not work and his annoyance at the white speckles spattering onto his supremely well polished, Italian leather shoes was palpable. Although, it was doubtful that Mrs McCormack would be losing any sleep over her indiscretion - even if she knew how much he'd paid for them.

'I'd rather you didn't. What's he supposed to have done now?'

'Well, I'm not sure. Probably nothing, but if he's here I'd like to speak to him. A policeman has been killed and I think Zander knew him, so I'd like to ask him some questions.'

The mention of a murdered policeman seemed to knock her out of her stride, and she began to babble.

'I, I, haven't seen him for about two weeks. He does that every now and again. Just ups and disappears. I don't know anythin about a policeman bein killed, and he isn't here, so I can't help you. Now, if you don't mind I've got the dinner on.'

Betty made as if to close the door, so Gordon put out his hand and gently stopped her from doing so.

'Ok. Please don't shut the door. I would just like to come in and check he isn't here.'

She began trembling. Her face flushed, and she looked behind her furtively. Taking a long drag on the cigarette, when she blew the smoke directly into his eyes, it seemed deliberate; which it was. Covering his mouth with a fist to contain his cough, and with his eyes smarting, he was not feeling particularly in control of this interview.

'Are you callin me a liar son? Are you? Have you a warrant?'

'Well, Mrs McCormack, no, of course I'm not calling you a liar. And I don't need a warrant, but this is a very difficult situation. DI Smith was a friend of mine and I need to find out who killed him. It would help his poor wife and sons to come to terms with their grief if nothing else.'

Mentioning the bereaved family seemed to have an effect on her. Betty looked at her feet for a few seconds, then over her shoulder again and then back at him. He was sure she was going to let him in. Suddenly, she jumped out of the widow's shoes and became quite defensive.

'No, you can't! It's my house and you can't come in if you haven't got a warrant. I feel very sorry for the poor woman and her kids, but my Zander wouldn't hurt a fly. I told you he's not here, so just go. If he comes back, I'll tell him you were here. Now, as I said before, I've got some soup on the go and it'll burn if I don't get back to it.'

There was not a lot of justification for pushing her further at this stage. She was almost certainly hiding something, but on balance, he felt she was probably telling the truth about Zander. If the need to contact this kid became more pressing, he would come back another time, with a warrant, and have a proper look. It was only a tenuous link, and lacked enough substance or legal gravitas to continue pursuing it more vigorously.

'Ok. I'll leave you my card. If Zander does turn up, please ask him to come and speak to me. It really would be very helpful.'

She snatched the card from his hand, shoved it roughly into her cardigan pocket, and closed the door.

Gordon bent down and carefully wiped the errant ash from his shoes with his handkerchief, buffing them back to their usual, lustrous magnificence. He stood back up and toyed with having another go at gaining entry; mostly to avoid the need to return to this foul, dank outpost of

civilisation, but partly in retribution for her unrepentant soiling of his fabulous footwear. It was a short-lived notion, and he quickly decided it would be counterproductive and could get messy.

He began the unpleasant descent, wondering just what gaps in this sorry mess Zander might be able to plug. He still had a niggling sense that there might be something significant linking this boy to O'Neill and Smith, although exactly what that something was remained opaque.

8. The Way To Rock

Working for Danny O'Neill was going to be the best thing that happened to Davie in a long time, and quite possibly the worst thing ever to have happened to him. The crucial thing was that however ambivalent he might feel about it, he really needed to impress the new gaffer right off the bat. He was determined to get past the relatively lowly position of driver tout-de-suite, and get himself involved in something much bigger, and more importantly, something that would get him into the trusted inner circle. Something that would get him time alone with O'Neill. His plan depended on his total plausibility, and dictated prudence and watchfulness beyond anything required in the past - particularly any time they met face-to-face. There could be no repeat of the 'already got a job' incident at the Patriotic Scot.

His first few days learning the ropes went smoothly enough. It was a proper job in most senses of the phrase, with a planned round of deliveries to make to real customers. The company was an entirely legitimate and well-known outfit, and his activities were not common knowledge to the management locally or nationally - other than Danny's inside man who took him on. The only difference his rounds had over those of the other employees was that he had a second set of un-invoiced clientèle who certainly did not sign for their parcels. Most were monosyllabic, and those that were not were actively

discouraged from becoming too familiar. This was not an exercise designed to increase his social circle. He knew that at any given moment, any one of these new acquaintances could be unceremoniously removed from his rounds, or decide to remove him from theirs.

An early rise was required, but that was not really a big deal - the shop job required one too. A distinct advantage to achieving this feat, while not completely sacrificing his night-life, came in the shape of an iron constitution. If burning candles at both ends had been an Olympic sport, Davie would definitely be representing the UK, and most likely be a strong contender for the gold medal, because his was one of the slowest melting waxes imaginable. Nevertheless, being careful and vigilant included not drinking too much or too late into the evening. Managing to get up early, only to fail a breath test would be a disaster, and his suspicions were it would be very unlikely to merely end in a fine and a driving ban handed out at the Sheriff Court. The exact fate of his greasy predecessor was unknown, but finding out the details was unlikely to have been a reassuring experience. A couple of customers made remarks, but their information was probably no better than his. However, Davie was confident that sending the guy a Get Well Soon card would have been a waste of a stamp, and not following in his footsteps seemed like an eminently sensible course of action.

At the end of each day, he returned to his main contact called Gary, who was using a small newsagent shop as cover. After handing over the money collected, and reporting any trouble or disputes encountered, he could drive off home and the rest of the night was his. The next morning he was back again to collect his supplementary cargo and any messages from O'Neill in relation to any issues that arose the previous afternoon. The day's work started at 7am and finished at about 4pm.

On day four of his second week, the potential scale of the

peril that lay in wait for the incumbents of the role became apparent. It seemed that some people were actually arrogant (or desperate) enough to try to take on Danny O'Neill. Of course, it may also have been that they were unaware of exactly who it was they were dealing with by proxy. After all, they only met Davie, and he was far from a chatterbox. Whatever this particular customer's motivation was, it made Davie even more determined to make sure his tenure as delivery boy was as short-lived as possible.

It was the fifth drop of the day. The guy worked in a small garage that operated from an archway under a railway bridge. Automotive debris and puddles of oil adorned the yard in front of the arch, and a car perched on a ramp within the garage itself. This was Davie's first visit to this site, and as soon as the guy hauled himself out of the pit under the car and swaggered into view, it was clear there was going to be trouble.

He was about six-foot tall, fairly well built, with copious tattoos enlivening his forearms, chest and neck. Wearing a very dirty pair of blue overalls - standard issue mechanic - with zip open almost to his belly button, and sleeves rolled up to his elbows, he was trying very hard to appear very hard. His hair was one of those bald on top and ponytail at the back jobs. It was only slightly more acceptable than a comb-over, but the difference in relative admissibility was gossamer thin. What self-delusion allowed people with this particular coiffure to look in the mirror and avoid seeing what everyone else saw? It would have been simpler to hang a great neon sign around his neck that flashed on and off proclaiming 'I am in denial of my baldness!', and it indicated he was trying far too hard to suggest he was still as vital, youthful and cool as he was in his early twenties. To add insult to hirsute injury, he adorned his fizzog with a straggly goatee, which hung in wisps below his chin. He was probably about fifty, but in continued defiance of his chronology, a nose ring pierced

his right nostril. Still not cool.

Stepping out of the van, it was obvious the guy was expecting Davie's greasy little predecessor, and he shot him a look that clarified his ill intentions toward this unannounced surrogate. As Davie opened the back door to retrieve the allotted parcel, the mechanic strode forward purposefully, grumbling obscenities.

'Who the fuck are you?' he said grimacing and wiping his hands on a rag that appeared to be exacerbating their oiling rather than alleviating it.

'The delivery driver, and I've got your delivery,' Davie replied with as much good humour as he could be bothered mustering.

'Where's Billy?' came the distinctly aggressive reply.

'No idea who Billy is mate. Do you want the parcel or not?'

The guy looked him up and down contemptuously and thrust the rag into his pocket, apparently content that it had managed to spread the oil over his hands in a satisfactory way.

'There's no fuckin way I'm giving you any money. You could be police for all I know.'

Delivered with a snarling curl of his upper lip that Billy Idol would have been proud of, he stepped in closer to Davie and folded his arms across his partially bared chest.

Davie was no expert in body language, but expertise in that field of pseudo science was not required to work out that it was definitely time to prepare for some fisticuffs. An overwhelming desire to make some kind of comment about the hairdo, the beard or the nasal ornament gripped him, but surprisingly he managed to stifle it.

'Sorry mate, but my instructions are very clear - no money, means no gear. So, if you're not gonna pay up, I'll be on my way.'

This clearly infuriated the mechanic. Colour flushed across his head and neck, and veins began to bulge in his temples.

'Really? You cheeky wee shite. How about I just take the gear? What do you think to that then?'

He said this with the kind of relish and self-confidence that Davie knew he could take advantage of. This was a man used to getting what he wanted by force, and the idea that this daft wee laddie could present him with any challenge was so far from his thoughts as to have been up there with what colour of curtains would go best with the new carpet in the front room.

When he lunged, Davie was ahead of him. Dropping the parcel, and dodging to the right, he delivered an extremely accurate kidney punch, which as well as surprising the mechanic greatly, knocked him off balance. This allowed Davie to follow home his advantage by grabbing the ponytail, twisting him round against his centre of gravity. Conveying as much force as possible, his knee pounded with a sickening crunch into that stupid, bearded face. Stunned, and bleeding, the mechanic slumped to the ground. Davie decided that was enough of the heroics, and took his chance to pick up the parcel, jump back in the van and make good his escape. Looking in the wing mirror, he could see the mechanic sitting on the ground, with one hand covering his most likely broken nose.

It took quite a while for the adrenalin to subside, and when his shift finished, the incident was reported to O'Neill's shopkeeper. Davie was not macho about this sort of thing. Luck played a massive part in the encounter. If he missed the punch, if the guy didn't have a ponytail or if he was armed with a knife or an ounce of self control, it might have turned very nasty and Davie knew it. What it did show him was how important it would be to keep his wits about him. Doing this job would entail dealing with some very dangerous and unpredictable characters.

When the Maybach drew up alongside him a few streets from his flat, on his way to the pub, he felt strangely

vulnerable. Danny was certainly showing a keen interest in him - to the point of finding out his address. It worked well as an indication of his reach, and omniscience. The passenger door gently swallowed its window and O'Neill beckoned to him to get in.

The inside of the car was amazing. A veritable herd of cattle appeared to have donated their skin to upholster it, and there was probably more room in the back than there was in his entire flat.

'My man says you had a wee problem today with Bobby McGraw over at the garage.'

'Aye, if that's his name right enough. It's no big deal. I was fine and I made sure the ugly bastard didn't get any free gear.'

O'Neill looked at him in an almost fatherly way...as if he had drifted off somewhere.

'Well, you'll not be havin any more trouble from him. I was very impressed how you dealt with it though. McGraw's a bit of a bruiser, and I know a few blokes, a lot bigger than you, that have come to grief at his hands.'

'I've done a wee bit of self defence and boxin. It was just luck. I caught him off guard,' replied Davie trying to convey genuine humility.

'Anyway, as a sign of my gratitude for a job well done, here's a wee bonus.'

He handed over an unmarked manilla envelope, which Davie pocketed without even opening.

'Ta!'

There was the almost indiscernible nod of acknowledgement, and then a short pause.

'I've decided that maybe drivin isn't the most productive thing I could have you doin. You can keep it on for a bit, but I'll be back in touch. Now on your way.'

Davie got out of the limo, convinced more than ever that his plan was going to work.

The next night there was a gig booked with the Shambolic

Sharks or the Disorganised Dogfish, as he liked to call them - much to the annoyance of the bassist Calum, who came up with the name, and thought it was pure genius. To give Calum his due, it was actually a distinctive name, and worked well in terms of promotion and helping punters remember them. But it was impossible for Davie to avoid the opportunity for a wind-up when it presented itself.

The venue was a local dive called The Kennel. The urban legend was that the current proprietor applied this moniker in honour of the vast majority of the regular female clientèle. Despite the dearth of talent on show most weekends (musically and romantically), it was nearly always a good gig to do. There was rarely any trouble, it was quite well paid, and they could drink as much as they liked courtesy of the house.

Davie turned up slightly late for the sound check as usual. This was a habit developed deliberately because it seemed to piss off the singer so much. Stevie took the whole band thing far too seriously, and still had delusions of adequacy as far as his singing was concerned. The more they played together, the more their mutual dislike and antagonism grew. Stevie was easily wound up and so full of his own importance that he could never tell when Davie was taking the piss or being serious. His default position was to assume it serious, and so they clashed constantly. Calum was harmless enough, with a slightly annoying tendency to appoint himself as band-leader and spokesman, and totally unrealistic ambitions for what was essentially a half-decent covers band. Tommy was straightforward, a bloody good drummer, and a champion drinker - although not always in that order. Davie's uncharacteristic abstinence piqued Tommy's suspicions on the night of the Kennel gig.

'You off the drink?' he asked incredulously.

'Aye, I've got a new job drivin and the guy I work for is not to be messed with. Don't look at me like that you

tosser! The pay's great, and it's way better than that fuckin shop, so I'm calmin the beans with the drinkin on school nights from now on.'

Luckily, for Davie, Tommy was not, for the most part, an inquisitive sort of friend. He did not show any particular interest in what he did; content for Davie to merely turn up for gigs, talk about football, and buy him beer. So, this work-related story seemed to satisfy him. All that remained to be said on the matter was to deliver the only insult Tommy deemed appropriate for such circumstances.

'Poof!'

The gig went really well. The turnout was healthy enough, with a good mix of ages and standing room only for most of the night. Better still, they seemed to enjoy the mixture of modern and classic rock cover versions the band played, and were generous with their applause. Davie surprised himself by realising that his musicianship while sober was far superior to that while trolleyed. Drink had manned his barricade against stage fright or overtly critical audiences for as long as he had been gigging. It was liberating to discover he could cope perfectly well without it, both musically and psychologically.

They played two sets. The first ran from about nine o'clock until ten thirty. After drinks and bowel movements, they went back on again between eleven and twelve thirty. Learning this number of songs had been time consuming, but enjoyable for the most part. Other than two or three songs Stevie insisted on playing (that he did his best to sabotage every time they played them), Davie loved the set. It was challenging enough without inducing a slog, and simple enough without inducing boredom. The owner was delighted with his bar takings - despite Tommy's best efforts to erode them significantly. He even paid them a small bonus on top of their normal fee.

However, the real bonus of the night was catching the eye of a fair young maiden who was definitely not barking,

IN MANY WAYS

but nevertheless, very interested in his bone.

9. The Way To Roll

Gordon was poring over the papers in front of him with what even he would have to admit was an uncharacteristic determination. Despite searching most of his alleged familiar haunts, none of his team had any luck finding Zander McCormack. However, there was just about enough in Whistler's notes to persuade the Chief to authorise some surveillance on O'Neill. After all, this was the cold-blooded killing of one of their own, and so far, there was little else to go on. The notes and photos from the tailing officers were unremarkable bar one small detail - an encounter with a delivery driver with one of the national courier outfits.

Whoever this driver was, none of the beat officers or detectives he showed the photo to recognised him. This was disappointing. It might mean that the contact was irrelevant or co-incidental. However, the photo of the lad getting into the back of the limo clearly suggested the possibility of otherwise. It could be he was already a soldier of course, or they just might have recorded the moment when O'Neill attempted to encourage him into his fold. One thing was certain - he was not delivering anything on behalf of his official employers. Whatever the reason for the liaison, Gordon was going to have a word with this guy and see where it led him.

Gordon arrived at the main depot, explained the reason

for his visit and showed the photo to the supervisor on duty. Recognising Davie, he put out the call.

When Davie got the message to come up to the office at the end of his shift, his suspicion was immediately aroused. In four weeks of employment, the supervisor had studiously ignored him. What did he want today? Did he know something about his clandestine activities? Whatever the reason, he best be on his guard and ready to be light on his feet. As he climbed the metal staircase to the office, which was on a mezzanine level above the main warehouse floor, he could see through the open door. As well as the supervisor, there were two other men waiting for him; sharply dressed, tall, and officious looking. His stomach somersaulted and he inhaled sharply - police. It was important to be calm and unconcerned. Davie slowed his pace on the last steps, took a few deep breaths to reduce his anxiety, and knocked firmly on the open door.

The office was sparsely furnished. A filing cabinet with a haphazard pile of papers on top of it stood in one corner. The current incumbent festooned the desk with folders, invoices, and all manner of other paperwork, a mug, a couple of photo frames, and a telephone. On the wall behind the desk hung a large year planner with a range of coloured dots all over it, a few tasteless prints, and a calendar featuring some scantily clad models. In another corner of the room, a large rubber plant stood in a pot, its leaves dusty and drooping from neglect. Further piles of folders and papers stood in a row on the floor along one wall. Davie wondered how someone with such a chaotic approach to his own work was able to organise that of nearly a hundred others. It was certainly not immediately apparent.

'You want to see me?'

The taller of the policemen turned to face him. Probably about forty-five, over six foot and well built, short and incredibly neat blond hair, dressed in a dark suit, white shirt and red tie. He also possessed a set of truly

dazzling teeth. A handsome, chiselled type, in a sort of obvious, TV kind of a way.

'David Argyle?'

And he had a posh English accent.

'Aye, and who are you?'

'Detective Inspector Henry Gordon. This is Detective Constable John McFadyen. We'd like to ask you a few questions.'

The supervisor shifted uncomfortably in his seat before standing and excusing himself. Late fifties, sporting the obligatory paunch, bald crown ringed with greasy, salt and pepper fringes, and a matching greasy, straggly, salt and pepper moustache. His whole demeanour meant he looked every inch the man in charge of a bunch of indolent, surly, deliverymen whose real wish was that they could have been footballers or pop stars. Most of them had the brains for either career, but sadly not the talent. As he left, Davie got the kind of look that suggested extreme displeasure at having two policemen in his office questioning one of his employees, and that he would be making this abundantly clear to Mr D. Argyle at the earliest opportunity. He lingered slightly at the threshold. Perhaps considering delivering the bollocking right then, he thought better of it, stepped out and closed the door behind him with a thud.

Gordon gestured to Davie to take the seat in front of the desk, and walked around and took the seat vacated by the supervisor. McFadyen stood.

'Now, David.'

'It's Davie. Only my Mum calls me David, and she's dead.'

'Right, sorry to hear that.'

Davie shrugged.

'It was a long time ago. Anyway, what am I doin here?'

Without pausing to exchange any more pleasantries, the dapper copper addressed him quite forcefully.

'I was interested in how it is you know Danny O'Neill?'

The intention of this directness may have been to put

Davie off kilter, but it was at times like these that his smart arse tendencies actually became a distinct asset.

'You mean wee Danny O'Neill? From Paisley? That I went to school with?'

This had the desired effect on Gordon.

'Eh? What? Paisley? No, I mean the notorious Glasgow gangster of course. Are you trying to be clever?'

Davie was sure McFadyen smirked at this, but this obviously junior officer was clearly there in spirit only, and not expected to contribute anything meaningful to the proceedings. To his credit, he achieved this with admirable diligence.

'No, I really did go to school in Paisley with a boy called Danny O'Neill. I don't know the other notorious gangster one you're on about.'

As doubtful as it was that the lie would be convincing, he was not prepared to make things easy for this plummy plod.

'So how do you explain this then?' Gordon replied, sliding the photo of him getting into the car across the desk.

Davie cocked his head to the side, picked up the photo and pretended to study it closely for a second or two, eyes flicking between the recorded liaison and the copper opposite him.

'Is that who that was? Car rolled up alongside me, door opens, I hop in without thinkin. The suit in the car asked me some directions to a local boozer. Didn't ask his name, and I was a bit distracted by the car, which was fuckin amazin inside by the way. Never seen so much space in a car in my puff!'

He shoved the photo back across the table.

Gordon felt fleetingly flummoxed. The reply was entirely plausible and coolly delivered, but at the same time he was convinced it could not possibly be true. Unfortunately, he was not well equipped for a battle of wits of this magnitude. His limitations as a cut and thrust,

top line detective, were beginning to show.

'Come on Davie. Am I supposed to believe that? You're just walking along, minding your own business when all of a sudden up pops Danny O'Neill, who invites you to get into his car, but only because he is looking for directions.'

'Aye, because it is true!' he replied with faux indignity.

'So why did you get into the car if it was just to give him directions? You could have done that from the pavement, and more likely directed them toward the driver than the passenger surely?'

This was a good point well made, but Davie was not about to confess all just because his off the cuff story was a trifle flimsy. He had the measure of this guy, and did not need an extendible tape to make the calculation.

'I don't know why he wanted me to get in and tell him the way, but he did. Maybe he's a control freak, maybe he's got a hearin problem, maybe I don't have a clue. Whatever. That's what happened and that's all I've got to tell you about it.'

'Look, if you don't tell me the truth, I'll have to caution you, and ask you to come down to the station.'

Davie knew this meant he was off the hook. It was an idle threat. If this DI Gordon had enough on him, there would have been a caution or arrest at the outset. Coming to his workplace and interviewing him was a fishing expedition, nothing more. It was time to call his bluff and see what happened.

'It is the truth, and if you want me down the nick, I want to call a lawyer first. Anyway, what are you chargin me with? Helpin a stranger with directions, leavin the scene of a non-event without reportin it, or maybe not combin my hair before I got into a fancy motor?!"

This time McFadyen definitely snorted, and Gordon glanced at him furiously. However, they all knew this single encounter, where no crime took place, was not going to be enough to do anything with at this stage, and

this boy was streetwise and clever. Too clever for Gordon's liking, and unfortunately for him, way cleverer than he was. A dose of mild intimidation would suffice for the moment.

'Ok, smart arse, we'll leave it for now, but just be aware that I'm watching you, and if I find out you've been lying to me, I'll have your guts for garters. Are we clear?'

This would have been more effective in making him feel uneasy about his future conduct if Davie could stop imagining this idiot fronting some moronic Saturday night game show.

"Well folks, the tension is building here. Davie, here is your first question. We asked a hundred people which Glasgow gangster's car they would be most unlikely to get into in order to give them directions to the pub. What do you think was the top answer?"

'So I can go then?'

Gordon nodded and waved at him dismissively, avoiding eye contact, and pretending to check a message on his mobile.

Davie trotted down the stairs, his boots' clanging reverberations ringing around his head, as he made for the nearest exit. The supervisor shouted something at him, but he feigned temporary deafness. Once outside, he jogged quickly around the corner and headed for the van with his keys already in his hand. Thankfully, he parked the thing close by. Driving out of the gates, he checked his mirror and saw the supervisor bursting through the door he left ajar, looking around angrily, and evidently bemoaning his dashed bad luck at having missed him. Davie could deal with that wanker later. Right now, his story needed to be totally straight for Danny. This would be potentially dangerous. Giving O'Neill the slightest reason to suspect he was in cahoots with the police would land him in big trouble. However, the easiest way to achieve that would be to say nothing, and for Danny to find out from his insider or elsewhere that the police had been to see him at work.

The other balancing act was to make sure this did not wreck his plan. There was a good chance Danny would cut his losses, and him adrift, if he did not handle the situation very carefully.

Making for the newsagents, by as circuitous a route as possible, he kept vigilant watch for any persistently following vehicles. After an hour of aimless, paranoid driving, he was satisfied the less than dynamic duo from the office had not set up any surveillance on him yet. He knocked the door at the back of the shop, and explained the incident to his contact. Davie made sure the guy repeated the story back to him precisely as he needed it relayed. The journey home was by another meandering route, which thankfully turned out to be equally lacking in police interest.

As soon as he was safely ensconced in his flea-pit flat, he retrieved a bottle of beer from the fridge and downed half of it in one long swig. The cold sensation that spread from his gullet, across his chest, and then into his stomach was most welcome - helping to ease the tension in his muscles and the pressure in his temples. It was going to be a waiting game now. O'Neill would come to him when he was ready. The beer would definitely be singular because above all else, it was imperative to stay sharp and focussed.

When the taxi horn brayed from the street below, he knew instantly it was for him. Already changed out of his uniform, and now wearing a dark, hooded tracksuit top, jeans and trainers, he checked his wallet and phone were about his person, trotted down the stairs and climbed into the waiting cab. Fifty minutes later, he found himself once again inside the Patriotic Scot.

Déjà vu was rampant as Davie sat down in front of O'Neill. He was nervous, but confident enough to see this through. Danny looked calm, and the hunks of meat either side of him were relaxed and disinterested. This was a good start.

'You had a visit from the Old Bill then?'

His voice did not seem to insinuate any anger or displeasure, but it was too early to be certain all was well in Danny's world.

'Aye, I got called up to the office and it turned out he had a photo of me gettin into your car. So, he wanted to know how I knew you, and what I was doin gettin into your motor.'

'Right. What else did he ask you about me?'

O'Neill stared intently at him throughout this exchange. Davie was clearly undergoing an interrogation of his honesty and potential.

'Nothin that was it. He just wanted to know how I knew you. I told him you asked for directions to a boozer and that I'd no idea who you were. Not sure he bought that, but I was sure he didn't have much to go on. He tried to put the frighteners on me, claimin he was gonna take me down the nick, but when I mentioned lawyers, and pointed out that I hadn't actually committed a crime, he just folded.'

'Not so much Inspector Clouseau as Inspector Clueless, eh?!' interjected one of the oversized rump steaks, laughing heartily at his own joke.

Admittedly, it was not a particularly witty remark, but the pregnant pause that followed seemed long enough to allow an elephant to go to full term as far as Davie was concerned. Finally, O'Neill stopped glaring at his now squirming companion and continued their discourse.

'They're always followin me, hopin to catch me out. I think its best you leave the delivery job. You need to get off the radar for a bit and let the cops think you're nobody to be interested in. Is your flat rented?'

'Aye.'

'Right, I'll fix you up with a new gaff, and I'll sort you out with a couple of weeks wages until the dust settles and you can get back to work for me.'

Davie realised this constituted the passing of a seriously

important test. This was a man prone to violent retribution against those he felt had, or even just might have crossed him. If there was the slightest whiff of betrayal or lie in Davies' story, it was certain the consequences would be dire. Yet, here was this same man almost protecting and nurturing him. This level of trust and acceptance was much more than he could have reasonably hoped for at such an early stage of the plan, and crucially, it confirmed his suspicions and kept him on track.

O'Neill reached into his inside pocket and took out a roll of banknotes. Casually unfurling a few and quickly counting out six hundred pounds in twenties, he passed them across the table, but as Davie took hold, O'Neill held onto them, tugging back slightly.

'This is an advance, right? I don't do hand outs. I expect you to earn it.'

'Of course, cheers Danny, I appreciate it.'

The grip relaxed, and he pocketed the money before any reconsideration occurred. The lasers homed in again, and the hand ran from neck to forehead. Davie was back in control.

'You're gonna have to keep your eyes open for the police. I reckon you're right and they've got nothing, but I don't want to take unnecessary chances.'

The pub door opened. The wind whistled in briefly before it shut with a clatter of the latch and a thump of the door proper, and a small man in his sixties hobbled in and up to the bar. The suddenness of his entry made Davie start slightly, but the interloper nodded in Danny's direction, and the greeting was returned. Ordering a pint and a whisky chaser, the old boy sat down to enjoy his own company in the opposite corner - instantly entranced by the silent TV hanging from the roof. It is amazing how much attention people can give to such a pointless and life-wasting exercise.

'I'm gonna talk to one of my landlords, and get you fixed up. In the meantime, you need to get packed and be

ready to go at short notice. When it's sorted, I'll send a van round to move your stuff. Have you any furniture?"

A great many properties throughout the West of Scotland were now under his DO-it Property Services tutelage. Some thought it may even be the biggest such firm operating in the medium to lower end of the market. Whatever the size of the firm, it was lucrative, and provided a vehicle to launder money through, and control the whereabouts of staff and customers. His favourite tactic was to combine rent and drugs money together. He would offer flats with initially low rents to vulnerable junkies, gradually squeezing every penny from them, before evicting them, and replacing them with the next slightly better off batch. They may as well have been battery chickens as human beings, for all the sympathy he gave them - and that included the children.

'I've got a telly, a stereo, a laptop, and a guitar and amp. Apart from that it's just clothes, books, CDs, and photos and that.'

'Right, sounds like a small van will be ok. On you go then. I'll be in touch soon.'

Davie got up and walked toward the door.

'Oh, and Davie.'

'Aye?' he turned back to face O'Neill

'The police are not the only ones watchin you.'

10. The Way To Enlightenment

Zander was distraught. In an almost touching show of compassion, the three goons dumped him at the hospital after completing their mutilation. The doctors managed to stem the bleeding, patch him up and give him something for the pain. Since then, about a week had been spent in the ward recovering; his new main form of communication facilitated by a small blackboard and chalk, and some notepads and pens. Try as they might to prise the truth from him, the only story he would relay to the hospital staff was that this horrendous misfortune occurred after falling down some stairs. The fact he did not have the severed section of tongue was one anomaly in this rather flimsy tale, another was the size of the chunk removed. It was way beyond anything accidental the consultant had ever encountered in a long and illustrious career repairing damaged faces. They toyed with calling the police but their patient made his feelings very strongly known (in his rudimentary hieroglyphics) that he had nothing to tell them. Moreover, being over sixteen, Social Services were powerless to intervene.

Eating, sleeping, drinking, and all manner of everyday things were at the very least disrupted, and often rendered unachievable. Although hardly renowned for his Churchillian oration with his tongue intact, the frustration and difficulty of communicating since losing his power of speech was proving far more troublesome than the

agonising pain, inability to eat a decent solid meal, and the effects of sleep deprivation. Unfortunately, all these momentous problems paled into insignificance compared to what happened on the ninth night of his rehabilitation. The three goons returned but their compassion was not travelling with them.

They masqueraded as bona fide visitors, before making it abundantly clear that he better accompany them or losing his tongue was going to seem trivial. Given their solid track record, he was of a mind to take them at their word. They forced him to don his bloodstained and filthy clothes from the night of the original attack - since they were the only ones available to him. Then, they locked him in a van for a few hours, before dragging him to the cemetery in the early hours, and tying him to the bench. One of the men leaned in close and whispered with great relish 'Enjoy the show, your big porky pig is for the chop!' before they strode off, leaving him freezing, befuddled and terrified.

All his valiant attempts to struggle free failed because the ropes were so expertly tied, and in light of the ordeal he went through just over a week before, his physical condition was hardly at its peak. The cold went right to his bones, and the struggling, shuddering and shivering left his wrists and ankles raw and bleeding.

The shooting was horrendous. Smith had been almost kind to him, tolerant of his fatuous information, paternal even. Certainly more fatherly than any of the previous applicants for the job, and it wracked Zander with guilt to have been the cause of his murder. It was the sheer mind-numbing shock of it as well. This giant of a man's brains turned to bloody porridge, spattering Zander's face as he fell like a sequoia in a Californian forest, and probably making only a marginally smaller indentation on the ground. A teenage intake of violent movies and computer games, where people died like flies, and gore drenched scenes were commonplace, were inadequate preparation

for witnessing the real thing; in real life Technicolor. His weeping was uncontrollable, and he sat there staring at the slain policeman for what seemed like hours. Staring until the blood that gently oozed from the ragged hole in the back of his head stopped pulsing; shortly after his heart must have. In reality, it was probably only a few minutes before his kidnappers returned and untied him. They roughed him up, warned him about the consequences of any further informing (rather pointlessly given the mismatch in physicality and the fact that it would be pretty hard to top the hint the assassin just dropped), and turned him loose.

With no other options available, he staggered and stumbled back to his mother's flat. As he went, he drew some rather startled looks from those who watched him go. He looked like an extra from a post-apocalyptic horror film - Dawn of the Ned perhaps - making his way down the many streets that lay between the cemetery and his intended destination. With no money, his only option was to walk, and it took him a long time.

Returning home was far from ideal. His mother's boyfriend was a drunken, violent yob, who did everything he could to force him out of the house, and Zander could expect neither sympathy nor respite from his ills if that arsehole was home. However, as feckless as his mother may have been, he was confident she would still try to help him. It had to be possible for him to manage a change of clothes, retrieve his stash of drugs, and get at least one night's sleep in a real bed. After that, it would be vital to disappear in order to avoid the attentions of the boyfriend, the police and Danny O'Neill. More than anything else, he just wanted to numb the pain in his mouth with as many narcotics as he could afford.

Zander barely made the journey. He needed to rest frequently and even nodded off at one point through sheer exhaustion. This sparked the concern of some wee old woman, who gently nudged him, asked if he was alright,

and said that maybe she should phone a doctor. He was ashamed that in his distress he told her to mind her own fucking business. It may only have amounted to an unintelligible moan-cum-shout, and a flailing of his limbs, but she was left in no doubt as to the sentiments of it. He weaved off unsteadily, every inch of his body and mind aching with pain and shock; thus leaving the wee old woman feeling hurt, confused and unlikely be so public spirited again in a hurry. It may have been a coincidence, or it may have been divine retribution, but as he left the bewildered Good Samaritan to ponder the error of her well-intentioned ways, it started to rain. Already cold and sore, this was just about the last thing he needed. He trudged pitifully on, the rain substituting for tears since his body decided they would be a waste of his rapidly diminishing physical resources.

The slightest, but nonetheless most welcome, reversal of fortune awaited Zander when he finally reached home. The bullying boyfriend was AWOL, and despite his mother fainting when she caught sight of his injury and appearance, once recovered, she actually rallied to his side with some gusto. It may have been guilt, or it may have been to distract herself from the full horror of the situation. Whatever her motivation, it meant she got him clean clothes, let him sleep in his own bed for a few nights, and fed him as best she could. She even managed to fob off some posh copper that came snooping around, asking where he was and telling her about Smith. Betty quizzed him about Whistler, but he denied any knowledge of the man or his fate. Luckily, she seemed to buy it and her interrogation was short-lived. She was trying so hard, but although her care and attention was both welcome and therapeutic, what he really needed was somewhere safe to go, away from any further reprisals or the attentions of the clan O'Neill.

Wherever that might be, he would also need someone

to look after him until his tongue healed fully.

Betty McCormack was one of life's great losers. Nothing had ever really gone right for her. Her parents were inadequate in almost every regard; incapable of giving or receiving love or affection. She was an only child, but rather than the stereotypical spoiled brat this conjured up in some less open minds, she always felt diaphanous and irrelevant. She was the girl at school who tripped around behind the troublemakers, only ever joining in with their bullying or vandalism in a half-hearted manner. At the same time, this desultory devotion took any hope of escape from the financial and emotional poverty of her upbringing and flushed it down the toilet; along with the heads of several perfectly nice young girls who dared to cross the path of her unfortunate choice of companions. These same top dogs dropped her like the runt of the litter she was as soon as school was over. They moved on to be cool and sluttish in discos and bars, while she lacked the confidence to do anything other than fall under the spell of a man who took their place admirably; making her feel inadequate, inconsequential and ugly, through action and words.

The only good thing Betty ever achieved was to give birth to her two beautiful kids. However, she even blighted their arrival by dint of their separate fathers and her subsequent marital abandonment. She loved her kids with all her heart, but she knew she had not given them anything like the start in life she should have, and her own insecurities brought thugs and danger into their home. She was determined to make some kind of amends now. In her son's darkest hour, she would step up to the plate, do something right and fix this for him. Just like a mother should.

Betty contacted Zander's older sister Ruth, who lived in Dundee. There was initial resistance to the idea because she had long since left the life of grime, domestic abuse

and petty crime that Zander still inhabited, far behind. She was an achiever at school, quietly amassing enough qualifications to get into University. Dundee was her choice of town to study in as it was far enough away from home without totally abandoning her mother to her fate. She loved her mother, but knew that they inhabited different mental worlds, and contact over the past few years was minimal thanks to the drunken animal she allowed to move in with her.

Ruth met a guy soon after she graduated with a degree in accountancy. They fell in love and married. She was worried about Zander's negative influence on her two children and it was not going to be easy to concoct a benign explanation for his sudden arrival - minus a significant portion of his tongue. However, Betty cajoled her and re-assured her; she even resorted to emotional blackmail. Eventually, Ruth's natural, protective instincts towards her younger brother, and her basic goodness, took over. He could stay as long as he needed to.

After packing a couple of bags with as many of his possessions as he could, and gratefully grabbing the bus ticket his mother bought for him, Zander snuck out under cover of darkness. He was completely unsure of what he was going to do. Apart from one thing. Danny O'Neill was going to pay for killing Smith and taking his tongue. Zander was very, very sure about that.

11. The Way To Move

The mid-sized van that O'Neill sent round was plenty big enough for all his gear, and the bloke sent with it to help him move was amiable enough. Northern Irish, probably ages with him, fairly well educated as far as Davie could tell, and quite brawny; he was also a lunatic behind the wheel. There was an overwhelming fondness for the accelerator. In sharp contrast, he appeared to hold a fearsome grudge against his brake pedal, which he stamped upon with great force throughout the journey. Davie thought it likely he would end up with a permanent imprint of the seat belt tattooed across his chest. This was disconcerting enough, but this Irish speed demon also liked to leer at any passing girls, issue advice to other drivers about their shortcomings by using the medium of hand signal, and answered phone calls at the most inopportune moments – sometimes doing all three simultaneously. Davies' obvious unease only seemed to goad him on, and when they finally slammed to a halt outside the new flat, his relief practically outweighed his worldly possessions lying jumbled in the back of the van.

'Fuck's sake mate! Do you always drive like that?'

'Aye, sure, you're here in one piece are you not?'

Sean had the sort of wheezing cackle, which in other circumstances may have proved rather infectious, but the trauma of the journey had acted like a course of antibiotics.

'It's a fuckin miracle we're not both dead you fuckin mental case!'

Sean took this as good-natured banter, but in reality, Davie meant it. If this wannabe rally driver ever turned up to chauffeur him somewhere again, it would be a choice between taking a bus instead or tying him into the passenger seat to allow Davie to take the wheel. They unloaded his gear and Sean roared off, tooting the horn an inordinate number of times, much to the chagrin of a soon-to-be neighbour. He leaned out of the window of his flat, indicating (with a slightly raised voice) that perhaps Sean might like to be a good chap and refrain from such antisocial behaviour - or several swear words to that effect.

Davie's new flat was remarkably spacious, and even more remarkably well appointed. If truth be known, he half expected to end up somewhere with hot and cold running cockroaches, but it was clean and modern, and significantly bigger than his old place.

The first port of call was the bathroom to test the shower. He was mightily relieved to discover he would not be responsible for making Old Faithful feel inadequate any more, and would have greater than a fair chance of getting wet and warm at the same time. Even if the rest of the place was a disaster, this would make it eminently more bearable (and bare-able) than the last place. The rest of this new domicile was about as far from a disaster as he could ever have hoped. There were two double bedrooms, a lounge/dining-room/kitchen combination, and the bathroom. The floor coverings were a mixture of carpets and laminate wood, and all the paintwork appeared fresh and recently completed. It was also replete with a couch, dining table and chairs, and even a washing machine. Being a single bloke, the way to work that particular domestic appliance would undoubtedly remain shrouded in mystery. Anyway, it would have been rude to threaten the livelihood of the local launderette owner by using it. The only real

downside was that it was in Glasgow.

However, Davie would not be raising that particular gripe with his new benefactor.

O'Neill issued him with a pay as you go mobile phone when he started work for him on the delivery run, and his instructions, relayed via Sean, were to sit tight for a few days and wait to be texted.

A mixture of middle-class couples and singletons, some families, and a few students occupied his street. It was a predominantly white area, but there was at least one Asian family, and they appeared to run a small convenience store at the foot of his block. There were a few other small businesses; a hairdresser, a betting shop, and an estate agent. Cars lined both sides for the majority of the time, with parking for residents only. It was quiet, dog shit free, and had a plethora of well-maintained gardens. Of course, it also rained. A lot.

Keeping a suitably low profile required him to make a serious conscious effort. With some difficulty, he avoided the pub, despite the obvious attractions of a barmaid who smiled at him on her way to work one evening. It was important to be as anodyne as possible - invisible even. One brush with the law was unfortunate; to have a second would seem careless. He spent his days popping out for shopping, watching TV, or playing guitar and computer games. He spent his nights popping out for shopping, watching TV, or playing guitar and computer games. After ten days of this inanity, and anonymity, he was thoroughly bored. The text arrived just in time to save him from taking up jigsaws or fishing.

Car will pick up @ 8pm. No jeans.

Despite the beyond minimalist brevity, and even though it was no doubt useless as evidence if ever his phone fell into the hands of the constabulary, he deleted it from his inbox immediately. He also complied with the dress code and when it was time to go, he put on a pair of

chinos, his brown brogues and a nice silk shirt. His leather jacket - one of the few sensible and lasting purchases made with the proceeds from his stunningly stupid house sale - completed the outfit.

The car waiting in the street was an Audi, and the driver was the usual black-garbed bouncer-type fellow, with absolutely no interest in striking up or maintaining a conversation with him. The stereo was on at hair parting volume; made even more distressing since his choice of music to perform this coiffing was some sort of avant-garde jazz. This was not music, this was a form of torture dreamt up by Beelzebub himself. After twenty-seven minutes and fourteen seconds of this aural equivalent of nails down a blackboard, water boarding, and kneecapping combined, they arrived outside a small Italian restaurant. Davie practically hurled himself out into the street to escape.

The restaurant was packed. Every chair appeared taken, and although the surprisingly loud traditional Italian music was not his normal bag, it was a blessed relief from the pain inflicted during the journey there. The voices of the patrons were giving it a run for its voluminous money, vying with it and each other for airtime. The atmosphere was distinctly convivial and lively. The words 'a right little goldmine' jumped to mind.

The smell was utterly fantastic; basil, tomatoes, oregano, mushrooms, freshly baking pizza dough. Salivation was impossible to avoid. Standing by the lectern that held a notice inviting patrons to 'Please Wait Here To Be Seated', it felt as if barely a few seconds elapsed before a waiter approached and asked Davie to follow him. They walked past all the bums on seats that were visible from the entrance. At the far end of the dining area, they stopped in front of a door by the kitchen. The waiter punched in a number code on the lock, before opening the door and ushering him through.

The door led to a short corridor, at the end of which was a table. O'Neill sat in one chair, and a second empty chair waited for Davie. Another waiter took his coat, and he sat down. The table was adorned with a candle stuck into a bottle, which was the latest in an apparently long line of varying colour that had oozed wax in great lava flows; to the point of obliterating all signs of the neck and label.

O'Neill was wearing an immaculately tailored, powder blue shirt, a yellow silk tie, and hefty gold cuff links. He looked every inch the dapper City gent, albeit a murderous, ruthless, sociopath of a dapper City gent. He seemed not to favour any other jewellery and unlike so many of his peers and employees, he was lacking in any obvious tattoos.

'Alright Davie? Do you want a drink?'

'Aye. Can I have a beer?'

The disdain was almost palpable.

'I meant wine! This is one of the best wee restaurants in Glasgow, and they provide some of the best wines our Italian cousins have blessed us with. The least you can do is show a little bit of respect and decorum. I'll order for you.'

Davie had never been much of a fan of wine. Whenever someone offered to let him try it, he was of the opinion that it was both greatly overrated, and for the most part, appeared to taste like he should have put it on chips. It was the domain of the pretentious and the social climbers, and he considered himself neither.

'Right, aye, sorry. That'll be fine.'

'Gino! Uno botiglio de Brunello per favore,' said O'Neill, in his best Glaswegian gangster Italian.

The eponymous Gino came over to the table and theatrically opened the bottle in the fashion that is often the wont of more flamboyant waiters. He poured each of them a generous measure, plonked the bottle down, retired to the shadows somewhere between the table and the

kitchen, and awaited his next instruction.

O'Neill raised his glass, swirled the dark ruby liquid around a few times, pressed his nose to the rim and inhaled deeply. He paused, eyes closed, savouring the aroma, and then took a swig, which he swished noisily around his mouth before swallowing it. Davie decided against aping this for two reasons: the danger of feeling like a complete twat, and the much more important one that Danny might have thought he was taking the proverbial. Instead, he just took a drink. To be fair, it certainly bettered his lowly expectations, and it was way beyond the usual condiment standard, but this cultured approach to drinking still did not sit very well with him. He could have murdered a pint of eighty.

‘Magic eh?’

‘Aye, it’s really nice. Cheers!’

He clinked glasses with O'Neill, and could see him sit visibly lower in his chair afterwards.

‘So, you’ve not had any more trouble from the police then?’

‘No. Not a peep. I’ve been ultra-cautious, and kept a mega low profile. I’ve hardly been out the house.’

O'Neill nodded in seeming approval.

‘Good, glad to hear it. The flat’s ok is it?’

‘Aw, it’s amazin, I can’t believe it. Much better than the dump I was in before. Thanks a lot for sortin that out for me,’ Davie gushed.

O'Neill actually smiled at this. In all his dealings with him so far, Davie had yet to see any hint of good humour. It proved a fleeting moment and he soon reverted to taciturn type.

‘Just remember it’s not a freebie. As soon as you’re back workin you can pay the rent. Right?’

‘Totally understood. So, does that mean you’ve got some work for me then?’

‘I’ll get to that soon enough, but my stomach thinks my throat’s been cut, so let’s order some food.’

The menu was classic Italian meat and fish dishes, and pasta and pizza. Davie was feeling ravenous himself and ordered a large ham and mushroom pizza with a side salad. O'Neill just handed his menu to Gino and asked for his usual.

'I've been very impressed with the way you've been handlin yourself since you came on board. I hope I'm not gonna regret this, but I've got a very important shipment that needs chaperonin and I reckon you are the man 'I need to do it.'

It was now, with alcohol flowing and as he relaxed into the evening, that Davie needed to work hardest to suppress the smart arse. This was no time for quips, asides, or devastating repartee. This was the time for laying foundations, and acting like a good little lap dog if that was what it required.

'Ok. Sounds spot on. Just let me know the what, where and when.'

Those piercing eyes fixed on him again, searching for any hint of insincerity or subterfuge.

'Right then. I'll get you all the details in due course, so let's just enjoy the food, and let's see if we can't arse a couple of bottles of this fantastic wine in the process!'

The food arrived and they passed the time with small talk about football, films and music. Davie found it almost surreal. Here he was, sitting in a restaurant with a man capable of having him rubbed out on a whim, and they were acting like work colleagues - discussing the merits or otherwise of Alien 3 and The Pogues amongst others. The pizza was in his top five of all time and, to his surprise, even the wine was beginning to grow on him by the time O'Neill abruptly ended their cosy little evening.

'Right son, I've got a lot on. Off you go. My man is waiting outside to take you home.'

'Ok. Is it alright with you if I just get a bus?'

O'Neill actually burst out laughing at this. This strange and strangely disconcerting show of emotion and

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normality really did not suit him at all.

'Not so keen on the jazz then? I don't blame you, its total pish! Tell Rab I said he's to turn that utter shite off.'

Unsurprisingly, relaying this instruction to Rab fell by the wayside, since his biceps were bigger than Davies' hamstrings. All the way home Rab gloried in his mighty, noisy, avant-gardism and Davie suffered in wimpy, square, silence.

12. The Way In

At some point during the night, O'Neill deposited a car outside the house and posted the keys through the letterbox. The explanation, couched in the usual, economical language and clarity of purpose, arrived by text - as would all further details as and when he needed them. A dark blue 1.8 litre Ford Focus, it was no doubt deliberately low-key in appearance. Nonetheless, it was comfortable enough, came equipped with a decent stereo, and was really quite quick. It would do Davie nicely, and was a big step up from the crappy delivery van. There were more than a few hours driving ahead of him, and there were a lot worse vehicles to endure them in.

The meet was in Hull. He was instructed to make his way to a pub called The Cock Inn, but upon reading the name in his text, he nearly shit himself laughing. Mentally, it was impossible to avoid the temptation to add a question mark. Was it a pub or an enquiry from a lady as to whether a less well-endowed lover had achieved penetration? Alternatively, it could have been a slightly offensive way to ask if the gentleman owner of the public house was present. Of course, it was clearly a reference to a male chicken, but seriously, in this day and age, surely the owners would have dispensed with tradition and changed it. The addition of an l between the C and o or even crayoning in le after the k would be all that was required.

On arrival at the pub, he was to meet a man called

Harry Burns. They would join forces and make their way to the exchange. It was hard not to shake the feeling of unease that carrying twenty thousand pounds in notes around in a bag created. This may have been his big test, his rite of passage into the O'Neill fold, but it was going to be dangerous. If anyone other than O'Neill asked him directly, he would have to admit to feeling a bit out of his depth. There were so many unknowns. Who was this Burns character? Who else was going to be at the meet? Was it a set up? This was his maiden voyage to Hull, so its layout was entirely unfamiliar. If things got rough and a quick getaway became essential, there would be no instinctive compass bearing or ingrained patterns of movement to help with his escape. The length of the journey was not helping to ease his misgivings, in fact, if anything, it was intensifying them.

Motorway driving in Britain has steadily become tedious in the extreme. It seems that no matter what time of day you decide to travel, it has coincided with the arrangements of millions of others. In particular, the over seventies towing caravans. The sheer volume of vehicles is one thing, but the corresponding rise in contact with incompetent or careless drivers is far more stressful.

You get the people glued to the middle lane who appear to have decided that turning slightly to glance in their mirrors is too much like hard work. Either that, or they do look and don't actually understand that the middle lane is not for 'cruising', so fail to move out of the way. Therefore, you get hemmed in behind them, reducing your speed from 75mph to 56mph, as ten vehicles zip past you at the speed of sound in the outside lane. You too could have been going at slightly less than the speed of sound, if only these middle-lane-lovers did not seem to have such an aversion for the thoroughly empty and available inside lane.

You get the trucks that are determined to overtake each

other on two lane stretches, despite a difference in their speeds of approximately 1mph (or slightly less in some cases). It takes them fifteen minutes to complete the manoeuvre, and in the meantime, a two mile queue of snarling, spitting bile forms behind them.

There are the tossers who must have been offered indicators as an optional extra when buying their car, which they clearly declined. Presumably, because other drivers would find it more exciting to try and second-guess what their movements across lanes or onto slip roads might be.

Most hated and reckless of all though are the tailgaters. Almost always driving BMW's or white vans, they career along the road a matter of inches from the bumper in front, practically breaking the stalk from their steering columns as they flash their lights to indicate just how much of a hurry they are in.

Of course, all of this drama occurs when you are actually driving.

Unfortunately, a great deal of time is spent not moving at all, or creeping along at less than ten miles per hour, thanks to the seemingly infinite ribbons of red and white cones strung out along the highways. These are generally used to cordon off a fifteen foot section of road, actually under repair for a full five minutes out of every twenty-four hours, for a month. At those times, you encounter all sorts. The nutter bikers who like to drive at break-neck speed between rows of cars, causing you to jump in surprise as they belt past. They are kept company by the (apparently self-appointed) police trucks. They like to block the outside lane, well in advance of its actual closure, trying to prevent anyone daring to go as far up it as possible before filtering in (even when there are signs saying use both lanes) and in so doing making the queues infinitely worse. Finally, meet the lane weavers. They pull out into free moving traffic in any lane that appears to be moving faster than theirs, and instantly concertina it to a

standstill in the process.

The actual driving and not driving bits are not the only things to be endured. The process of travelling for hundreds of miles down Britain's main highways is made all the less enjoyable by the range of catering facilities provided along the roadside. Expensive, nutritionally dubious rations, served up to you by teenagers with all the charm, but none of the warmth, of a freshly laid turd. Not to mention significantly overpriced fuel.

Davie experienced the full range of these delights on his journey, and was not in the best of moods by the time the signs for Hull finally loomed into view.

The car was fitted with a Sat Nav, and thankfully, the postcode for the pub had been texted earlier in the day. This was a godsend as the place was really quite difficult to locate, and he seriously doubted if he would have managed to find it without the high tech, talking map. Now, wouldn't that have been a fine step onto his second rung on the criminal career ladder: 'Sorry Danny, I just couldn't find the pub! Should I try again tomorrow?'

The Cock Inn. Aptly named.

Probably not in the sense that the original owners intended, but it was about as appealing as a gents' urinal. The hideously grubby exterior actually surpassed by the quite staggeringly filthy and malodorous interior. Carpets so sticky he could have sworn the landlord must have instructed the staff to smear them in jam of a morning, and the décor stained with enough nicotine to set up a business turning the wallpaper into patches. Every horizontal surface had rings from the bottom of glasses on them, and all the wood - from chairs to counter top – was enriched with graffiti and cigarette burns. There was one member of staff on duty; skeletally thin, slicked back, greasy, black hair, and a thin moustache combined with heavy stubble. He was wearing a once-white shirt and black trousers, had a heavily soiled bar towel slung over his

shoulder, and was openly flouting the smoking ban. Several elderly patrons, similarly paying no heed to the law of the land, were sitting sullenly at a table, playing what looked like a thoroughly dispassionate game of dominoes.

Harry Burns was standing at the bar sipping on a whisky from a small glass. Aged about forty, squat and stocky, with bulging forearms and biceps, he turned as Davie approached and pointed to a table next to the window. The brief description texted to him was entirely accurate, and Burns' instant recognition of Davie suggested he also received a similar textual prompt.

'What do you want?' he asked in a broad Yorkshire accent.

'Bottle of lager, ta.'

Davie decided that given the sanitary standards on display, risking a pint of bitter from a tap in this place was not worth it.

The Scottish accent seemed to stir some kind of reaction in the domino cabal. Davie was sure he heard something distinctly derogatory involving terms for male and female genitals being muttered in his general direction. Burns came to the table with the lager and a newly refreshed whisky.

'Now then Jock, I hope you're feeling fit tonight because the guys we're meeting are not to be messed with. Have you got the money?'

Davie was already worried about this guy. His slurred speech indicated a sturdy intake of alcohol. The immediate issuing of a threat and the questions about the money also rang alarm bells. The casual insult of calling him Jock was irritating but with one eye to the future, it actually suited him not to use his name and so he would put up with this lazy, casual racism.

'Well, I didn't travel six hours down to this shit hole for the scenery.'

Burns laughed heartily, and finished his whisky.

'Very good, very good. So you're Danny's new man are

you?’

Ignoring this chitchat, it seemed a much better use of his time to get straight to the point.

‘Look mate, as much as I’d love to sit here chewin the fat with you, are we going to meet these guys or not?’

Burns possessed one of those faces etched with deep wrinkles that gave him an appearance of being old before his time, and his complexion was swarthy. His steel-grey hair was shaved close into his scalp, but he was not bald. Years of daubing his Herculean arms in ink left him with an impressive collection of sailor tattoos, and he adorned his chunky fingers with several gold signet rings.

‘Ok, I get the picture - you don’t go in for small talk. I’ll just get myself another shot and then we can be on our way.’

Davie decided it was time to take charge of the situation.

‘Leave the drinks, and let’s get on our way now. It’s a long journey home, and the less time I need to spend down here the better.’

‘Eh? Well, ok then. I suppose the sooner we get it done, the sooner we all get paid.’

They stood up to more muttering from the other table, which in normal circumstances Davie would have been more than happy to take head on, but these were far from normal circumstances, and the miserable old twats could wait for another day.

He ushered Burns out into the street and into the passenger seat.

‘Nice car,’ he commented, stroking the fascia like a Persian cat. Clearly, this doyen of Hull’s criminal fraternity was used to far lower vehicular standards than a modern family hatchback.

‘Right, where to?’ Davie barked impatiently.

Burns proceeded to direct him around Hull’s less salubrious neighbourhoods, of which there appeared to be

many, chattering all the while about local landmarks that Davie could not have given less of a fuck about. This tour of the seedy underbelly of one of England's most deprived towns went on interminably until they reached another pub.

The Sailor's Rest was almost as run down and uninviting as The Cock Inn. With an exterior of exposed brickwork, and pointing in serious need of attention, it was a two-storey affair with at least half a dozen poorly maintained windows and a door to its front. To say Davie was on edge was more than an understatement. The place oozed menace and the thought of actually going in seemed like one of the least sensible things he had ever actively chosen to do in his entire adult life. It was surely stretching credulity to infer that any sailors actually frequented the place, and if they did, he doubted very much that they would find it in the slightest bit restful.

As they parked the car, Burns turned to Davie.

"The head man here, Carl Thomas, is a complete nutter. His two main lieutenants are nasty little pricks. Keep your eyes and ears open, and your mouth shut. I'll do all the talking. They hate Jocks."

Hardly reassured in so many ways, Davie decided not to argue the toss at this point and to judge the situation as it developed. Burns must have had some redeeming features for O'Neill to rate him. It may well have been the case that racism, as amply demonstrated at the last pub, was the main reason for him needing an escort.

They crossed the Rubicon and Davie immediately wished he could have spun on his heel and got the fuck out of there. It was too late though. To stand any chance of ingratiating himself sufficiently with O'Neill, he would need to make sure this job went smoothly.

Thomas was a brute of a man. Well over six feet tall, built like a sumo wrestler, several teeth missing, a pirates' hoop earring, and a shaven head. Quite why this walrus in man's clothing felt the need for physical backup seemed

laughable to Davie. He reckoned that you would need arming with a sledgehammer to knock him over, and even then, it was debatable as to whether or not the hammer would come off second best. The nasty little pricks lived up to their billing in every way. They were the type of characters that just emanated eau d'weasel from every pore. Like all the other best-dressed low-life scum, they wore shell suits, Burberry baseball caps and Nike Air trainers. From their relatively slight build, it was clear that their backup was not physical. No, their role almost certainly involved listening, watching and wounding with various weapons.

Burns suddenly seemed to be in his element. It was as if he had grown several inches in height, and what Davie considered a stocky build, now made him look as powerful as a bear. In fact, the amazing thing was that the drunken oaf of five minutes ago really did appear to command the respect of these Neanderthals. It was now becoming clear why O'Neill had chosen him to accompany Davie - a literally hard fought reputation, a track record, and invaluable local notoriety.

'Carl, you fat bastard, how the fuck are you?'

He opened with a familiarity of insult that made Davie relax a little.

'Fuck you Burnsy! If you want to see a fat bastard, look in the fuckin mirror.'

'So, still hanging about with these two little shits are you?'

Unlike the banter exchanged initially, this antagonism seemed a little more than required to Davie. It was obvious that Burns was trying to assert his authority and status straight from the off. However, these two were not likely to be respectful of authority of any kind, and very likely to have self esteem issues that resulted in cowardly violence against those who questioned their manhood or gangland credentials. He would be a lot happier if Burns would get on with the transaction and forget about his

pissing contest. For their part, both little shits scowled and muttered the obligatory reference to Burns having sexual intercourse as he left.

'Talking of little shits, who the fuck is this?'

The giganotosaurus pointed at Davie, his hand making his pint of bitter look like it was in a kid's tumbler. It put him in mind of Gulliver and Lilliput.

'He's O'Neill's man.'

Thomas looked Davie up and down and took a swig from his drink, practically draining the glass as he did so.

'How is the Scottish cunt? Tell him I said to fucking-well stay up in Jockland where he belongs, and keep eating those fucking, deep-fried Mars bars!'

This caused much hilarity among the weasels and several other punters who were listening to the opening exchanges between them. Davie remained stony-faced and treated the remark with the contempt it deserved.

'Anyway, if you've finished with the stand-up comedy routine, it's like the fuckin Gobi Desert in here, are you going to get us a drink or not?' interjected Burns.

Again, he looked them both up and down before relenting and ordering his allegedly parched guests some liquid relief - of sorts.

'Johnny, two pints of piss for these two wankers!'

They walked over to an empty table and sat down. The other customers were clearly from the same social group as the Thomas crew. Two or five appeared to have been imbibing to the point of paralysis and conversation was at a minimum. A couple of obviously under-age lads were playing pool in the far corner, and another couple of beer-bellied fifty-somethings were playing darts nearby. This was most certainly an establishment, and a patronage, wholly familiar with all manner of criminal activity. Johnny No Stars brought over their drinks and practically slammed them down in front of them, spilling some of the contents onto the table and making absolutely no attempt to clear up after himself. The finer points of barman

etiquette evidently failed to register during his time at barman school, and he sulked back behind the counter to await his next victim.

'Have you got the money?' Thomas opened bluntly.

'Have you got the gear?' Burns replied just as brusquely.

'Of course I have, but I want to see the money first.'

'Look Carl, you know the score, first the gear, then the money.'

Gear first, or money first, it was clearly a case of who would blink first. Thankfully, as far as Davie was concerned, Thomas did so.

'Trigger, get the gear from the car.'

Looking at the weasels, it was clear that one of them was a bit bigger; a stoat maybe? The stoat answering to the name Trigger, got up and went out to the car park. He returned a few minutes later with a black holdall, the contents causing it to bulge at the seams. It was obviously very heavy, because he was leaning to one side and was red in the face. Dumping it on the floor in front of Burns with a dull thud, he sat down puffing asthmatically.

Burns inspected the contents of the bag. He took a few minutes over this, checking and counting every parcel-tape-wrapped packet. Reaching inside his coat for a small weighing scale, he attached one packet to it and checked the reading. A quick dab on a calculator verified the total weight. He returned both instruments to his pocket, placed one packet on the table in front of him, and zipped up the bag.

'Ok, looks like it's the agreed amount. I just need to take a sample to the car and test it.'

Thomas put on his best 'oh I am so insulted' expression, stood up, and leaned across the table.

'Are you saying I'm trying to pass off dodgy gear?' he growled.

'Back in your box Carl, you've done this enough times by now to know I can't send this North without a test. It's

in both our interest.'

Burns replied with a calm authority Davie would have thought impossible when they initially met. All suggestion of ineffectual intoxication had evaporated.

Thomas sat back down huffily, and waved him off.

The now bristling Burns took the packet, gestured to Davie to give him the keys, and stood up. Trigger stood up at the same time and, with barely disguised contempt, followed Burns out into the car park.

Burns opened the boot of the car and opened a small box that was in there. He took a pocketknife and made an incision. Using a metal spoon from the box, he scooped a small sample into a vial of clear liquid, shook the vial and waited until the liquid changed colour. All the time he was doing this, Trigger stood behind him smoking and restlessly shifting from foot to foot. Satisfied with the result, Burns returned the box to its place in the boot and strode back towards the pub with Trigger Stoat in tow. All the while they were gone Davie and his companions sat in silence. Burns sat back down at the table, nodded to Davie, and handed him the car keys.

This time Davie stood and the weasel, called Flick apparently, followed suit.

In the car park, his mustelid escort stopped to light a cigarette, while Davie continued towards the car. Something made him think this was a ploy, as opposed to sating a nicotine addiction. Davie's heart pounded so hard he could feel the pulse in his tongue. Adrenalin levels were off the chart. This was very different to any previous dealing he was involved in. This was the big league, and the danger was far more acute. A few feet from the car he pressed the remote lock, but kept the keys in his hand. The money was in a compartment behind the back seat, and retrieving it would leave him vulnerable to the attack that now felt inevitable.

Davie used the back door on the opposite side from the money, retrieving the bag as smoothly and as quickly as

possible, before sliding across the back seat. Flick ran around to try and head him off but Davie opened the car door straight into him, knocking the newly produced knife out of his hand. Davie dived for the obvious source of his attacker's nickname as it skittered across the car park. Flick followed suit and, before Davie could grab the weapon, the wiry little bastard landed on top of him. As they struggled, his adversary hissed obscenities concerning Davies' cultural heritage and family history. Despite his lean frame Flick was just like a real weasel; deceptively strong. They rolled around; trading a few harmless punches until Flick suddenly wriggled free and managed to retrieve his namesake. Standing in front of Davie, eyes flashing in a mixture of blood-lust and glee, a slow, curling, self-congratulatory smile spread across his face.

'Give me the money you Jock cunt or I am going to fucking stick you!'

The rasping tone of his voice suggested his lungs were no more efficient than his partner's were.

Davie said nothing. This was not an occasion for talking; this was an occasion for looking and listening.

It suddenly dawned on his idiot assailant that the money was still in the car. However, as soon as he made to go and claim it, Davie pressed the key and locked the doors. Screaming like a ten year old girl, Flick launched himself at Davie, who was prepared for this. In a move practised a thousand times in class, he side-stepped, grabbed the wrist attached to the knife hand, and swept the legs from under Flick with his own right leg. As the weasel fell backwards, Davie wrenched the knife from his hand. Flick's head hit the car park with a dull thud, and he groaned. Davie followed this up by stamping on his face; shattering his nose and knocking him clean out. It was at this point that Davie realised there was a commotion coming from inside the pub.

This was bad. This was way worse than bad. This was about as fucked up as it could get. This meant having to go

to the last resort. Going back to Glasgow empty handed was not an option to take, and for some unknown reason, he felt duty-bound not to let Burns get beaten to a pulp or worse. As promised by text, taped to the underside of the passenger seat was a pistol. He threw Flick's knife as far into the darkness as he could, and strode purposefully over to the pub. He was finding out things about himself tonight that he never imagined were within his capability, but now he had engaged autopilot.

Kicking the pub door open, in what he imagined might be the manner of a SWAT team member, the sight that greeted him was astounding. The whole place was completely trashed, with chairs, tables, glasses and bodies lying all over the floor. Trigger was spread-eagled and motionless, near where the original table had been - blood not so much forming a pool as a lake around his head. In fact, so much seemed to have drained from him that it looked like he had donned his winter coat of ermine. Two other patrons were nursing bleeding and bruised faces, one was doing a passable impression of Trigger, and the rest were cowering in the corner near the pool table. The charming barman was nowhere to be seen, while Thomas was standing over Burns holding him by the collar and was about to land another smashing blow to his face.

'Leave him you toothless, fat, English bastard!'

Davie screamed and pointed the pistol in Thomas's direction.

Thomas looked as startled as such a behemoth could ever be by an eleven and a half stone drip from the West of Scotland. He let go of Burns who slumped to his knees gasping, with blood dripping liberally from his nose and mouth. Turning to face Davie properly, it was now that he realised what Burns had been alluding to with his earlier warning about this mountain of lards' mental faculties. The man's eyes were practically popping out of his head, his breath was so laboured and deep that the heaving of his chest was making Davie feel slightly seasick. He had gone

to another place, and the fact that Davie was armed with a gun seemed to make not one iota of difference to him. In the circumstances, this was not the best time for it to dawn on Davie that he had no idea how to use said gun, and still less inclination to go so far as to murder someone with it. Even if that someone was a twenty-stone psychopath, with a burning desire to close the distance between Davie's head and arse to a minimum, but dawn on him it had. The bravado and adrenalin that drove him inside after his weasel felling, suddenly drained from him as Thomas bellowed like a bull.

'I am going to tear off your fucking head and shit down your neck, you little, Scottish, cock sucker!'

There was not a lot in either the sentiment or content of that sentence that appealed to Davie, so it was very lucky for him, and very unlucky for Thomas, that Burns re-entered the fray at this point. Just as the giant was about to launch himself across the floor towards Davie, Burns took two shattered pint glasses and slashed them across the back of Thomas's knees, instantly severing tendons and ligaments that were already struggling to support his vast bulk. As they pinged, and his legs buckled underneath him, he howled in pain and staggered forward, falling onto his front. The whole building seemed to shake as he landed; an impact so forceful that it may well have produced readings that would trouble the local geologists for months. As he lay there momentarily incapacitated, Burns stood up, lifted the nearest chair, and brought it crashing down on his head with quite terrifying force. Thomas shuddered and then lay still. Burns spat a bloody gob onto the back of what was now his severely lacerated head.

'You will regret crossing me you fat fuck!' he stated, rather belatedly in Davies' opinion.

'Get the gear and take it back to Danny. I've got unfinished business with this piece of shit.'

Burns wandered over to the counter and pressed a bar

towel to his nose. Once he stemmed the flow of blood from that wound, he filled his mouth with lager from a half-finished pint, swilled it around a few times, and spat it back into the glass, turning the golden liquid a deep shade of red. It looked for all the world as if he had just performed some sort of illusion.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the Great Burnzo will now amaze you by turning lager into snakebite and black!"

Hardly enough to tour the clubs with, and not likely to make Jesus break out in a sweat, but it would probably be popular with students in Rag Week. Then, reaching over the bar, he grabbed another towel, and wiped his face with it. Still holding it as he spoke, Burns addressed the others who were still huddling in the corner.

'You lot, fuck off. NOW!'

They duly did. As did Davie, who grabbed the bag of drugs, and got back in the car. He had been driving for about half an hour when he pulled into a supermarket car park, opened the door and vomited.

13. The Way To Get Even

Sean was a very simple sort of a lad really. He liked drinking with his mates, women, Glasgow Celtic FC, and fast cars. The exact order of preference varied according to what his circumstances were at any given time, often playing a maddening game of leapfrog as a night out progressed.

Being the nephew of one of Glasgow's best-known hard men came with advantages and disadvantages. It intimidated some people; some wanted to curry favour; while others felt compelled to try and inflict violence upon him. The latter were usually other simple young men; full of alcohol and testosterone, intent on proving how much more masculine they were than him. Sometimes, they were the aggrieved relatives of one of his uncle's victims. Whatever the motivation of the aggressor, experience taught him two main tactics were the most effective. One was to walk away, and the other was to call on the assistance of the bodyguard assigned to him. Of course, that was in the ideal world, and that was not always possible - he might be drunk and hormonal enough himself to rise to the challenge, or he might have given the hired hand the slip.

Shaking the attentions of the bodyguards was never easy, and it enraged his uncle who always lectured him afterwards about the responsibilities to his sister and how she would never forgive him if anything happened to Sean,

and there were many people bearing grudges waiting to get one over on him, blah, blah, blah and blah. Sean's riposte always involved something along the lines of how he was an adult and could live his life any way he saw fit, that they had no right to mollycoddle him, and it wasn't his fault his uncle's reputation got him into trouble. Anyone other than the son of O'Neill's sister talking to him like this would have been augmenting the foundations of some multi-storey by now. Sean was well aware of that fact.

The pub-crawl had been a bit of a monster so far, and he was distinctly feeling the pace. Some of his friends had a quite ferocious appetite for drink, and although no lightweight, he struggled to keep up sometimes. They started on pints of lager in combination with tequila slammers, and after five apiece in rapid succession, moved on to the next venue, and then the next, and then the next. He was unsure as to how many more pubs they actually visited or how many drinks they consumed in the process, but suffice to say, the alcohol content amounted to a lot more than their recommended weekly allowance. There was more than a fair chance that it would amount to more than their recommended annual allowance.

He was standing at the bar of the latest pit stop, vainly trying to gain some composure. Looking around at the female attendees had proven decidedly pleasant. In general, the ladies present in this particular watering hole appeared to be gorgeous. As the beer goggles, had long since been replaced by a full wetsuit and aqualung, there was no surprise involved in reaching this conclusion. Unfortunately, the wanker who recognised him as Sean Duffy, nephew of Danny O'Neill, rudely interrupted his lecherous musings.

'Hiy, Duffy! Look at you, swaggerin about our boozer like you own the place. You think you're so hard, how about I fuckin show you what hard really is?'

About five foot six, smartly dressed for a night on the

town, shaven head, and copious amounts of bling, this guy had no idea how out of his depth he was about to be. More scarily, he would not have cared even if someone had told him, on account of having no concept of what his depth might be, or that he might even have one.

'Look mate, just leave me in peace. I have no idea who you are, but I'm here with a few mates for a drink and a laugh, so do yourself a favour and fuck off before you regret it,' Sean replied in his deep Ulster brogue.

The boy was undeterred and started to invade his personal space.

'I'll not regret it. You fuckin will, talkin to me like that. You fuckin Fenian cunt!'

Finally, it became abundantly clear just what the root of the guy's problem was. Religion. Football. Tribalism. Lacking a full set of functioning brain cells.

At this point, two of Sean's substantially framed friends realised what was going on and positioned themselves close by his side. Towering over the angry little turd that so ungraciously introduced himself to Sean, one of them put his hand on his shoulder.

'Maybe you don't understand English you little Orange bastard? Either you fuck off out of our faces or we're all gonna take turns mashin yours.'

Sean was not entirely sure what happened next, but it appeared the aggressive little bigot was not alone in the bar, and he really was intent on making a fist of a fight. Limbs flailed, glasses smashed, bar workers ducked for cover, and women screamed. The bodyguard was with him almost the instant the throwing of the inaugural punch occurred. He ushered him through the back to the toilets, and returned to the fracas to feed more than one of the troublemakers a very tasty knuckle sandwich. Jimmy 'The Hands' Campbell was a professional boxer in his younger days, and the lifting of the Queensbury rules gave him a distinct advantage over any of his opponents that night.

Sitting on the pan, sobering up (rather more speedily

than any neutral observer could have thought possible a few moments before), Sean became morose. So many nights out ended like this. Fucking, moronic, little bastards with a point to prove were always harassing him, and dragging his friends into violent conflict they were not seeking. He looked around the cubicle at the offensive remarks, crude jokes, adverts for personal services, and cave drawings of various sexual acts and body parts and felt an overwhelming urge to get the fuck out of there and go home. His mates would be fine, and Jimmy would comprehensively deal with the little turd who started on him. Not only that, but his ardour had been well and truly dampened. In any case, with the amount of alcohol coursing through his veins, an athletic performance in a young ladies' boudoir was now out of the question.

The window above him was already ajar. A good push saw it open wide, and dropping out into the car park below was no problem as it was not particularly high off the ground. The air was cool and fresh, and mercifully dry considering he had come out without a jacket. In the near distance, he could see a taxi rank. He swayed over, got into the cab at the head of the queue, and settled back in his seat to enjoy the ride home. A few streets away from his house he jerked awake, and seeing the lights blazing out of The Golden Bird, decided to stop and get a bag of chips. Taxi bill settled, and chips purchased, he walked and ate. Above his head, a black cloud was tracking him, spoiling his enjoyment of the normally delicious, deep fried delights.

It was not the worries about what his uncle and subsequently mother, would have to say about him abandoning ship that bothered him. It was much more to do with his guilt at leaving his friends to fend off trouble he had been at the root of. The thing was though; he had not been at the root of the trouble. He had not sought it out, and he had not provoked it in any way other than being who he was, and who he was related to. It started

out as a night with great promise, but it ended in ruins, and Sean was growing thoroughly tired of being infamous by proxy. The idea of a return to Ireland seemed desirable for the first time in a long while.

Sean was happy enough in Ireland, apart from the obvious problems of living with sectarianism. His move to Glasgow hardly relieved him of that particular thorn, but it relieved another problem - having no job. His uncle came to the rescue, and at the outset, Sean did not realise quite what he had embroiled himself in. He always knew Uncle Danny was a bit of a bad lad, and dabbled in illegal activities, but his actual notoriety and the extent of his empire was amazing to him.

He was always his uncle's favourite. They could talk about cars and Celtic for hours, and he knew his remuneration far exceeded the usual going rate for the gofer-like duties he performed on Danny's behalf. In no time at all, he made loads of new friends. The money meant he was living the life that would make most young single men of his age turn the colour of half his hoops in envy. Familial notoriety brought perks as well as difficulties. He got easy and mostly free access to clubs, great tickets for gigs, and hardly ever paid while eating out.

Like many in his situation, he may not have condoned the most unsavoury actions of his uncle, but he turned a blind eye. He was lucky that his benefactor kept these unpleasant aspects of the O'Neill operation away from his door, and he contented himself with the belief that Uncle Danny was not a monster, that he was just an uncompromising businessman, and basically, a good person deep down. He could not have been more deluded of course.

Leaving all this and going back to his homeland would definitely be a wrench. As much as he missed and loved his mother, father and four sisters, he really did not know if there was anything else there for him to go back to. Perhaps a good night's sleep and a clear head would help

him get some perspective.

The street where Sean lived was not particularly well lit, and consisted of two rows of tenements. The buildings extended below street level to accommodate basement flats. Access to each basement was via a short flight of stone steps flanked by black-painted iron railings with ornate spikes on top. The ascent to his flat was by another larger staircase, which ran at right angles to the one down to the basement, and was similarly railed either side.

Climbing up the steps was almost an involuntary, reflexive action - one performed hundreds, if not thousands of times before - and there were still chips to be finished. It was the combination of these two factors, and undoubtedly the lingering effects of the night's session, that helped him fail to spot the door to his flat was very slightly open. This ingress actually led to a communal staircase that facilitated admittance to about five further flats as well as his, and in theory, one could only gain initial entry by using a buzzer system. However, if any person leaving or entering did not pull or push it hard, but instead just let it swing-to behind them, it would fail to engage the lock properly. In which case, the buzzer became moot. Sean stopped at the landing in front of the door.

When the hooded figure exploded out of the doorway towards him, Sean had one hand in his pocket to get his key, the other was clutching the half-eaten bag of chips. Taken completely unawares, and unable to react quickly enough, the assailant was able to grab him around the knees, lift him bodily off the ground, and topple him over the railings of his stairs. He fell onto the basement railings with a sickening crunch.

The hoodie glanced over the railings and could see Sean looking back up at him. Impaled on at least one spike, Sean was so shocked and winded from the impact that he could not even manage a moan, never mind cry out. He could not be sure but he thought he knew his

attacker, and the bastard was smiling.

Taking his chance to flee unnoticed by any witness, the guy ran with unnatural speed out of the street and out of sight. At that time of the early morning, no one else was around, and it was Sean's great misfortune that the basement of his block was unoccupied.

It was a full five minutes before Sean's breath returned in sufficient volume to allow him to start calling for help, and scream in agony, and then both in tandem. These bouts of screaming were interspersed with lapses in consciousness when the pain became unbearable. It took at least half an hour before anyone reacted and the emergency services arrived. It took another two hours for the fire brigade to painstakingly remove him from the staircase and be transferred to hospital by the paramedics. It took a further ten hours before the surgeons managed to remove the spikes from his shattered spine, spleen and left kidney.

At the end of the following day, it was clear he would never walk again.

14. The Way Home

Davie returned to his flat in the early hours of the morning, after a drive he barely remembered in his desperation to avoid any kind of incident on the way. That and his utter pre-occupation with what happened. He seemed to be replaying events on a constant loop, trying to figure out what he should have done differently, and how he could have avoided such calamitous levels of violence and danger from befalling him and his companion.

As soon as the door was closed and locked, and a couple of essential chores attended to, he poured himself a large whisky, downed it like a gun-slinger in a Western saloon, and collapsed into bed. He slept the sleep of the dead - feeling very fortunate indeed that it was merely metaphorical. His dreams were a psycho-analyst's delight. Full of being caught naked in weird places, unable to run away as fast he ought to, and featuring all his ghosts. Of course, he considered the idea that someone could know for a fact what the meaning of dreams were as total bunkum. It ranked alongside astrology and tarot reading in terms of credulity and reliability. You might as well get a professorship in conjecture and supposition and at least be honest about it.

His wakening was uncharacteristically abrupt and left him a little bewildered. The closed curtains could not conceal the fact that it was clearly light outside. Since he did not

deploy the bee to rouse him, he had no reference point for what time it might be as he started to come to. Scrabbling around on his bedside table trying to locate his watch, which indicated it was ten past ten, he became aware that there was activity beyond his room. There was definitely someone else in the house. Quietly sliding out of bed, he pulled on a pair of jeans, and looked around the room for a potential weapon. He settled on a microphone stand. It seemed substantial enough to frighten off a casual burglar, but Davie needed to face a painful truth; the type of people he had recently embroiled himself with, would be unlikely to break into his flat unarmed - or alone for that matter.

He took a couple of deep breaths, and gently stepped into the hallway, trying to make his way to the living room with as much stealth as possible. Of course, as he was not acting out a role in a Hollywood film, and as he happened to live in a flat from the Victorian age, the floor creaked so loudly, he might as well have rung a bell, banged a drum, and played a trumpet on the approach to the door of his main living space. Cover clearly blown, plan B was to storm the barricades with shock and awe. This plan would have worked much better if he didn't burst through the door yelling 'Right you fucker, let's be havin you' and instantly slip on a strategically abandoned sock, which sent him skidding flat on his vertebrae, cracking the back of his head on the wooden floor, and leaving him dazed and helpless.

Danny O'Neill nearly pissed himself laughing. The second time Davie seemed to have tapped into his sense of humour in a matter of days. The accompanying human juggernaut, who Davie recognised as the Maybach driver, stood near the vigorously boiling kettle in the kitchen. His amusement level was possibly greater than O'Neill's was.

Davie picked himself up, rubbed the back of his head where it hit the floor, scooped up the microphone stand, and tried to avoid eye contact with either man.

'What would you give him Jimmy? I reckon it was a 9.6!'

They both continued to laugh uproariously.

'9.7 at least!'

'Do you want a tea or coffee?' asked the driver once he stopped wheezing and crying.

'No, you're alright ta,' he replied with as much dignity as falling arse over tit in front a gangster and his bodyguard would allow.

'I'll be back in a minute Danny; I'm gonna put some clothes on.'

Back in the bedroom, he put the microphone stand back in the corner against his amp, administered a Glasgow shower (a quick spray of underarm deodorant), and pulled on a t-shirt, socks, and trainers. He recovered the bag of money from under the bed, returned to the living area with it, and handed it to O'Neill, who opened it and began checking the contents.

'I'll need to get the other bag from the loft,' said Davie.

O'Neill nodded and continued to count his money in what seemed like a rather distracted fashion. Meanwhile, Davie retrieved the metal hook needed to gain access to the loft. The square of plywood that covered the hole in the ceiling swung down, flapping like a window shutter in a storm until he stilled it. Pulling down the retractable ladder fitted to the frame of the hatch, he climbed quickly and once in the loft switched on the light. The decision to put the drugs in the loft was a bit spur of the moment. A powerful paranoia grabbed him in regard to being caught in possession of them if, for some unknown reason, the upper class twit police officer decided to pay him a visit. The logic was not entirely sound of course. In hindsight, it might have been just as tricky to explain the presence of twenty grand in used notes under his bed, but it made sense at three o'clock in the morning after six hours of driving.

The bag was at the back of the roof space, inside a

cardboard box that once housed a TV. It weighed a ton, and nearly gave him a hernia lugging it up there. He dragged it across the boarded floor, switched off the light and made a slightly unsteady descent. The hot beverage dispenser cum minder cum chauffeur appeared at the bottom of the ladder and took the bag from him. He of course made it look like a purse, and about as heavy as if it had been filled with cotton wool. Davie returned the ladder to its cave in the roof, sealed the entrance with the plywood square, and made his way to the living area.

O'Neill looked at him sporadically but when he did it was with a palpable intensity, all the while checking the second bag's contents. Once satisfied, he zipped it back up and sat back in the chair. A steaming mug of tea sat on the side table next to the settee. Davie sat in the armchair to his left and waited for the verdict.

'Harry sends his regards. He was very complimentary about you. Said you dealt with a tricky situation really well, and he should know. He's a top man isn't he?'

Two minutes after meeting him, Davie would have been hard pushed to affirm this, but if truth be told, Burns had most likely saved his life after freezing at the vital moment, gun in hand. So it was easy to nod in agreement.

'I've worked with Burnsy for about five years now. I reckon he must be a secret Scotsman he's so honest and down to earth.'

Davie could think of many ways to describe Burns, but honest would not have been one of the words near the top of his list. After all, the man was deeply involved in criminal activity, including the pedalling of narcotics and grievous bodily harm, to name but two he had witnessed first-hand. Still, he supposed that what O'Neill actually meant was trustworthy in an 'honour among thieves' kind of a way. This did appear to be an accurate description.

'It's not often I get a new recruit with the kind of resolve and loyalty you've shown so far. It takes a lot of guts to face down the Thomas posse and come back here

with the money and the gear. I'm pretty sure the pubs in Hull will be buzzin with the story of the wee Jock that helped Harry Burns bury Carl Thomas.'

Davie was sure that O'Neill meant this as a compliment and thought that such macho bullshit would make him feel good about himself. In fact, he felt sick to his stomach. His plan was on track, but the original version did not involve being accessory to the murder of a fat, psychotic, Yorkshireman. The squeamishness about Carl's possible demise was certainly not due to any regret or guilt; that violent heap of blubber deserved all he got. Rather, his sickness came from the possibility of attracting unnecessary attention at such an early stage of the plan's development. His head was filling up with questions. Was Thomas dead? Were the mustelid brothers now burning with a righteous fury? In fact, as he sat here mulling over his options in his flat, were said brothers driving north to find him, aiming to exact dual, pointed, bloody revenge? Did one of the other punters in the bar squeal to plod after receiving monetary inducement? Did he leave some DNA behind that would be enough to get him convicted? Was he out of his fucking mind getting involved in this?

'Now, I think it's fair to say that you've earned a wee bonus over this. I have a big pile of gear to sell at 100% profit - seeing as how you and Harry got me it free and gratis. And, I've still got a lovely big wad of cash.'

After picking up the mug and noisily slurping his tea, O'Neill replaced it on the table, reached down and unzipped the bag of money. He pulled out a few bundles of notes, and tossed them over to Davie. It was a seriously large amount of money. His best instant calculation was that it was probably a couple of thousand pounds or so - more money than Davie could call his own since blowing the last of the bequest while on the first class flight home from Hong Kong.

'Thanks Danny,' he said - in the most convincing surprised and delighted voice he could rustle up at such

short notice.

'No, thank you, Davie. You can also consider your rent debt settled, and in fact, don't worry about rent for the next two months either.'

This was excellent news. He knew exactly what he was going to do with at least part of his windfall, and very soon, so would Danny.

The next job O'Neill sent Davie out on was much less eventful than the trip to Hull and back. There was a drop off for a sizeable sum of money, but this time, it was not in exchange for a hefty bag of merchandise. The recipient of the cash was professional, without warmth, and not in any way troublesome. The biggest problem Davie faced was Rab, his muscular chaperon. Once again, he subjected Davie to his utterly incongruous taste in music. At some point, on the way back from one of these exchanges, he could take no more, and demanded a change of CD (just turning it off would have done). Rab mulled over his perfectly valid protestations, and totally ignored them. Once home, Davie downed a stiff drink, and played Back In Black at full volume as an antidote to his jazz poisoning.

Several more jobs like this followed, and in time, Davie resorted to an iPod to escape his aural spearing at the hands of Rab the Impaler. In the course of fifteen trips, they never exchanged more than a handful of perfunctory sentences. He loved to imagine Rab as a deep intellectual, drawn to jazz for its mental challenge, the complexity of its arrangements and the virtuosity of its proponents. However, the reality was that it seemed due to some sort of anti-social syndrome or other, and his fondness purely arose from the passionate hatred everyone else had for it. Moreover, by choosing a volume level of Spinal Tap proportions, it drowned out any possibility of conversation. Still, it was doubtful that Rab was hired on the basis of anything located between his ears. The fact he appeared to shun the rest of humanity, was far more of an

asset to his employer than a thorough understanding of modal shifts and improv.

In between jobs for O'Neill, a handful of gigs were booked with the band, and as the weeks passed, the detective that visited him at the delivery depot became a flicker in the back of his mind. There was still plenty of call to be as cautious and alert as any self-respecting criminal should be, but there was no longer the need to avoid the pub or stay in all the time.

An enthusiastic full house at the Kennel cheered on the Shambolic Sharks the night he got a timely reminder about what might come before a fall.

The preliminary set went down well. He managed to drop the prerequisite number of bollocks during the songs Stevie loved so much, and Tommy was on top form. The crowd were milling around during the break, drinking, chatting and visiting the toilets when he spotted him walk through the door. He was with a couple of other blokes and a girl. Detective Constable John McFadyen - the laughing policeman. Only this was no joke.

Davie needed to think, and act, fast. He dodged out of the stage area, round a pillar, keeping his back to McFadyen all the time. He made his way to the car park, where Tommy was having a fly puff on a toke.

'Tommy, I feel like shite man, I don't think I can play on.'

His percussive band mate looked at him as if Davie had dropped his trousers and taken a dump right there in front of him.

'Fuck off you wind-up merchant! Leave me in peace to get out of my napper.'

'No, really Tommy, I've just spewed and shit for Scotland back there! I can't play another note. Will you pack up my gear for me and I'll come and get it tomorrow?'

He feigned a stomach cramp, and doubled over

groaning. Tommy reacted with as much concern and goodwill as Davie would no doubt have done if they exchanged places and the illness was genuine.

'You fuckin useless wanker! That means I'll not get paid for the second set now. Aw, for fuck's sake Davie! No doubt you'll want me to break the good news to Pinky and Perky as well will you?'

Davie grimaced, nodded, and ran back inside shouting that he was going home via the toilet. Back inside the pub, he scanned the room. McFadyen was standing at the bar, but as far as Davie could tell, he didn't see him, and if he had, he either failed to recognise him or was playing things incredibly cool. Davie grabbed his coat from behind his amp, put his guitar in its case (he couldn't possibly trust a drummer to handle it as carefully as it deserved), and walked back out to the car park.

Tommy was, at that moment, in the process of telling the other band members about their guitarist's sudden incapacity. As they screamed abuse at him, he flicked them the finger and ran for a taxi.

Back in the flat, he rue'd his stupidity and arrogance. He may well have been safer but he was certainly not immune from detection and disaster. The band didn't know it, but they would be experiencing a temporary hiatus on the gig front.

Aside from this one unfortunate flirtation with plod, life trundled on rather uneventfully - for a drug dealer. Interaction with O'Neill was minimal after the initial burst of activity, but always cordial in its own way. Texts were the main form of instructive device, along with grunts and hand signals by Rab, but there had been one visit to the Patriotic Scot. Disappointingly, there was only one further foray into the corridor in Gino's palace of olfactory joy, and this time, there was no invitation to join O'Neill to eat and drink. Rather, there was merely a set of instructions handed over and explained in detail, on account of them being more complex than normal. In addition, there were

some photographs of the men he was to rendezvous with, and another pay packet. This was becoming a worry. Had he misread the situation?

Meanwhile, Zander also returned home.

The time spent with his sister Ruth was painful in lots of different ways.

The state of him appalled her, but his physical traumas were really the least of her worries. She would need to prioritise helping him to tackle his obvious dependence on opiates head on. Rehab has become a byword of modern celebrity, and in the main, it appears to be nothing more than another marketing tool or publicity stunt. In the seventies, rock stars galore came off drugs without announcing the date and time of their admission to a clinic, or tipping off the press as to the precise moment at which they emerged 'cured'. For addicts like Zander, without money or notoriety, rehab was a far less glamorous process. Cold turkey is an infinitely variable experience for those who go through it, but it is usually unpleasant and painful. The agonies of his oral, auto-amputation undoubtedly exacerbated Zander's experience of pain, but perversely, said affliction greatly aided his successful detox. His inability to speak, being stranded in an unfamiliar town, and having no income, were major impediments to sourcing a fix. In addition, Ruth lived in an affluent, middle-class area, well away from the ones where he might have ready access to a supply.

With so many hurdles in his way to achieving a purchase, and an inescapable yearning to avenge his surrogate father's execution (and his tongues' excision), he acceded to the imploring of his sister, and freed himself of his chemical yoke. It took two weeks. Two traumatic weeks of sweating, roaring, crying and sobbing. Things were broken and thrown around. Language was fraught and abusive, and yet, throughout it all, Ruth and her husband Jonny had been saintly in their levels of tolerance,

dedication and love. They tended him gently and without complaint. Indeed, this magnanimity and affection helped him greatly with the struggle.

Throughout his house arrest, she also helped him improve his communication. His handwriting had never been particularly good, and this would be a much bigger issue now than ever before. Larking around at school was not only de rigueur, his cultural and social circles considered it compulsory. To show interest in school would have been to show weakness worthy of a remorseless beating or five. This time, he was unhindered by threats of violence or ostracism, and the endless hours of monotonous practice actually helped to distract him. Eventually, his illegible scrawl became a neat and tidy, upper case, dream. He was amazed and delighted to discover that he had a very natural way with his nephew and niece, and that they really liked him. His brother in law was a top lad, always joking and laughing, and willing to take the time to teach him poker, bridge and rummy in order to take his mind off the purge.

The time spent with his sister was wonderful in lots of different ways.

Zander knew that playing happy families could not go on forever - tempting as that prospect was. Despite their generosity and protestations otherwise, Ruth and Jonny needed normality back. They needed their spare room to be available for guests who did not have a predilection for hard drugs. They needed their children to be able to invite friends over to play or have tea. They needed to go to the pub, watch telly, and make love, without changing shift watching over a Ned relative going through cold turkey. They did more than enough. More than they would ever know about repairing things far more important than his tongue or his shitty handwriting. In any case, he felt strong, healthy and confident, and there were pressing matters to attend to in Glasgow.

Going back to his mum's house would allow him to

sign on and receive a meagre income. This time though, the money would find far more productive uses than administering intravenous injections or embellishing roll-ups. He was sure O'Neill would have moved onto bigger fish, and forgotten all about him by now. The only way to exact his revenge would be to move back in with his mother, keep a very low profile, and stay clean. O'Neill was going to become his new habit. Every spare minute of every day would be spent following him; learning about his movements, his routine, and most importantly, the things he cared for.

Zander settled back in at his mothers' pretty well. The fuckwit boyfriend remained AWOL and he assumed that this was now a permanent situation. He suppressed contemplating what might happen if the prick returned, in favour of more constructive and less depressing thoughts. For her part, Mrs McCormack seemed as relieved about this as he was. Avoiding old friends and haunts, and temptations came easier than he thought it might: mainly because he filled his every waking moment with trying to watch and record the life of one Daniel Francis O'Neill esquire. A realistic chance of keeping tabs on him was made possible by the acquisition of a Vespa-type scooter. It was perfectly adequate for trailing around the city and outlying schemes, but had to accept defeat whenever the giant German limo ventured onto the motorway. His biggest headache was preventing vandalism or theft. In the end, the only solution was to manhandle it up and down the stairs, and store it in the hallway of the flat. Mrs McCormack was far less relieved about this, but since her only son had been through such a hellish time, she relented and endured its oily intrusion.

The miles of nipping about, on what amounted to a wheeled hair dryer, led Zander to the discoveries that the Patriotic Scot was O'Neill's local and a regular meeting place, as was a small Italian restaurant called Gino's. Other

observations included a weekly swim at his very private health club, although the times this was taken varied according to the rest of the schedule in any given week. He also noted almost daily visits to his legitimate businesses in retail, catering, and property rental; the location of his lawyer's office; and the regular appearance of certain characters. The work done in Dundee to improve his writing was put to very good use, and copious notes were recorded in A5 notebooks.

Rising at six every morning, Zander ate a light breakfast of tea and toast, before heading out to O'Neill's mansion on the outskirts of the city. Occasionally, he got there to find the limo had already departed, but after a few weeks of tailing was able to narrow down his choices of potential destination. Of course, some days would draw a frustrating and irksome blank, but overall, a very clear idea of how this guy lived and operated was emerging. Unlike DI Gordon, Zander had no boss to answer to, no budget to fret over (other than his fuel bill), no paperwork to fill out, and no other priorities to deal with - apart from signing on every week. To his surprise, he also qualified for more money due to his entitlement to disability allowance. His dedication to the cause was unswerving and absolute.

15. The Way To Get Nowhere Fast

Gordon was seriously hacked off. A week after his initial visit, he was back at McCormack's house, once again enduring the horrors of ascending and descending the stairs. This time, furnished with a warrant, he gained entry, only to find the house empty of his quarry. Despite turning the place upside down, the team found nothing more than a couple of minuscule butts that were formerly joints, a couple of unused syringes, and a stash of wank mags.

Mrs McCormack, questioned under caution, was less than forthcoming, so he released her without charge. Although Zander seemed to have disappeared, his mother appeared unmoved. In any other person, Gordon might have found this odd and perhaps even suspicious, but he resigned himself to the depressing reality that this was a genuine apathy and disinterest in her own flesh and blood. It seemed abundantly clear why Zander would be keen to avoid her company, and might not feel compelled to update her regularly as to his well being or otherwise. The quest to locate him even involved sending a PC from Dundee to visit Ruth Williams nee McCormack, but she claimed not to have seen her half brother for at least four years. They were not what he would call a close family.

More disconcerting, and definitely becoming more suspicious, was the disappearance of the delivery driver Davie Argyle.

Gordon spoke to the chief. He agreed that the photo

of the encounter with O'Neill provided sufficient grounds for further questioning. After all, they were investigating the death of a police officer. Taking the smirking McFadyen with him, they arrived at the depot and went up to the office of the supervisor they dealt with previously.

The man was clearly stressed and deeply unhappy in his work, and probably in life generally. His demeanour was rude and bumptious, and Gordon felt blessed that he did not turn up to work for him every day - especially when the money, hours and job security were so abject. When the two detectives walked up the stairs, he was pacing around the room, and did not sit when they did. He launched into a salvo of abuse against Argyle almost as soon as the door was closed.

'That cheeky wee bastard, I was furious. The day after you pair were here, he walks into my office, chucks the van keys at me, chucks them mind, doesn't hand me them, demands his outstandin pay, tells me I can stick my job up my arse, and then fuck's off without so much as a bye or leave!'

It was as hard not to empathise with Argyle's sentiment almost as much as he did with McCormack's lack of maternal bond.

'Left me right in the lurch. I had to get an agency driver in, and pay another bastard time and a half to cover for him. I mean to say, he was the one bein interviewed by the police in my office, and he's havin a go at me. And he's the second one in the past few weeks. The guy before him just never turned up one mornin. It's a fuckin liberty!'

Gordon decided he'd had enough of this spleen venting and interrupted.

'Mr McKenzie, I can understand your position, and I'm sure it was highly inconvenient, but I'm investigating the killing of a police officer, and I need to speak to David Argyle as a matter of urgency. Do you know where I might be able to contact him?'

McKenzie looked uneasy. He sat down heavily in his

chair, interlocked his fingers in front of his paunch and swung back and forward, looking up at the ceiling and almost anywhere except directly at his guests. After what seemed like an age, he deigned to answer.

'I'm not sure I'm allowed to give out details like that any more. Not since that Data Protection Act came in. As much as I've no desire to protect that ungrateful shitbag, I also don't need any hassle from some lawyer later on who tries to turn the heat on me for breakin some poxy rule or other.'

Gordon was exasperated now, and changed his tone of voice to one of polite hostility.

'Look, just phone your HR department and get me permission to access his personnel file, and make it quick please. I am trying to find a cop killer, and if you obstruct me any longer, I will arrest you. Do you understand?'

Unlike Davie Argyle, this guy was clearly afraid of authority figures and was definitely used to being compliant to his superiors. In response to this threat, he instantly lifted the phone. After a brief conversation with the HR adviser, he went over to one of his filing cabinet drawers and retrieved a file. Scribbling the address onto a post-it note from a pad next to his phone, he passed it to Gordon. He slumped back into his seat, as surly and deflated as a grounded teenager.

'Thank you Mr McKenzie. I will be back in touch if I need anything else, but for now, goodbye.'

Gordon and McFadyen left the room and heard McKenzie slam the cabinet drawer shut, before storming out onto the landing and shouting to someone that he required their presence. No doubt, it would be a chance to re-assert his manhood, and repair his dented self-esteem, by harrying some unsuspecting minion. As Gordon descended the metal steps to the depot floor, said minion passed him, using quite possibly the highest number of unflattering terms directed towards another human being, in one sentence, that he ever heard.

A few hours later, they found themselves outside the address McKenzie supplied. The flat was a bit of a dump, but nowhere near the sub-standard of the McCormack residence. McFadyen's first attempt to rouse an occupant failed, so he returned to the car and they both waited. Gordon must have nodded off because his head suddenly leapt up and back as if on the receiving end of an uppercut from an invisible boxer. A very unbecoming string of drool ran from the corner of his mouth and down his chin. Wiping this away with his handkerchief, and turning to see if McFadyen had noticed, he realised a girl was letting herself into the flat.

He nudged the equally soporific McFadyen - what a crack team they made - jumped out, and called across to her.

'Excuse me Miss. Is this David Argyle's flat?'

The girl was visibly startled and he realised a little too late that the pair of them were bearing down on her in a very inappropriate manner. She bolted into the house as they approached and slammed the door.

'Go away or I'll call the police!' she shouted at them through the letterbox.

'Sorry to have scared you Miss, but we are the police. My name is Detective Inspector Gordon and this is DC McFadyen. We would like to ask you a few questions.'

They held up their identification for her, and after a few seconds of consideration through the still open letterbox, she slowly opened the door. She was petite and very pretty, probably about nineteen years old, and from the way she was dressed, Gordon thought she was most likely a student.

'I am looking for David Argyle, and I have reason to believe he lives here.'

She looked at Gordon, instantly transporting him to his own student days. All that freedom, debauchery, and rebellion was exhilarating. He was a fairly intelligent sort.

Diligent without being swotty, and ended up with a pretty good degree result in Psychology. Drinking was possible every night of the week, nothing seemed as important as the next social gathering, and despite his relative poverty, no proper responsibilities weighed on his mind. In any case, the bank of Mum and Dad was always willing to extend interest free loans when the money got seriously depleted. Well, loans may have been stretching it. They were more like interest free handouts. The more Gordon looked at her, the more she reminded him of an old girlfriend who took his virginity and broke his heart.

'Actually, he doesn't live here, I do. He moved out a few weeks ago, and I moved in. I don't know him, and I've never even met him. Is he in some kind of trouble?'

'Well, that's not really your concern Miss...?'

'Ramsay, Anne Ramsay.'

'Ok if I call you Anne?'

She nodded coyly, and he was gripped by an overwhelming urge to grab and kiss her.

'Did he leave a forwarding address Anne?'

Her reply clipped the return ticket from his nostalgia trip.

'No, and the weirdest thing happened yesterday. I had been piling up his mail on the table in the hall to give to the landlord when I next saw him, but when I got home yesterday after lectures, it had all gone. I was a bit freaked out about it, and when I called the landlord to ask if he had collected it he said he hadn't. I asked him if anyone else had keys, and he said no, and he refused to change the locks because it cost too much - that's why I was so scared when you ran at me before.'

This was irritating to the point of possibly requiring anti-histamine. They missed the opportunity to get hold of some vital info by what appeared to be a matter of hours. Of course, Gordon was not to know that a delegation from O'Neill's office visited the landlord. They asked if he might feel inclined to help Davie out, by gathering any

mail that came in, and then forwarding it to one of the DO-it Property Services branches. The landlord, unsurprisingly, felt inclined to do this very thing, but even less surprisingly, not inclined to let the police know about said arrangement.

'Ok Anne, thanks for your help. I am sure you have nothing to worry about, but here is my card. Call me if you think of anything else or if this David Argyle turns up to collect any more mail. He's not dangerous, but I really need to speak to him.'

For a fleeting moment, he secretly hoped she might call for reasons other than police work. What was he thinking? It really was time to get a relationship - preferably one with a woman, rather than a girl young enough to be his daughter. One of the major downsides of police work, and his sense of dedication to the cause, was that it left very little spare time. What little time he did have, was impinged upon time and again at the drop of a superintendents' hat. Women tended to be thoroughly unimpressed by the ménage a trois of them, him, and his job. They were even less impressed when it became apparent they were consistently third choice. Suddenly, feeling awkward, frustrated, and dismayed at himself, he bade his goodbyes and they left. As they did so, the much younger McFadyen winked at her, and her face flushed a very endearing shade of pink.

Once back in the car, he embarrassed himself further by giving the poor boy a thorough dressing down for falling asleep while on a surveillance operation. This investigation was not amongst his finest hours.

This happened six weeks ago, and since then Davie Argyle simply evaporated into the ether. After a bit more research, it became apparent that Argyle had no close family to check in on, and the landlord was as disparaging about him as McKenzie was. It seemed that his outstanding rent remained unpaid, and his appropriate notice period

blatantly ignored. The general view of both men seemed to be that if they ever got a hold of him, they would make him very sorry. The Council appeared to have lost track of him as well, and as far as they could tell, he was neither claiming benefit, nor paying Council Tax. The strangest revelation though, was that when his team investigated the details from the delivery depot more thoroughly, they found that David Argyle was dead. In fact, he died eleven years ago. Therefore, whoever the man Gordon met in the delivery depot was, it was clear his name was not David Argyle.

If Gordon was going to get justice for Whistler he was sure O'Neill was the key, and to get to him, he was becoming more and more convinced either (or both) of the vanishing acts that were McCormack and Argyle needed to be located. There must be something a bit more than coincidental about Gordon speaking to Argyle and his subsequent vanishing. However, if both men turned out to be ciphers or blind alleys, he was in big trouble. The team and therefore, as far as his superiors were concerned, he, had turned up nothing else.

16. The Way To Get Even, Even

It was Monday evening and Jamie Argyle sat staring at the television. Whatever the programme was, it patently failed to hold his attention. This almost catatonic preoccupation was down to the invitation. The text message remained emblazoned on the handset; undeleted and the only one in the inbox. Reading it time and again was not making the enormity of it diminish by even the tiniest amount, although it was making the phone's battery charge diminish bar by bar.

Come to house for dinner Fri @ 9pm. Have proposal.
Rab will drive.

It was definitely game on.

The idea to swap his personal data for that of his deceased father occurred to Jamie soon after he first got involved in peddling drugs. His dad's passport, birth certificate, and various other forms of identity came to him as part of the bequest. For five years they stayed in a box under beds, in the bottom of wardrobes, and in the corner of rooms. They seemed nothing more than pointless mementos - their liberation from the box reserved for those maudlin moments of self-pity and regret that came every so often. His involvement in criminal activities shed a new light on them.

Assuming this new identity was extremely easy. The physical likeness between him and his father in photos was

uncanny. His father died at the relatively young age of thirty-two, and a very youthful-looking thirty-two at that, so flashing the photo when required never caused an eyelid to bat. Filling out forms with a false date of birth online or that were posted into a mailing house was equally lacking in problems, and once accepted for one credit card with lax procedures, it was easy to build a bogus credit history. When signing up for Council Tax, and submitting his National Insurance details to employers, he used Davie as his middle name, and then insisted on workmates calling him that. He merely told them that he never liked Jamie, preferring to remember his Dad. Before long, his real name dissolved away, retained only on a small savings account into which the army paid the pension.

The one exception to this scheme of mixing identities was the delivery job. He took a huge risk and signed up in his Dad's full identity, trying to give himself some cover or wriggle room if things went a bit wrong. He figured that it was a short-term gig, and if they came back to him and challenged his credentials, he could just bail out and rethink his plans. He was not there long enough for it to come to a head, and the prime time TV copper's intervention hastened his departure.

He became so accustomed to Davie that it actually threw him more when someone used his real name. He still needed to be careful though. Occasionally, he would start to sign a document or credit card slip and realise he was using the wrong name. He also needed to be very wary about which acquaintances gathered in the one place and how they knew him. So far, it was working out ok, and so far, he still had an extra layer of surprise to spring. Once the evening was over, it would allow him a slight advantage, and however minor the improvement to his odds, it could potentially make all the difference to his chances of avoiding a wooden overcoat.

The plan had been gradually taking shape over many weeks. He was still a bit unsure if the central plank was as

robust as he would like, but if not, it wouldn't stop him; it would only make things a bit more difficult. He thought all the angles through. He had been waiting for this moment, this invitation, to initiate the first phase.

By eight o'clock, all the pieces were in place. The journey over to the house with Rab was its usual battle of the iPod versus the car stereo, and there was likely to have been more conversation between two Trappist monks than between driver and passenger. The iPod allowed him to focus and get ready. The agitation brought on by the noodling and tuneless, free form, arse trumpeting Rab tried to inflict on him, would not have been good mental or emotional preparation for the night's work ahead.

The property was way bigger and grander than Jamie suspected it might be. It was more akin to a small castle than a big house. Set in a large, walled garden, it sported a long sweeping drive of grey gravel that snaked from powered security gates to the front of the main building. Main building since several smaller ones also sat within the grounds – a lodge at the main gate, a stable block, and a row of single storey cottages. The original Laird of the manor's pastimes would probably have been hunting, shooting and fishing. Describing the pastimes of the current Laird in similar terms would not be too far off the mark.

Getting out of the car, Jamie nodded to Rab to show his appreciation. The chauffeur received this with his usual indifference, and in no way reciprocated. Once free of the jazz capsule, the headphones came off and were neatly wound around the body of the machine, before both of them returned to their resting place inside his jacket. Meanwhile, Rab drove to the Lodge near the gates and let himself in with a key. Chances were this was the hub of the home security system, and would include cameras and the alarm panel. Rab was likely to be one of several who took it in turns to guard O'Neill and his property from

anyone brave enough, or stupid enough to feel like having a go at either of them. Davie remained relaxed and focused; this would be unlikely to pose him any problems.

The bell chimed far inside the house and after a few moments, O'Neill appeared.

‘Alright son? Come away in.’

The hallway was as grand and opulent as the exterior suggested it might be. The stuffed head of an eleven-pointer stag hung on the wall, a large, loudly ticking grandfather clock stood about halfway down the corridor, off which doors led to various downstairs rooms. The staircase to the upper floors was wide and carpeted with a thoroughly appropriate, but thoroughly awful red tartan. Large, gilded, chunky-framed portraits and landscapes were dotted along the length of all the walls in view. It was the quintessential Scottish manor house. Jamie took the chance to scan quickly, but studiously, around the space and noticed a single CCTV camera keeping watch on this lobby area. There would be more, and it was important to be sure he accounted for all of them.

‘Cheers.’

‘Hang your jacket on the hook there, and take off your shoes, I don’t want dirt dragged all over my good carpets.’

The coat stand already held several very expensive garments that made Jamie’s once bank-breaking leather number look decidedly low rent. He kicked off his shoes and thanked fuck he put on a decent hole-free pair of socks. Then he laughed at himself, thinking how proud his mother would be that it bothered him, and how utterly irrelevant it would have been if he was in desperate need of darning.

‘Come on through to the dinin room. I’ve had Sammy rustle up a bit of dinner for us. Are you hungry?’

‘Aye, I could eat a scabby wean!’

‘Well, luckily, you’ll not need to coz Sammy hasn’t been out kidnappin and cookin kids with skin complaints. We’re havin Italian. That should suit you fine, eh?’

'Smashin!'

'Aye, might even let you have a beer if you play your cards right!'

The chortle that accompanied this in-joke was just the sort of thing Jamie wanted to hear, and he reciprocated.

'Very good Danny!'

The dining room was similarly ornate to the hallway. Oak panelled walls with the obligatory paintings that surely had no personal relevance to the home-owner, a huge chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and a plush carpet with pile so deep it almost provoked fears of an ambush by a large carnivore. It looked as if several hectares of rainforest contributed to the production of the ridiculously solid, lacquered table and the eight chairs around it. Set for two sitting at right angles to the far end, there was a whole ironmonger's shop worth of cutlery and other utensils, and at least three glasses each by the looks of things. Two bottles of red wine were already breathing, and a bottle of white was in an ice bucket. A basket of bread and a decanter of olive oil rounded off the ensemble. Approaching this bewildering array, O'Neill sat at the head of the table, and beckoned to Jamie to take the other setting. Glancing around the room, it was not obvious if there was a camera. However, to his great delight and relief, with a more careful examination, it seemed as if there really were none. A mini-cam was a possibility mind you, so caution would still likely be wise.

'This is a beautiful house. Have you been here a while?'

'Aye, thanks, I've had it about four years. I've left it with most of the original features and added the antiques and other stuff as I went. It's startin to feel like home now.'

O'Neill took a small silver bell and rang it almost daintily. Quick as a flash, Sammy appeared with two plates of insalate caprese. He placed them in front of master and guest then stepped back. O'Neill looked admiringly down

at his plate, and then turned to address the chef.

'Nice one Sammy. Now, off you go. I'll manage to serve up the rest of the courses. It's all ready to go after a wee bit of heatin and platin up right?'

Sammy nodded.

'Aye, that's right Danny. The pasta is boilin now, so don't let it overcook - drain and serve in about fifteen minutes, but apart from that, it's just a case of retrievin it from the kitchen.'

'Good lad. See yourself out and get Rab to give you a run home.'

As Sammy left, it was hard not to be even more pleased than ever. Rab would be off the reservation for a reasonable amount of time and so worries about cameras receded to the point of irrelevance. Not only that, but there would be no need to manufacture a reason for Danny to leave the room. His host proffered a bottle of the red, and filled both their glasses generously. Under the table Jamie patted his pocket, and started to eat the tomatoes, basil and mozzarella cheese drizzled with olive oil. No meal ever tasted so good.

'So, how's things been goin?' asked O'Neill.

'Aye, not bad. You've been keepin me plenty busy!'

As they ate, it was becoming more and more obvious that Jamie's suspicions about Danny were correct. His eyes were never off him. It was hard for eyes that colour to be anything other than intense, but they were. They were wistful and covetous.

'It's been a busy period right enough. You've done well though. A man in my position needs guys he can trust. Rely on when the chips are down. You've been solid as a rock so far, and I've been thinkin about movin you on to bigger and better things.'

The starter was deliberately light and quick to consume. This allowed Danny to go and deal with the pasta in good time. When he rose to go to the kitchen, Jamie was ready.

GHB or gamma hydroxy butyrate is colourless, odourless, tasteless, and dissolves very easily. As soon as Danny left the room, Jamie emptied the small packet of powder into his drink. Getting hold of it was relatively easy thanks to the circles he was moving in now. The fact that body builders used it as an anabolic to reduce body fat meant it was freely available at the gym where he boxed once a week. It would take approximately fifteen minutes to take effect, and he just needed to pray that it did exactly what the seller had promised it would. If not, then busking it did not look particularly appealing. Jamie picked up his wine glass and emptied it into a plant pot. Sobriety would be important.

Danny returned with two plates of spaghetti vongole, and as he put the plate down in front of Jamie there was a very deliberate brush against him...chest to shoulder and hand to hand. The blokey thing to do, the boss man thing to do, would have been to sit down and plonk it over unceremoniously. This was a clear signal. A move.

On sitting, Danny took a generous drink from his wine, and topped it up, automatically filling Jamie's glass as well. Frowning and licking his lips, he stared at the glass, and took another hefty mouthful, followed by another topping up. Both men commenced their main course.

'You'll no doubt be wonderin about this proposal will you?' said Danny after a few mouthfuls of pasta.

'Well, aye, it has been on my mind.'

'Thing is Davie, it's awfully lonely at the top. You spend a lot of time in the company of morons and sycophants. Trust is a rare commodity, and it's not easy to relax.'

'I can imagine it's pretty difficult right enough.'

There was a period of silence as they chewed at food and thoughts alike.

'I don't know if you heard, but some bastard crippled Sean - my nephew that helped to move your stuff. Cowardly fuck shoved him over some railings, broke his

back and put him in a wheelchair. It set me back a bit I can tell you. That's how I've not been in touch so much in the past few weeks.'

'Really? That's fuckin' terrible. He seemed like a good lad. Have you any idea who did it?'

O'Neill seemed to hold his breath momentarily.

'Well, I can tell you this much, they better hope that I never find out who they are...coz if I do...they are gonna write a whole new unpleasant chapter in the book written by folk who feel regret for doin somethin they shouldn't have.'

He sighed heavily and took a drink.

'Anyway, I don't want to get into that tonight. This is about you and me.'

His eyes locked onto Jamie now. His gaze was turning from wistful to lustful. This may have been partly due to the drug starting to work, but there was no doubt, there were powerful urges that had been suppressed and controlled until now. Another swig passed his lips. Dutch courage that would have been endearing if it wasn't one of the most remorseless and unpleasant men in Glasgow requiring it.

'Playin the hard man twenty four hours a day is bad for the soul. I need to have a companion. Someone to share this big house. Someone to chew the fat with of an evening. Someone to have dinner with regularly.'

After several more mouthfuls of food and wine, he took a long pause - elbows on the table and fingertips together in front of him. Danny reached over and placed his hand on top of Jamie's.

'How do you fancy bein my companion, my right hand man?'

The rumours were true, his judgement and interpretation of their interaction was accurate, and the plan was going to work. Danny O'Neill was in the closet, but he just opened the doors and stepped out to try and seduce Jamie. It would be a few minutes until the drug

started to work fully, but playing along was the key, so Jamie left his hand where it was. It was very hard not to feel triumphant at this moment, but it was vital to maintain the charade until he was sure it was safe to act.

'Eh, I'm not sure what you mean. Are you offerin me a promotion?'

The drug was working. Danny's speech became decidedly slurred, and his eyes dimmed slightly. He actually stroked Jamie's hair and replaced his hand afterwards.

'No son. I know you've been lookin at me. I've been keepin my eye on you too. I want you to... Fuck's sake, I'm feelin a bit dodgy. Are you alright?'

Shaking his head, he took another fateful swallow of tainted grape juice.

'Never been better you baldy bastard!' replied Jamie.

Jamie's sudden reference to his follicularly-challenged bonce, and the strong inference that his birth had been out of wedlock, genuinely shocked and confused Danny.

'Eh? Did you just call me a baldy bastard?'

It might have been pushing his luck, but it was important to enjoy this moment, to control and insult this parasite.

'You a bit slow on the uptake tonight Danny? Aye, I called you a baldy bastard, coz that's what you are!'

At this point, it became clear Danny was no longer in full control of his faculties. He tried to take a swipe at Jamie's face, missed, and more or less slouched back into his chair, mumbling to himself. Jamie got up and walked briskly to the hall to retrieve his camera and mini tripod from his jacket pockets. Returning to the dining room, he set the camera up on the table and started to re-arrange the furniture. Danny sat semi-comatose on the chair, barely able to register what had happened or what was happening.

Jamie had been planning to get his own back on Danny O'Neill from the age of sixteen. The year his mother died. O'Neill supplied the drugs that were the cause of his

mother's untimely demise. It was irrefutable, because he had actually been witness to deals where O'Neill stood in the background as one of his minions took her money and handed over the brown powder. When it became clear his mother was a lot more out of control than just drinking heavily, Jamie took to tailing her to see what was going on. She usually carried out purchases during school time, so this was one of the contributing factors in his lack of success when exam time came round. Pleading with her failed, and coaxing her failed. The one time he tried to confront her in the midst of transacting, he found himself roughly dragged away by one of Danny's burly henchman, and told to fuck off back to school where he belonged. Danny laughed heartily at this. Laughed at his mother killing herself in front of a fifteen-year-old boy; laughed at his pain and desperation; laughed as Jamie's life slowly shredded before his eyes in order that he might make a few lousy pounds profit. Well, there would be no more laughing at Jamie 'Davie' Argyle after completing what he set out to do eight long years ago.

After nearly an hour of taking photos, Jamie was ready to leave. Danny lay half-naked on the floor, sleeping soundly under the influence of red wine and GHB.

Jamie helped himself to a substantial sum of money in Danny's trousers, put on his jacket, pocketed the camera and tripod, and jogged down the drive just as Rab arrived back through the gate.

The best option for dealing with the Jazz master would be brazeness. Pulling open the car door and popping on the headphones, Jamie sat down.

'He told me to get to fuck because he's got a lot on tomorrow. Give me a lift home will you? Good man.'

Rab scowled, got out, popped inside the Lodge for a few seconds, then returned and swung the car around on the driveway, closing the gates behind him as they roared back to Jamie's flat. Across the road, from behind the

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hedge, a hooded figure wheeled his scooter out onto the road, switched on the engine, and buzzed after them like a jar of angry wasps.

As the car came to a halt in his street, Jamie got out and took his chance to bid the Jazz master a final, fond farewell.

'Cheers big man. Fuck you very much!'

Above the din of the widdling, tuneless shite that somehow assumed the name of music, he could hear Rab shout.

'What? What the fuck did you just say?'

Jamie did not stay to discuss it any further, waved cheerily and shut the door. Rab roared off leaving a cloud of jazz in his wake.

17. The Way Downhill

Jenny Argyle was utterly exhausted. The funeral of her husband had involved meeting and consoling a plethora of relatives she never knew he had. Handshakes, hugs and pecked kisses, exchanged numbly with all manner of well-wishers - from Army bigwigs to neighbours. The death of any soldier in active service makes headlines, but they all regarded Davie as a hero; one of those selfless, unsung, behind-the-scenes heroes who made battle zones safe for soldiers and civilians alike. Some turned up merely to make themselves look good and worthy. Some came out of genuine grief, and yet others were drawn by morbid curiosity and should not have bothered. The way he died added to the pathos of the event. Blowing himself up was tragic and tragically comic.

They met at school, and almost instantly found themselves smitten with each other. Davie was popular, sporty and full of himself; handsome and rebellious, without being a complete arsehole with it. Jenny was the girl all the boys wished they could be with, extremely pretty, fun to be around, and interested in sport - even football.

The army was the only career Davie ever considered and he joined straight out of school. They were married at eighteen and at nineteen, their son Jamie was born. The life of an army wife was hard on Jenny. She was often terribly lonely; there were times when they moved house

almost annually, ensuring making friends and keeping them was very difficult; a career of her own was out of the question, so she was bored; and Davie became distant and unnaturally attached to his comrades. Gradually, all the love and devotion of their early years together ebbed away, but they had a child and a traditional outlook on marriage. Secretly, Jenny always held out hope they would rekindle their spark one day. They stayed together and endured, and did their best.

She finally managed to soothe Jamie to sleep. His father had not been around a lot over the years, but a boy needs a man in his life, however sporadically. Jenny was desperately worried about her son. To lose a father so young in life might leave him traumatised for years, and who knew what psychological scars might persist. She was also desperately worried about how she might cope with starting a new life on her own. There was the small matter of a job, and she had no idea what she might be capable of doing in terms of work; she may have been lonely before but Davie was still there sometimes. Jamie would be clinging and needing her help.

With the house empty at last, she went downstairs and poured herself a vodka and lemonade. A decidedly voluminous vodka with what, if one was being generous, might have passed for a dash of lemonade. Barely seconds after sitting on the couch, there came a faint but definite knock on the door. This was strange. It was ten o'clock at night, and the night of her husbands' funeral at that. Who could possibly be calling at this hour?

The woman in front of her was petite and mousey, with sharp but pleasant enough features.

'Is this Davie Argyle's house?' was her rather blunt opening remark.

Jenny looked her up and down. Not particularly well dressed and certainly not well off. However, there was a nagging familiarity about her.

'Aye, can I help you with somethin? Only, you might

not be aware but we buried Davie this mornin and I could really do with some time to myself and to get to bed.'

The woman stubbed out her cigarette on the front step and looked directly at Jenny.

'I really need to talk to you about somethin and I'm afraid it can't wait. Can I come in?'

This was beyond rude and insensitive, and more than a little perturbing. As the woman made to step into the house, Jenny put out an arm to stop her.

'Just a minute you! You come to my house at ten o'clock at night without so much as a hello or any introduction, then you have the cheek to stub your ciggie out on my step, and to top it all off you try and force your way in. There's no polite way to say this, so I'll make it crystal clear. Fuck off and leave me alone!'

Jenny pushed the woman away and closed the door, instantly bursting into tears as she did so.

The knock came again, and the tears transformed into anger. Opening the door, fully prepared to have it out with this Harpy, it caught her completely by surprise when the little woman barged past her into the hallway and continued into the lounge without stopping.

'What the fuck?!" was the best she could come up with at such short notice.

The woman was standing fidgeting in front of the fireplace and looked straight at Jenny as she stalked into the room fully intending to eject her.

'Look, I'm sorry. I didn't want you to find out like this, but I have to tell you somethin. Somethin he should have told you about a long time ago. I can't manage on my own, and I need to know he's gonna take care of him.'

Jenny had gone from perplexed, to incandescent, but was now just baffled. What was this woman wittering on about? Who was looking after whom?

'You've got some fuckin nerve lady. Burstin in here and talkin in fuckin riddles. I'm gonna give you one last chance to get the fuck out of my house and out of my sight...'

'Davie's his dad.'

This did not help. Why was she stating the patently, bleedin' obvious? Of course Davie was Jamie's dad.

'I know he's Jamie's dad you mad little slag now do one before I...'

'Naw, he's my boy's dad, he's Zander's dad!'

The irony of Davie of all people dropping a bombshell like this, on the day he went to ground, permanently, was a little insignificant compared to the revelation itself. Jenny couldn't speak, her vision became impaired, her ears were full of a shrieking whistle, but this was no impromptu impersonation of the three wise monkeys.

She awoke a few minutes later sitting in an armchair with Betty McCormack standing in front of her holding a glass of water.

'Here take a drink. You fainted.'

Jenny lashed out and swatted the glass sideways into the hearth where it shattered. Leaping forward, she grabbed Betty by the throat, knocked her to the floor, and proceeded to rain punches down on that stupid, mousey face. Betty wriggled and pleaded for the beating to stop, and eventually the red mist cleared. Sobbing with anger, grief and shock, Jenny rolled off her miniature punch bag, and sat dumbstruck on the living room carpet, hugging her knees and gently rocking back and forth.

'I didn't mean for any of this to happen, I'm sorry, and I'm sorry Davie's dead, but I've got a son to think about just like you have,' rattled Betty breathlessly, scrabbling backwards and pulling herself up to her feet again.

Betty could have been speaking Chinese for all the sense it made to Jenny right then. The enormity of this news and what it meant on this day of all days was too great to bear, and she just sat rocking and weeping. After several attempts at raising a response, Betty gave up and left.

Over the course of the next few months, Betty tried to contact Jenny but found herself rebuffed at every turn.

Eventually, she had to concede defeat and find some other person who could help her raise her little bastard child. With no money for lawyers, and no wherewithal to get one anyway, she faded away into a life of drudgery and domestic abuse.

Jenny's spirit was compacted. Fifteen years of acceding to the needs and ambitions of Davie Argyle had robbed her of any self worth. She gave up everything for him. Youth, work, looks, figure, friends, and family...everything. And now it turned out that for the past seven years, he had been living a double life. How could he have betrayed her with such an ordinary, nothing of a woman like Betty McCormack? There could only be one reason.

After the cancer scare and resultant operation, they argued and fought about IVF, adoption, and foster care. Davie was obsessed about having more kids, but they could not afford IVF, and the council rejected their application to be foster carers on various grounds, including their transient army lifestyle. This may have been Davie's problem, but he made sure it became Jenny's.

It turned out that in the last few years of their marriage Davie attempted to spread his seed far and wide beyond the walls of his own home. Some friends, who felt unable to betray him while alive, and hesitated before sullying his reputation once dead, were unburdened by the discovery of the McCormack child. Betty McCormack received her usual slice from the great cake of luck in being the only one that actually succumbed to this propagation and produced an offspring. Well, the only one Jenny could prove anyway.

The feelings of inadequacy over what not being able to provide him with a second child led him to do, and the despair at apparently wasting the best years of her life, stood in front of her like a brick wall - an actual physical object that could not be scaled, dug under or gotten around. The first drinks helped push the wall back into the

distance, but it did not stay distant for long, and she soon needed help keeping it more than an inch from her face. Cannabis and then heroin were her obliging stonemasons.

After a while, the wall started speaking. It said that there was no point in carrying on. There was nothing to carry on for. The chance to do something in life had been and gone, and there was nothing else coming along to make things right. Jamie would be better off without such an albatross around his neck, and there was no way he could know about any of it. It would do no good for any of them. The wall was persuasive and it did its job well.

One day, not long after Jamie's sixteenth birthday, the wall said it was time to go and toppled onto her.

18. The Argyle Way And The Highway

Emma Collins had a good life in most respects. A career as a nurse brought her to Stirling Royal Infirmary and a flat in Alloa - a small town some ten miles away from work. Friends were plentiful, the social calendar was almost always full, there were no real money troubles, her family all had good health, and she owned a cute, toy poodle called Fluffy. The only down side was her love life, which was sporadic and disappointing. Boyfriends tended to be bad boys; dangerous, fun, sexy and exciting, but ultimately egotists, unfaithful, and unreliable. Every time she went out she seemed doomed to be drawn to the most unreliable, handsome, arsehole in the place; like he was a Death Star drawing her in against her will and taking her over to his dark side. It was not as exciting as it used to be, and in truth, she craved someone she could trust and rely on.

Some four years previous, while travelling, Jamie Argyle met her in Australia. The bar in Sydney was a raucous, sports-themed, back packer's hangout. Jamie stood out the night they met by being much better dressed and presented than the rest of the rather dishevelled and grubby students on gap years, or the rather uncouth and loutish locals. He was handsome too, and when he sidled up to her and started to chat her up, it turned out he was charming, generous and funny. They spent ten days together in Sydney before travelling to Hong Kong first

class (paid for by Jamie) and living it up for a further two weeks. Emma fell for him head over heels. The sex was incredibly passionate, they laughed all the time, they liked the same movies, they both supported Glasgow Rangers, and they knew how to enjoy life.

His mum and dad were dead, and he needed someone to look after him, to re-assure him all was well in the world and she thought she was the one to do it. Except, it turned out, he did not think she was. When they got home to Scotland his money ran out, and his mood blackened. They could not find the switch that would turn on the electricity they felt in foreign climes, and Jamie gradually cooled on the whole girlfriend/boyfriend idea. After a couple of months, they agreed to part and keep in touch as friends. Emma never actually agreed to this, but merely felt incapable of convincing him of the terrible mistake he was making. She had fallen hard for him then, and in the intervening period, the candle just refused to burn out. Texts between them were infrequent, but every single exchange made her heart race, and as irrational as it may have been, she could not help hoping that he would have a road to Damascus moment and come back to her.

The latest text was like a jolt from a defibrillator, but the phone call was like an adrenalin needle straight into her heart. She was naturally suspicious of his sudden request to come and visit her, but at the same time, she could barely conceal her excitement at the prospect. He had been warm and friendly, and they talked for around an hour about nothing much in particular that she could recall. He seemed a bit tense, and he admitted to problems at work and an imminent eviction. The least she could do was help him out and take the chance that the candle might flicker a tad higher.

Maybe, just maybe, he had travelled a road in the Middle East.

As soon as Rab ejected him from the jazz mobile, Jamie

raced upstairs to his already packed bags, and returned to the street in time for Tommy to turn up with his van. In the preceding week, all his important, but non-essential possessions wended their way to Tommy's garage and house. He completed this task as discretely as possible, taking particular care to avoid the gaze or attention of the resident dragon. Certain important tools for living a double life remained with him, as he was unsure of who he might need to be and when either one of him might need to vanish.

Before leaving the flat for the last time, he took a moment to vandalise and damage a few items - the more inconvenience and expense he put that murdering piece of shit to, the better. He drove a deep score with a knife all across every wooden floor, pulled the door off the washing machine and smashed the dial, broke plates and various other crockery, slashed open the sofa and snapped two legs off the dining table. It all felt very cathartic. Living in that place, on the payroll and at the disposal of that man, had been the second hardest thing Jamie ever had to do, after burying his mother. Over the past few weeks, he found himself thinking about Emma. Not just because of the need for a safe house to lie low in for a while, but also because he was genuinely taking stock. All the things that had gone on through the last few months were mad, exciting, thrilling, and extraordinary, but there is only so much peril and revenge a person can give and take before they begin to crave normality and safety. Their time together in Australia and Hong Kong had been magical, and his subsequent rejection of her nagged at him from time to time over the years since. Texting her to ask for help was a long shot, and he had a plan B in place - just in case she decided it was a bad idea. For all he knew, there could be someone else on the scene, who would be less than enamoured to have her holiday romance roll up and stay for a while. The phone call was a bit awkward. She was definitely excited and enthusiastic about him visiting,

but he felt like a fraud. He really needed somewhere safe, away from anyone who knew him as Davie, away from his connections with drugs and most especially, out of the immediate and easy reach of Danny O'Neill. The desire to see Emma again was genuine enough, but there were no amorous intentions and it was definitely a practical solution rather than a romantic one. He came off the phone with the distinct impression that she was hoping far more for the latter than the former. There was another much more important reason to keep things cool - he may well be putting her in danger, and at any moment he might have to flee, leaving her far behind.

Tommy was a bit of a rough diamond, with questionable taste in women, but when the chips were down, and Jamie really needed him, the top-notch tub-thumper came up trumps. The drive to Alloa was unhurried. Unlike his recent experiences of chauffeuring, the music was (expectedly) to his taste, and Tommy (entirely unexpectedly) turned out to be an exemplary driver. Once in Alloa itself, Jamie deliberately asked Tommy to drop him off at the Town Hall. It was important Tommy's complicity was only partial - for his sake, for Emma's sake and for Jamie's. They said their farewells (extended middle fingers, and a mouthed 'fuck you') and he waited for Emma to come and collect him as arranged.

Alloa was a good place to hide. Not small enough for him to be instantly noticed by the locals, far enough from Glasgow without being cut off from all semblance of civilisation, and at the same time, unlikely to be near the top of any list of potential places to look that O'Neill might compile. On top of that, he was Jamie again – that was how Emma had always known him. She would not accidentally reveal his nom de plume to any people they met, and it precluded any encounter between Emma and Tommy. It may not help much, but Jamie would be straight down to the barber's the next morning to have his

hair cropped very short. Any small advantage or chance to buy some time might prove very useful.

Emma arrived ten minutes early. She was much more beautiful than he remembered her. She had long, naturally curly dark hair, hazel eyes and her skin glowed with a natural gold no tanning salon could have induced. The car was a red Citroen Saxo, and when she pulled into the car park and stopped just in front of him, it seemed as if she might have bought it to match her lipstick. Her smile was dazzling and in an instant, he was back in the bar in Sydney, only this time he was sober, and on a comparatively even keel. She practically tore off her seatbelt, flung the door open as wide as it could go, threw herself into his arms, and before he could react, kissed him fully and passionately.

The kiss lasted for minutes. When she finally let him up for air, she sighed and rested her cheek on his shoulder.

'Oh Jamie, I knew you'd come back to me.'

His thoughts of playing it cool had not really panned out as he intended. They got into the car and drove to her flat. As soon as they were inside, they undressed each other without any consideration for buttons or the finer points of their garments' tailoring, tumbled onto her bed and made love several times before drifting into sleep; sweaty, breathless, and spent.

Jamie was quite possibly on the way to falling in love with Emma, and Emma was clearly in love with him. This was brilliant and terrible. It complicated things and he started to have serious doubts about following through with the final stage of the plan. The thing was though, if he let O'Neill off the hook, he was as good as signing his own death certificate, and probably those of quite a few people around him. Whatever his feelings of guilt at getting her involved in this, it was just too late to back out.

19. The Way Ahead

Danny O'Neill's headache was monumental. He was not normally prone to such maladies and certainly had no history of migraine or the like, but the bloody thing lasted all weekend. The worst of it was he couldn't really think why. Waking in the early hours of Saturday morning, he found himself lying half dressed on the floor of his dining room. The remnants of a meal for two were strewn about it, and his furniture had been shifted around. He was stumped. His memory was not helping him out in any way. There were vague recollections of inviting someone to dinner, but from the look of the alcohol consumption and the half-eaten food, it had not run its course. The half-dressed thing was distinctly odd, and suggested some kind of liaison, but if that was so, he remembered nothing of it at all. Exhaustion overcame him and he spent most of the next two days in bed, ignoring phone calls and refusing to answer his door. Rab was able to see him on a couple of cameras as he went to and from the toilet, or into the kitchen for a drink. A text message enquiring as to his health was met with the prerequisite disdain, so his apparent desire to remain incommunicado did not really raise any suspicions in his team.

It was Monday morning, and he was waiting for the kettle to boil when Rab knocked on the front door.

'Aye Rab, come away in,' he shouted.

The driver came through to the kitchen clutching the mail, and newspapers, which he did most mornings.

'Rab, was there somebody over here on Friday night?'

The Jazz master frowned and looked at him as if he felt it might be a trick question or perhaps the prelude to some kind of bollocking. There had been some remark thrown in his direction when he dropped Davie off, and he thought maybe it had something to do with that. His boss often took a shine to temporary favourites whom it was as well not to get on the wrong side of. 'Aye, it was that Davie, how, is there a problem like?'

O'Neill's mind raced. He did remember inviting the boy over, and he was beginning to remember why, but he could form no tangible memories at all of the actual night itself.

'Naw, naw, it's just my head's burstin and it must be affectin my memory. I think I might have one of them migraine things. When did he leave?'

Rab relaxed slightly at this, and hoped he had avoided any kind of verbal lashing.

'About half nine. I'd just got back from runnin Sammy back. Came out, said you'd told him to leave, and asked for a lift home.'

This was not sparking anything at all, and O'Neill was still none the wiser as to what had gone on. One thing was clear though. Something was not right about this.

'Ok, give us the mail and then go and ask Jimmy to get the Merc ready will you? I'll be ready in about half an hour.'

'No bother boss.'

His faithful servant nodded and left to do his bidding.

The mail was the usual collection of junk and bills, but there was one much less formal looking envelope. He turned it over a couple of times, then ran his finger along the seal and carefully opened it.

The letter, written and printed from a computer, was

IN MANY WAYS

accompanied by a photo. A very perturbing photo indeed.

O'Neill you parasitic scum,

No doubt you are reading this while wondering what happened on Friday. Well let me put you out of your misery. I fucked you. I fucked you good and hard, and everybody is going to know about it unless you do what I want.

This photo is the tip of the iceberg. You see, the internet and photoshop are incredibly useful and clever. You can make anything appear how you want it to.

I want you to suffer. I want you to suffer like my mother suffered, and like I suffered. I want you to know what it is like to lose everything you care about, to be humiliated and broken, and to feel like nothing is worth living for.

I want you to meet me at a place of my choosing. I'll send you a text to the number you used to text me from. You won't know when it will be, and when it does arrive you will come and meet me alone.

If you bring any of your morons with you, or if anything happens to me, I have made arrangements with a solicitor for sending the photos to the press and the police, and a good friend of mine will post them on an internet site I have already created called oneillismybitch.com. Go on line and check if you want to. After which, he will start a viral email campaign to alert users to its existence.

I want two hundred grand. I know you've got it to hand, so don't use any sob stories about needing time to raise it.

Do not fuck with me or you will regret it.

He dropped the items onto the counter and sat down heavily on a stool.

Attempting to hide and deny his sexuality had been a long struggle. He knew there were rumours out there, but no one dared even think about them in his presence. All his previous indiscretions that looked like they might lead to his exposure had been dealt with very firmly - before any damage occurred. This was different though. This boy was organised, clever, and clearly planned the whole thing. Something O'Neill did in his past was now coming back to haunt him, and he could hardly feel that was unjust. This boy appeared driven by that something and for that reason alone he should not be underestimated.

The important thing was to remain calm and think things through. It would have helped to quell the jackhammer in his head, but that was a luxury not even cocodamol had been able to afford him. He carefully placed the letter and photo back in the envelope, and sat and stared at it. The frank indicated posting from a Motherwell postcode. That might be relevant or it might be a red herring. He knew there was no chance Davie was still at the flat, but from what he could remember, he was an orphan with no family, so there was no obvious bolt hole. He would need to ask a couple of his team to start asking about and digging for information on Davie, but not too overtly. It was obvious from all this boy had already managed to achieve that he would be a formidable opponent and it was vital not to let him keep the upper hand.

He took the letter out and read it again. The boy demonstrated admirable ingenuity, and a surprising degree of tenacity. But he was a rank amateur operating in the realm of the ultra-professional, and therefore, he must have made a mistake somewhere. Wherever the error occurred, or whatever his oversight may have been, Danny O'Neill was going to make damn sure he found it.

His primary task was to get into the security system and check what the tapes showed. The cameras linked up to a hard disk recorder, and assuming there were no incidents,

the security team routinely cleaned down each Monday morning before starting again. Of course, he made sure the camera in the dining room was off during the Argyle boy's visit in order to conceal his attempted seduction from his staff. This should mean that the disk would be clean and he would have nothing to retrieve, but at the same time, he wanted to be sure. His head was befuddled with thoughts of the potential humiliation his lecherous intentions could cause; captured for posterity on film. There was also the small matter of his bodyguard's patent failure to guard his body. An overt expression of this particular disappointment would have to wait for a subtler moment. There was dirty work afoot, and he would need all violent and loyal hands on deck for now. It was irrelevant that the bodyguard did nothing wrong, and that his own duplicities caused Rab's absence at the vital moment. The only thing that mattered was maintaining control, and fear of a total lack of reasonableness was a powerful tool in achieving that.

Lifting his mobile phone from the kitchen counter where he apparently left it earlier, he listened to his three voice messages. There was one from an irate property agent telling him of the Argyle boy's exploits in his flat. The second was a strange and garbled one from his cousin Conor, but he must have been in an area with a poor signal because he could make no sense of it at all. The other was from the manager of the Patriotic Scot, asking him if he was likely to be stopping by in the next few days as he had a few bills for him to sign. All of them could wait.

He picked up the envelope and walked upstairs to get dressed, and as he did so, made a few calls to start the process of locating the soon to be deceased Davie Argyle.

20. The Way To Worship

Conor O'Neill was the black sheep of a quite startlingly unorthodox family. In fact, a family that were willing to tolerate a violent, sadistic, drug running sociopath in their midst, so it said a lot about his personality and behaviour that they generally shunned him.

The only member of the family that took any regular notice of him was that very same violent, sadistic, drug running, sociopath - cousin Danny. The reason Danny was not so worried by his personality and behaviour was that he could put it to very good use whenever a particularly heinous deed was in order. Things such as mutilating teenagers and disposing of druggie drivers.

Conor thought Danny was a God among men. He had never seen such beautiful dedication to brutality and exerting one's will over others on the scale that Danny O'Neill was capable of. He revelled in being one of his enforcers, and recently had reason to feel he made Danny a very happy man indeed. Not only did he use his contacts within the police force to discover the treachery of the McCormack kid, but he also turned Danny's twisted imaginings into reality by constructing the instrument of torture used to extract both confession and tongue. As if this were not enough, he went on to add to his gold star collection by hiring the hit man that so proficiently despatched the potentially troublesome cop. Oh yes, the last few weeks had been a golden time in the service of his

deity.

Unfortunately, some self-centred arse wipe had gone and ruined it all by crippling young Sean, and in so doing, sent Danny into the blackest of moods. A mood so foul, and so profound it made all his achievements and sycophancy seem immaterial. It was a measure of his maladjusted personality that this bothered him considerably more than the fact that Sean needed to wheel himself around now.

Tonight Conor was on a mission to restore some of his kudos and standing. He would offer up a sacrifice, a demonstration of his servitude and allegiance, an act of worship that would help to blow away the dark cloud engulfing his idol.

Jimmy 'The Hands' Campbell had been very remiss in his duties regarding the protection of Sean. So remiss in fact, that Danny asked Conor to deal with it personally. This he would do willingly, but also, with great relish. Campbell was getting too big for his gloves anyway, and took enormous pleasure in goading Conor; constantly claiming a higher place in the henchman pecking order, by dint of his being Sean's bodyguard. Well, he would not be taking the piss any more. Although it may have been more accurate to say that he would not be taking the piss ever again.

As he sat in his car in the pub car park, Conor checked over his various weapons. Campbell might well have been a cheeky bastard, but he was also a very tasty fighter, and although Conor feared no one, he was not arrogant enough to dismiss his adversary out of hand.

Jimmy Campbell had been on tenterhooks ever since the attack on Sean. He tried to apologise to Danny and swore deadly revenge on whoever carried out the attack, but Danny was incandescent. Jimmy needed to beat a rapid retreat before he could summon any of his soldiers to manifest his fury physically. He tried to lay low, but where

could he go? He had no proper job. If he was not receiving pay from O'Neill, he was not receiving pay. He really had nowhere else to go either. He was a Glasgow boy, all his family lived in Glasgow, and he never really made any friends he could go and stay with outside the city limits; and certainly none that he could place in mortal danger at short notice. In any case, running away would be pointless because Danny would find him, and the reality was that he actually did nothing wrong. What was hacking him off immensely was the fact that he actually saved the lad from a glassing that night. They both knew very well that this was not the first time Sean had given him the slip, and in fact, the boy seemed hell bent on escaping his minders at every opportunity. He just needed to let the storm of rage pass over and eventually, once Danny calmed down and thought about it, he would forgive and forget and he could go back to his normal routines.

The problem was that avoiding Danny O'Neill and his crew was not that easy. Glasgow may well have been a city of nearly a million souls, but it could seem very small when you needed to hide away from its most omnipotent of criminal sons. After a week of skulking and paranoia, Jimmy decided to go to the local boozer for a pint with some of his pals. If any trouble came his way, they would back him up, or more likely, run away at the first sniff of O'Neill being involved. He would just be careful. He knew very well who would get the job of taking him out: vigilance and humility would be his best defence.

Conor was getting bored - seriously bored. He tried listening to the radio, but it was one of those fucking stupid phone-in programmes. The ones where the ill-educated, self important and under-employed went on air to make a complete tit of themselves; ranting incoherently about issues and situations they could not influence in the slightest. Which celebrity has made the biggest arse of themselves, what were we to do about yob culture, should

gays marry, etc, etc, etc. Pointless and exasperating in the extreme, and not one sensible voice amongst them. The only alternative was crap music or the news repeated every fifteen minutes until you were so familiar with the script you could recite it on the announcer's behalf. Campbell was taking longer than Conor's patience allowed him to tolerate, and he had a nagging suspicion that he might have rumbled the trap.

He decided to go into the pub for a quick look and a piss.

The pub was busy but not bouncing, and after a quick scan and a visit to the facilities, it turned out his hunch was right. He leaned over the bar and gained the attention of the barman.

'Was The Hands in tonight?'

'Aye, he had a couple of jars, but he must have left coz I haven't seen him for about twenty minutes. Have you tried the bogs?'

Conor was not best pleased.

'Fuck!'

He stepped back out into the night. The air was frigid and still, and a full moon was glowing like an out-sized light bulb hanging magnificently in the sky. With moth-like fascination, he stared at it, transfixed by its awesome luminescence, until the brightness imprinted an image on his retina, leaving an irksome dark blob floating around in front of him, impairing his vision. Very fucking clever he thought to himself. On a mission for God and you end up blinding yourself looking at the moon!

Liberating his mobile from his trouser pocket, he rang Danny's number. It was best to be honest and let him know that Campbell might not be paying tonight, but he would pay. The sweet pleasure of that moment would come soon enough.

As he listened to the phone ring and made his way back to the car, he saw the boy standing about ten feet further back. He blinked trying to clear the blob and get a better

look. He wore a dark hooded top, but there was a familiarity. As he drew closer to the vehicle, he could see all four tyres on the car were flat.

'I don't fuckin believe it!'

Through the distraction of the blob he was sure the cheeky little fucker was...smiling!

'Hiy! Did you do that you wee bastard? And you're standin there as bold as fuckin brass too. You'll not be fuckin smilin in a minute pal, I can tell you!'

Conor picked up his stride, but the boy neither flinched nor replied. The familiarity was starting to register; he worked for Danny or something like that. He was at the brink of a jog and almost on top of the boy when he saw the chef's knife and it dawned on him who he was charging toward. It was too late to halt his momentum and despite trying to dodge the blade, he failed. The boy stepped forward and drove it into his abdomen with great force.

The blow knocked all the wind out of him, and as the metal tore through his stomach muscles and internal organs, he wanted to wrestle the McCormack lad to the ground. The problem was that, whether by chance or by design, the blow was deadly accurate and even as he was contemplating his resistance, the blade cleaved his heart and he collapsed to the ground dying.

The answer machine beeped and he tried to tell Danny what had happened and who did it, but he barely found the strength to whisper. As the phone dropped to the ground, Zander picked it up, looked at the name on the screen and in his head he told Danny O'Neill that he was next.

21. The Way (Not) To Help

'You'll tell me or you'll be losin more than a couple of teeth, you great big, lanky, streak of pish!'

Blood ran slowly but persistently down Tommy Scott's face from several different points. He was lying on his side, on the floor of the cellar, moaning. The aforementioned teeth lay somewhere nearby. The two goons who abducted him then beat him senseless, stood over him - black malevolence oozing from their every pore.

O'Neill remembered from one of their Gino's conversations that Davie played in a band. It transpired there were three band mates. A few enquiries at venues in the town confirmed their names, and the only one he had any regular social contact with outside the band was the drummer. The job of tracking said drummer down turned out to be surprisingly easy. Tommy ran his own painting and decorating business, and drove a van emblazoned with a huge Scottish flag and his name on it: Tommy's Scott-ish Painting and Decorating. A pun of which he was immensely proud for making him stand out from the crowd, but one he could never have predicted would make it so very convenient for O'Neill to locate and entrap him by.

What he presumed was a punter called Mr Douglas phoned to ask him to come round and quote for a renovation job on a derelict flat. He arrived at the address

supplied, and could never have suspected the welcome committee awaiting him inside. The two lumps that grabbed him and frogmarched him back to the van at gunpoint were very persuasive. One of them forced him to drive to a small pub called the Patriot Scot, and he was currently ensconced in the cellar with his rather insistent and abusive inquisitors.

'You know where he is, and you're gonna tell me, or I'm gonna stop punchin you and start slicin bits off you.'

The air was dank and alcohol tinged. The light was from a single bulb suspended from the centre of the low ceiling. The knife glinted weakly but menacingly under its pallid glow, and left Tommy in no doubt as to how much loyalty he could afford to maintain.

'Alright, alright, stop hittin me for fuck's sake! Please put that blade away mate; you'll not be needin it.'

He wiped his forearm across his mouth and nose, darkening and dampening his sleeve with his freely flowing blood.

'I'm tellin you the truth. I dropped him off in Alloa the other night. He didn't tell me why he was goin there or who he knew that stayed there - my best guess would be a woman. He just asked if I would take him to the Town Hall and look after some of his gear. He didn't say how long for, or why he was gettin out of Glasgow. He's my mate and I did him a favour. Wish I fuckin hadn't now though.'

He tried to push himself up from the floor. Unfortunately, one of his abductors decided to boot him heftily in his adductors, and he collapsed in winded agony, hard concrete scratching against his cheek as he lay there rueing the day he decided to help Davie, fuckin, Argyle. He could just imagine Helen standing over him tutting and telling him 'I fuckin told you he was a waste of space'. For once, he tended to agree with his distinctly less than feminine femme.

'Where in Alloa? Give us an address.'

Gasping for breath and now aching and sore all over, Tommy was becoming very concerned that no matter what he said, nothing was going to be enough to placate them. He wiped again, turning his sleeves into a matching pair as he did so.

'I don't have an address. I dropped him off at the Town Hall, and he said he'd be back in touch soon enough. We're supposed to be playin a gig weekend after next. He's not really inclined to deep meaningful conversations or tellin me anythin about his life. I swear that's the truth. Do you not think I've got the message yet? Coz I'd just like to make it very clear that I most certainly fuckin have!'

The two goons looked at each other and seemed to be trying to decide on where to take the interrogation next. They had definitely extracted some useful information from him, assuming it was the truth, but they were also sure he was still holding out on something more specific.

The last twenty-six minutes of Tommy's life were definitely the least enjoyable of his entire twenty six previous years' worth. The removal of several peripheral and at least two vital body parts did not in fact reveal any more to the inquisitors than was gleaned from the beating and knife brandishing. This should have been a bit of a disappointment to them but, in truth, they were sadistic psychopaths who positively revelled in the painful misery of their victims. From the moment they picked Tommy up, he was doomed - no matter what he told them.

Five days later DI Gordon received some interesting information relating to the apparently deceased and definitely absent David Argyle. He appeared to have surfaced. Tommy's mutilated body also surfaced; washed up on the shore at Largs in Ayrshire. They knew who he was because Helen Scott reported her husband missing two nights before his discovery, and the adding of two and two together and his formal identification had been

comparatively swift.

The interviewing officers quickly established from Mrs Scott that Argyle was a friend of her spouse through playing in a band together, and that she thought him a smart arse and a bad influence. A routine check of the names she provided at interview raised a flag against Davie's name that instructed them to contact Gordon.

He visited her house because she said Argyle left some possessions there for Tommy to mind for him, and Gordon was keen to check if there was anything significant amongst them.

Following a brief chat with Helen, he was standing in the garage of the Scott residence leafing through the contents of a box - a very interesting box. Moreover, this very interesting box appeared to hold some quite startling photographic revelations about a certain Mr D. Argyle and his young son Jamie. The clunk from his dropping penny was probably audible back in Glasgow.

22. The Way To Go

The text arrived the morning after Tommy Scott divulged the potential whereabouts of O'Neill's one-time object of affection, and ex-employee. This negated the requirement to extend his search for information in Ayrshire any further. The lack of detail Scott offered up under duress made O'Neill seriously consider visiting his house, or perhaps to get in touch with one of the other band mates, but there was no need now. If things did not go so well with Argyle, then he may revisit that plan. If the little shit did somehow get away, then he reckoned he might be able to exert some more leverage by going after the other people he associated himself with.

The meeting place was sufficiently close to Alloa to suggest the recently departed, drumming, decorator had in fact been as truthful as he could be. He was pretty pissed off at the heavy handed tactics employed by his lads in dealing with the boy. He was not sorry by any means, but rather worried that their increasingly sadistic and violent approach to interrogation was getting sloppy and would help lead the police to his door. He made a mental note to stop using that particular pair of goons unless absolutely necessary.

The biggest dilemma was whether or not to attend the meeting with company in tow. The threat to expose him if any harm was to befall Davie seemed real enough, and the website mentioned in the letter had a staging page and

looked as if it might be genuinely ready to go. However, it seemed folly of the highest order to go along unprotected. There was palpable malice and ill will towards him in the letter, and he had long since forgotten what it was like to defend himself with his fists. Serious wealth, and all that brought, softened him physically, and years of having others to rely on for doing your dirty work left him rusty and uncertain of his current abilities. He also knew that the boy was handy because he dealt with the mechanic and the Hull posse in a very impressive manner. In the end, he decided he would go alone, but armed: to the teeth.

The venue for the meet vexed Jamie. He needed somewhere private, but easily accessible by road. It needed to be out of the obvious gaze of bystanders, and somewhere where a lot of noise would be unlikely to draw the attentions of the police via a disgruntled or worried resident. The small, local nature reserve met his criteria more closely than any other site he had managed to locate in the past few days. Outside of early morning (when some locals came to empty their dogs) it was distinctly lacking in patrons. The car park was only just off the main road, it was not renowned as a rendezvous for al fresco carnal delights, and there was nothing worth the attention of bored youngsters with a desire to break things or set fire to them.

He was circumspect as far as Emma was concerned. After the initial euphoria and lust of their reconciliation, she began to question why he had suddenly come back into her life. He just said he had been trying to pluck up the courage to do it for a long time, but embarrassed by his behaviour in dumping her, was reticent. In addition, he was sure she would have someone else by now. He told her he'd had a serious falling out with his boss that meant leaving his job, and as a result, found himself evicted from his flat - the truth, of a fashion. He just needed some time to rethink what to do with his life (again not entirely

without substance). She seemed temporarily appeased by this, and no further interrogation ensued.

Both texts went one after the other, and things were set in motion that he knew could not be undone. It was a pivotal moment. The next twenty-four hours would determine whether he had a future free of anger, vengefulness, unfulfilled potential, or perhaps in a worst-case scenario - life itself. There would be no halfway house here. There would be no room for error or misjudging the mood. He would meet with O'Neill and grind his worthless, shameful, pointless life into the dirt, or he would die trying. Walking away was out of the question. Jamie's mother deserved more from him than that, and his life would be forever blighted by torment and guilt, if he failed to expunge that leech from it.

Emma allowed him to borrow her car for the evening. His cover story was attending a gig with a couple of mates from back home, and although she would have been welcome to come along, she had a shift at the hospital. In fact, he delayed sending the texts by one day in order to make sure she was working and out of the way. He dropped her off at the hospital and made his way to the reserve.

After parking at least half a mile away, he walked in via a footpath through some woodland. It was a lovely spot, serene almost, and the singing birds and pleasant breeze were almost incongruous given the task in hand. He conducted the walk in a state of supreme concentration and alertness. As he walked, he thought about all that had gone before, and all that was to come. Life had been comprehensively disappointing so far, and this felt like his catharsis: a chance to re-write his history and fill a hole in his self-esteem that had festered for so many years.

He was sure O'Neill would Welch on the 'don't bring any of your morons' part of the deal, so walking in from a different angle allowed him to spot any henchman lurking, and would prevent him being ambushed. There were no

cars loitering and there were no henchman lurking when he finally, cautiously, arrived at the muddy oval that constituted a car park. Content that he remained firmly in control, he sat down behind a large holly bush and sent the confirmatory text.

O'Neill was not prone to gallivanting on his own of an evening, and both Rab and Jimmy were more than a little perplexed and concerned when he announced that he was about to do just that.

'But boss, you never go out on your own,' protested Jimmy in his Southern drawl.

'Aye, well I'm goin out on my own today. I don't have to justify myself to you. You work for me remember.'

'But it's not safe. You won't have bulletproof glass, and you won't have back up if some arsehole decides to try it on. You've made a lot of enemies, and more than one of them would love to find you out by yourself,' added Rab.

This loyalty and apparently genuine concern would have been touching if it was not for the fact that O'Neill could not be arsed with it. Earlier that day he decided he was dealing with an amateur. A cocky and so far wily amateur, but an amateur all the same. He had personally despatched far more intimidating and capable foes than Davie, fuckin, Argyle in the many years he had been making a living from ill-gotten gains. His pride was dented at being outwitted by such a nobody. He needed to meet this tricksy little upstart and leave him in no doubt as to who the hardened, criminal, boss of a multi-million pound drugs empire was, and who was merely a small-time dealer and ne'er-do-well with ideas way above his station.

'Look Jimmy, Rab, I'm not arguin with you, I'm tellin you. I'm goin out, on my own, for reasons that I don't feel inclined to share with my fuckin chauffeur and go-fer. So, shut the fuck up, and Rab, bring me the Audi. Now!'

They both knew there was no point pushing things any further. The tone and demeanour of their boss had shifted

gear from firmly assertive to comply or you will be looking for a new job or possibly becoming guest of honour at your own wake. Rab brought the car to the front of the house and held the door open as Danny got in.

'Please tell me you're packin at least?' Rab ventured tentatively.

The withering look and inappropriate jacket for the weather were enough to confirm that was indeed the case.

O'Neill drove steadily. The sat nav guided him; he was not particularly familiar with this area of the country, and the map book was lacking in the detail he needed to pinpoint the meeting place. He felt calm and controlled. There was no way this boy would get as far as exposing his double life, and he was prepared to deal with him in exactly the same way as the last would-be blackmailer. The pushing up of Argyle's own small-time crop of daisies was imminent.

Jamie was on tenterhooks. Two cars pulled into the car park since he had been sitting behind his jaggy camouflage, causing him to jump to attention. However, one was just some punter stopping to make or take a mobile phone call. This was very public spirited of him of course, to make sure he was not endangering himself or any other road users by doing so on the move, but nevertheless Davie was willing him to get on his way - whether he was breaking the law or not. The call was interminable, and it seriously crossed his mind to get out from his hiding place and make it very clear to this interloper that staying around was a very bad idea indeed. Luckily, his common sense and patience held sway, and he avoided such a rash and reckless course of action. The second was a bloke, clearly caught short, who raced into the undergrowth and released a shower of faeces that practically exploded from his bowels. The poor bastard did not appear to have very much in the way of cleaning materials, and as everyone who has been through the 'shitting in the countryside'

without any paper' scenario themselves knows, this is a soul-destroying experience. After exhausting his one blob of tissue paper and several dock leaves, he just pulled up his drawers and drove off, no doubt heading straight for the shower and the washing machine.

Dusk was falling when the Audi pulled into the car park. It made one full circle and then came to a stop near the centre. Jamie could see O'Neill behind the wheel, and as far as he could tell, he was alone in the vehicle. Now, more than ever, he needed to be careful and alert. The man may have been on the back foot, but consequently, he would be even more dangerous. O'Neill got out of the car, looked around him, and lit a cigarette. Jamie sat tight as the driver's door clunked shut and O'Neill paced around the car, peering into the gloom gathering around him.

The object of all his planning and vengeful detestation arrived ten minutes before the agreed time. It was vital Jamie held to the timetable. The final part of the plan was about to be executed. The final text wended its way and Jamie got ready to meet his destiny.

'O'Neill!'

Danny swivelled around on his heel and tried to work out where the voice was coming from. His phone beeped to indicate he had just received a text.

'Argyle?'

Jamie moved slowly and carefully twenty yards to his right in order to try and keep him guessing where he was and how far away.

'Step away from the car and throw down your weapons.'

'I'm not armed son,' came the reply

'Don't fuckin mess with me Danny. I know for a fact you would never come alone and unarmed. Now do as I say and throw your weapons down!'

O'Neill hesitated. Clearly, he was armed. The next judgement for Jamie was to work out whether what got thrown to the ground was the whole arsenal or just a small

selection. O'Neill stubbed out his cigarette in a small container and put it in his pocket. He reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a handgun, which he tossed aside a few feet from where he stood.

Jamie moved again.

'Right, where's the money?'

'In the car, but you know what, I'm not sure I feel like givin you it. You've got balls, I'll give you that much, but you do know that wherever you run to, I'll find you, and when I do, you'll not be very happy about it.'

'Never mind the idle threats. I've got you strung up by your short and curlies, literally, and you need to understand just how much I want you to suffer.'

'Suffer! That's a laugh, how is a part-time musician from the sphincter of Scotland gonna make me suffer?'

Jamie was incensed.

'Did you actually look at that photo? What the fuck kind of career as a gangland hard man do you think you'll have when people find out you like to suck cocks in your spare time?'

The deep laugh rolled out towards him like a bowling ball.

'I can just pass it off as a wee prick with a grudge and too much knowledge of how to use a computer. Nobody will believe it's genuine and I will crush anyone that says it is. You haven't thought about just how powerful I am son.'

'Oh, I've thought about nothin else for years Danny. Ever since you proved to me first-hand how powerful you were when it came to bullyin wee kids and exploitin vulnerable women!'

'Ach, don't start lecturin me about morality you wee fuckin bleedin heart. I just provide a service. If people weren't so weak-willed and needy, they wouldn't do drugs. I don't force them to take them. Anyway, you're a dealer yourself you fuckin' hypocrite!'

Jamie was not in control. His emotions and the enormity of the situation were running away with him.

'I did it to get to you! It was a way in. I've been plannin this for years you fuckin moron. That's what you don't get. You killed my Mum, and you laughed in my face while you did it, and she is gonna get her own back thanks to me.'

The laugh came again, looking to finish off the last skittle, and this time Jamie was enraged. He broke cover and strode towards O'Neill. He had the gun from the Hull job in his hand. O'Neill's decision to let him keep it had been a very bad one from his perspective as it happened. He pointed it with arm held straight in front of him as he went.

'Down on your fuckin knees you murdering piece of dog shit!'

His voice almost cracked with emotion, and the force of the utterance, but O'Neill seemed to be standing his ground.

'You don't have the bottle son! Harry told me you burst into the pub and froze at the vital moment. So, why don't you just get to fuck while you still can?'

O'Neill made as if to go and retrieve his gun from the ground nearby and Jamie let a round off that smashed into O'Neill's left calf. The look of shock and displeasure on O'Neill's face at this turn of events made Jamie start to think about changing the script and wiping the fucker out right then. But, as he dutifully dropped to the dirt, there was an immediate realisation that killing O'Neill would be a senseless and ultimately unfulfilling act. Even people who kill notorious crime lords go to jail for said killings.

He jogged (almost ran) right up to him and booted him around the side of the head, releasing a great plume of pent up rage and indignation. O'Neill grunted and turned onto his opposite side, holding the point of contact in his hands.

'You little bastard, you are gonna pay for all this!'

He muttered this, probably more for his own sake than Jamie's.

Jamie walked over to O'Neill's discarded gun and bent

as if to pick it up. As he did so, he covertly swapped it for his own gun, before kicking it across the car park and returning to the prone gangster.

For his part, O'Neill was beginning to regret his staggeringly supercilious self-deception of not arranging back up. The pain searing through his mangled leg was excruciating. The boy was more dangerous and organised than he gave him credit for. Rather than daunt him, his attempted intimidation regarding who he was and Argyle's limited abilities only seemed to have goaded him into extreme violence and a higher level of performance. There was a panic button on his phone, but the location of their confrontation was too far from his base to make it worthwhile using. It would take any of his team a good half an hour to get here - assuming they could get here first time in the dark. He was sure that he would not be getting half an hour's leeway from his one time muse.

There were another two weapons secreted about his person, but his own confidence was ebbing fast, and he was sure that it could get very messy if he resorted to using one, but the little bastard just shot him, and if he didn't take his chance now, he might not get another one. Reaching down he tried to retrieve the back-up pistol, held in a holster strapped to his right calf. Unfortunately for him, the combination of blinding pain and dulled reactions from the kick to the head, meant he was not quick enough.

Jamie saw him reach. He sprinted over and delivered a kick so hard that he actually fell over O'Neill as he did so. Quickly composing himself, he leapt on top of the dazed and bleeding gangster and wrenched the gun from his leg, taking little care as to what pain he might inflict while doing so. He also quickly patted him down in case there were any more weapons, and sure enough there was a knife in one of his jacket pockets. O'Neill roared in agony and fury, valiantly trying to resist, but he was beaten and he knew it.

Jamie got to his feet and stepped back; breathing

heavily and with adrenalin coursing through him in tsunami like waves. He could feel his heart beating as if it were providing the entertainment at an illegal rave. The knife went into his back pocket, and the second gun into his waistband. He really hoped the gun didn't go off accidentally, otherwise claiming any family allowance in the future would be but a pipe dream.

'Right! I want the fuckin money! Look at you, you're fuckin pathetic! I wouldn't mind your proclivities if it wasn't for the way you covered it up. Actin the fuckin tough guy, and all the time what you really wanted was a good seein to from one of the Village People.'

O'Neill lay clutching his now profusely bleeding face and moaned.

'Go fuck yourself you little cunt!'

'Really? Is that your answer? Well, our survey said... IR! IRRR!'

With that, he stood on O'Neill's wounded leg, and the howl he let out was really quite extraordinary.

'FUCK YOU!'

The reply roared from him as if he was marking out territory on the Serengeti, and replete with saliva that shot towards Jamie in lieu of the bullets he wished he still had at his disposal.

'Oh dear, I'll need to ask the computer if that was the answer we were lookin for. Nope, our survey still says... IR! IRRR!'

Again, he applied almost his full weight to the leg, and once more O'Neill bellowed his disapproval. This time there was no immediate defiance, and Jamie bent down with the gun and pushed it against his temple.

'I could keep doin this all night, but I don't have time, so give me the money, or I'll just kill you and take it anyway.'

O'Neill groaned, and made as if to reach into his inside pocket.

'Stop!' shouted Jamie before he actually got to the point

of grabbing anything.

'Take it very, very fuckin easy.'

O'Neill took out his car keys and pressed a button, which released the boot lock. Jamie walked over and took out a large leather holdall. He returned to the gangster's side and opened the bag cautiously. There was another gun inside, and he took it out and waved it in front of O'Neill.

'Tut, tut Danny, you're not very trustin are you?'

He put it back, and also took the back up from his waistband and dropped it in alongside it.

Somewhere on the road, a vehicle was approaching at speed. The engine note was insect-like and incessant. As he looked down at the massive pile of bills in the bag, the scooter swung noisily into the car park. The rider screeched to a halt in front of the gun he kicked away and picked it up, immediately letting loose a shot that smashed the driver's door window in a shower of glass chips. The bullet actually carried on right through the front cabin and removed the passenger window as well.

'What the fuck?' was the simultaneous cry of both men being targeted.

'You traitorous bastard O'Neill!' shouted Jamie as another bullet whistled over their heads and he instinctively ducked.

Zander got off the bike and threw his helmet to the floor. O'Neill gasped in disbelief and recognition.

'He's not here on my account,' he hissed through clenched teeth.

Zander was gesticulating to Jamie to drop his gun, and he did. The mute gatecrasher walked purposefully up to them both and pushed Jamie forcefully away from O'Neill. He turned to his former boss and indicated that he stay on the ground. It was a moot point really. He picked up Jamie's dropped gun and tucked it into his jacket.

He walked behind Jamie and put the gun to his head.

O'Neill was finding it hard to fathom what was happening in front of his eyes. A former employee and

potential bed mate was being held at gunpoint by another former employee turned police informant – in a car park somewhere near Alloa. He had found himself in some scrapes before, but this was a pretty good one.

‘Who the fuck are you?’ shouted Jamie to no reply.

‘His name is Zander McCormack. He used to work for me until we had a wee fallin out. He’ll not be able to talk to you on account of a wee accident he had with his tongue.’

He looked directly at the boy he ordered mutilated.

‘Look son, I’ve no idea why you’re here or what you think holdin him up with a gun is gonna achieve. I can appreciate you’re a bit pissed off after what happened, but you know the score. You grassed to the police - I had to teach you a lesson. At least I never killed you. Sayin that, if you keep this up, I might need to reconsider my previous leniency.’

Every utterance and movement was shredding his nervous system, but he had to try to wrestle back some initiative. He might not have had much luck making Argyle back down, but this little shit was not in his league. It troubled him that Zander was still alive. O’Neill was sure he issued an order at one point to go out and finish him off. Inexplicably, and rather annoyingly, he must have let it slip. Too many distractions.

Zander reached into his pocket, took out what looked like a postcard and threw it from between two fingers, in the manner one does when throwing playing cards into a hat. It bounced off O’Neill who picked it up and read the message it contained.

YOO AR GONNY PAY FOR WHAT YOO DID.
YOO KILLED THE POLIS MAN FOR NAY GOOD
REESIN AND ROOIND MA LIFE BY TAKIN MA
TUNG.

SO I AM GONNY ROOIN YOURS. I AM GONNY
KIL EVRYWUN YOO CAYR ABOOT. I KILD SHON

AND CONOR AND NOO I AM GONNY KILL
YOOR BOYFREND.

The lessons his sister gave in writing, and the hours of practice while exiled in Dundee, were successful in terms of producing neat and legible lettering, but a few weeks was never going to be enough to overturn years of neglect in the basics of academia. Nevertheless, spelling notwithstanding, the message was crystal clear.

O'Neill was stunned. How could this pathetic little Ned have crippled his beautiful, wonderful nephew? What the fuck had he done to Conor? Was that what that message had been about? What did he mean by boyfriend? Had he been spying or did someone else know about last Friday and told him? Worse still, he was now threatening to kill Argyle, and in doing so, was about to set in train the events that would lead to his exposure as a homosexual.

'You did that to Sean? You wee bastard, you are fuckin dead! And what the fuck have you done to Conor?'

Zander just grinned inanely, and drew his finger slowly across his throat.

The shock was like having an electric fire dropped into his bath. However, with the pain and confusion from his injuries, and the crushing his ego had already taken, he had no time to react before the train left the station, destined for the point of no return.

Jamie began to wrestle with Zander. They struggled and moved away a few vital yards, and then the gun went off. Jamie slumped to his knees in front of Zander who stared at O'Neill in what looked like a mixture of horror and triumph. Jamie fell onto his side, rolled onto his stomach and lay still.

O'Neill managed to drag himself almost to the car during the struggle, grabbing one of the guns from the holdall as he went. The bag itself was a burden he could not manage. He hauled himself into the driver's seat and started up the engine. The psychotic little Ned started

shooting again, and as he tore out of the car park he returned fire as best he could through the glassless window frame. He was lucky the car was an automatic, so his useless left leg could bleed and throb quietly on, safe in the knowledge that it was not letting the side down on the escaping-from-certain-death front. He pressed the panic button on his phone and drove like a bat out of hell, heading towards the nearest semblance of civilisation to await his cavalry.

In the car park, Jamie was holding Zander in his arms. One of the aimless shots from O'Neill hit him full in the chest and he was drowning in his own blood. There was no lifeguard available. As Zander's lungs heaved with the effort of staving off his impending death, Jamie kissed him tenderly on the forehead, and a tear dropped from his eye at his half brothers' passing.

'I'm so sorry Zander!'

As he whispered in the boy's ear, the heaving stopped.

Betty McCormack approached Jamie a few months after his mother's funeral. She was surprisingly upset considering he had no recollection of her and his mother ever having been acquainted. They were not really, as it happened. They met once, a long time ago, but her upset was over the prospects for her son Zander; his half brother through infidelity and betrayal.

At first, hearing about this secret sibling, he was outraged and railed against the idea of having anything to do with this literal little bastard who he assumed was the root cause of his mother's ruination. However, in time, he came to realise that Zander, like him, was just another victim of his father's weakness of character and inability to reserve his sperm for one woman's exclusive use. Zander was not the cause of his mother's breakdown, his father was.

Jamie gave Betty a few thousand pounds from his inheritance, but he and Zander never became particularly

close, in part due to the large age gap between them. They saw each other occasionally in the passing, and as he became old enough to gain entry to pubs, sometimes Zander would come to gigs.

It was at a post-gig drinking session that they actually started to talk about Jamie's desire for revenge over O'Neill. Jamie was talking about how he would love to see the bastard go down, and Zander became effusive in his support. This was when Zander decided to get himself noticed by the O'Neill clan, and hatched a plan to inform on him, and have him sent down for ever, thus ingratiating himself with his big brother. Unfortunately, part of this plan backfired when he managed to get himself addicted to heroin in his attempts to infiltrate the gang. The second and far graver error led to his tongue being taken from him.

When Betty called Jamie and told him what had happened to Zander, it cemented his determination to get even once and for all. How many more people that Jamie cared about would be brutalised or broken by O'Neill if he did not stop him?

The text messages from Dundee came thick and fast, and together they developed the plan to ensnare and blackmail O'Neill. They would be a team: Jamie would do the talking and Zander would do the watching and listening. The crippling of Sean Duffy and the murder of Conor had been independent acts on Zander's part. In fact, it was only when he handed over the card and O'Neill reacted, that Jamie realised how far his brother had gone in his pursuit of revenge. He was willing to concede that the murder of Conor O'Neill was probably justified. After all, he was one of the heartless thugs that mutilated Zander and abandoned him to his fate, but if he had known what he was planning to do to Sean, he would have stopped him. The object of his ire was Danny O'Neill, and randomly targeting his family would be no better than what he did to them.

Sitting in the car park with Zander lying in his lap, Jamie needed to think fast about how he could sort this out. The original plan involved him faking his death, leaving revenge against him pointless, and only two other people knew the connection between him and Zander, so no one would ever have suspected collusion. The money would allow Zander to disappear for a while until the photos and website did their damage to O'Neill's authority and power. This done, he could return and take his mother out of the hell-hole she lived in, and away from the prospect of her worthless boyfriend ever coming back. Davie would become Jamie again, and live happily ever after with Emma.

The plans seemed foolproof while they were formulating them, but they had not thought of everything after all - now Zander was dead. How was he going to explain this to Betty? How was he going to avoid a forensic team detecting him? He was wearing gloves because the gun switching was deliberate. The gun he kicked out into the car park had fluorescent paint on the handle to make it instantly visible to Zander when he rode in, but it was also O'Neill's gun, so he did not want to leave his prints on it, in case it was ever recovered as evidence. He had been prepared all along for the eventuality that circumstances would have dictated taking O'Neill out. When Zander "shot" Jamie, he was aiming back behind himself - something the crime lord would not have been able to tell. However, his big problem now was that his clothes were soaked in blood and he needed to get home without leaving traces of it in Emma's car.

He dragged Zander into the woods at the edge of the car park, and carefully positioned his body close enough to the path to be sure that the next daytime visitor would discover him easily. He quickly removed Zander's trousers, shoes and socks and swapped them for his own blood-soaked ones. They were not a perfect fit, but they would not leave blood stains on the car, and the fact that he was

slightly at half mast was much less of a worry to him than the prospect of the police stopping him and finding him head to toe in gore.

After collecting the bag of money from the car park, he jogged back through the woods to Emma's car. There was a plastic carrier bag in the boot. He put his gloves, his sullied hooded top, O'Neill's back-up pistol and the luminous barrelled gun into it, and tied it up. He sat this in the passenger foot-well, and during the journey home, he spotted a large set of wheeled rubbish bins behind a row of shops. He drove as close as he could, made sure the coast was clear, got out hastily and dumped the bag into the receptacle, before jumping back in and completing the journey.

In the street outside the flat, he waited for an opportune moment, bolted for the door, leapt up the stairs two at a time and let himself in. He hurriedly showered and re-clothed. The reconciliation with Emma had not run long enough or well enough for her to be familiar with his wardrobe, so the loss of the night's outfit would most likely go unnoticed. Once cleaned up, he got back in the car and drove to the local hypermarket. The original plan was for Zander to take the money. It was never about the money for Jamie. All he ever wanted was to exact his revenge on O'Neill and now he had to think of a way of dealing with it. He purchased a new holdall and transferred the money, before depositing O'Neill's bag, and Zander's clothes, in another dumpster behind a pub. Back at the flat, he pushed the cash under the bed in the spare room and hoped that Emma would not have any call to look there in the next few days.

There was nothing more he could do that evening. Tomorrow, he would get on with the unravelling of O'Neill's life and reputation, but for now, he would wait for Emma to return from her shift. While he waited, he fell into a distracted slumber.

23. The Way Down

The doctor was one that O'Neill used when he needed to make sure there would be no official records of the treatment administered. A tried and trusted contact that he used many times previously. The system operated like a criminal version of BUPA, with the insurance linked to an assurance that the long arm of the law could not extend its reach towards the subscribers. Such a service came at a hefty price - a price that did not involve direct debits or ten months for the price of twelve. All of those involved were taking an almighty risk with not only their career, but also their liberty. It was cash in hand, and undeclared to HM Customs and Excise. These worries over losing one's job or ending up in the Bar-L would have been enough to dissuade most doctors from seeking to earn a living from this niche medical market. However, in reality, giving the wrong diagnosis, treatment, or palliative care to powerful criminal boss men and their charges was much more problematic than the GMC or the police finding out you had done so.

With the bullet removed, the wound cleaned and a cast applied to his shattered tibia, Jimmy drove him back to his house in total silence; the morphine and the raging fury at how the evening panned out leaving him even less sociable than normal. O'Neill should have accepted the chauffeur's offer to help him upstairs, but instead he told him to leave him be. His pride was hurt more than his leg, or at least,

that's what he thought before attempting to climb his ornate staircase unaided. Once finally in his room, he undressed, levered himself stiffly into bed, and despite doubting it possible, fell soundly asleep. McCormack and the consequences of his murderous actions could wait until he underwent some semblance of battery re-charging.

O'Neill's slumber was not interrupted by any conventional tool designed for early mornings. Something like a bee-shaped alarm clock or a Teas Maid. Instead, he came to at the behest of his pain receptors, which had clearly exhausted their supply of opiates. He scrabbled around on his bedside table until he located the pills and swallowed two as quickly as his oesophagus would allow without water to assist their passage to his stomach. That most imperative of tasks in hand, he began to piece together the previous day. The meeting, the much handier than expected Argyle, the unsolicited intervention of McCormack, the revelation that he crippled Sean and did something heinous to Conor. The shooting. The agonising pain. All these things were speeding through Danny's mind towards the crushing realisation that if Argyle was dead, then there was a website with his name on it, and it was about to go worldwide. McCormack would pay with his stupid, tongue-less head, but he could wait for now.

It was ten thirty in the morning according to his watch. He slept far longer than he could actually have afforded to.

He pulled himself out of bed and hobbled excruciatingly over to the desk. The laptop was wireless and state of the art - not that he was particularly computer savvy of course. However, when one had as much money as he did, then it might have been no object, but it meant he could have any object he took a fancy to. He had not done cheap and cheerful for a long, long time. When he went into a shop, he just went to the 'preposterously expensive' section and chose the top of the range model. No matter how much the thing cost though, it did not

make switching it on any easier. His finger hovered over the on switch for what seemed like minutes. Procrastination was not normally top of the list of characteristics he displayed when under pressure, and it felt anomalous. He stared at the switch until his whole universe seemed to be centred on it, and the terrible outcome using it might lead to. When he did press it, it was involuntary, and as if someone else, getting pissed off waiting for him to act, reached over his shoulder and did so.

The whirring of the hard drive and the beeping of the BIOS brought him back to the room in troubled mind and damaged body. He waited for the familiar start-up screen and entered his password. Even the fastest computers can seem frustratingly sluggish when you really want to get on with something, and this was no different. His desktop took shape icon by icon, and the task bar slowly added its duty roster. When the hourglass finally returned to pointing, he slowly moved it with his mouse toward the Internet Explorer icon and clicked. He had set Google as his homepage and its minimalist search box and multi-coloured logo almost seemed to be taunting him to search. He would search, and destroy, all in good time, but he did not need the aid of the search engine; oneillismybitch.com was there in the drop down box of websites he visited most recently.

Again, the icy fingers of indecision gripped him. He had to do it, he knew that very well, but he just could not click. Thankfully, the impatient, invisible onlooker intervened, and the page appeared. The staging page. The little fucker was lying, bluffing, or his pal liked a lie in of a morning. It was too early to be completely sure, but it did mean he might have some time to sort out this mess. How though? Surely, he could find a techno geek who would help him track the site down and prevent its activation. This techno geek would need to be utterly trustworthy or easily disposed of once he sorted it out, but he could not

think of anyone. He might have a connection that could though. A few phone calls should render some results.

When he switched on his mobile, it came to life indicating that a couple of texts and a voice mail message were waiting for him. The texts revealed that McCormack told the truth when he claimed to have murdered Conor. He was almost inclined to change his priorities and go straight after the tongue-less wonder, but in reality, the text changed nothing, and the website still had to take precedence. He decided to send another couple of henchmen out to retrieve the little bastard and hold him until he was ready to deal with him.

The game was not a bogey just yet. He set a couple of hares running with his contacts to find his crucial techno geek, and went back to bed. His leg was loping and the pills made him a bit woozy. He lay down and drifted off much more contentedly than he did the previous evening.

The phone was ringing. It was ringing, and ringing, and ringing. He let it go. He had an answering machine for these very moments where he could not be arsed talking to anyone. The machine beeped to indicate it was time for the caller to leave a message, but instead they hung up and another call came in immediately. If it was the same caller, then they were certainly one persistent bastard. He suddenly remembered the urgent mission he engaged several of his contacts in. If it was one of them, he made it clear he wanted to hear from them in person, and as soon as possible.

He groggily reached for the receiver. It was one of those digital cordless jobs: top of the range of course. He fumbled around and finally managed to accept the incoming call.

‘Hullo?’

‘Is that Danny O’Neill?’

He was suddenly wide-awake. Who the fuck would ask him such a thing? Sure, it could be one of those annoying

shithouses from a power company or multi-media conglomerate, attempting to make you switch suppliers to end up saving tuppence, and never content with a piss right off whenever they got one. However, he had a bad feeling. There was something about the tone of voice. The doggedness in pursuit of an answer that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand to attention.

‘Who’s askin?’

‘Well Mr O’Neill, my name is Charlie Graham, and I am a journalist with the Daily Recorder. I wonder if I could ask you a few questions about some information that arrived on our desk this morning?’

This confirmed his bad feeling all too forcefully. His mind was in overdrive. There was no right way to deal with this now. If he hung up, he was guilty, and if he engaged this hack in conversation, it would doubtless lead to things being said that would be twisted and used as quotes from the horses’ mouth ad nauseam. He breathed deeply, the pain in his leg returning to add to his pile of shitty things to have to deal with.

‘Oh aye?’

‘Yes, although I am afraid it is a rather unsavoury set of allegations, accompanied by a link to a website and some rather lurid photographs. I felt it would only be fair to get in touch and give you an exclusive chance to set the record straight by talking to me, before we publish.’

The slimy toad was about as disingenuous and insincere as his mentors and lecturers could ever have hoped for. He could practically feel the triumph and spectacular career advancement opportunities oozing from the receiver. Despite the pain, O’Neill leapt from bed and brought the laptop out of its slumber.

The staging page had gone, replaced by a hideous montage of pornographic images showing him engaged in lewd and lascivious acts with a gimp-masked male partner. Argyle emblazoned the home page with all manner of accusations of him being a drug-running murderer, and a

homosexual of course. The photos, staged in his dining room, looked completely and utterly convincing. He had to battle to prevent a peristalsis reverse, his throat was drier than a fortnight in Saudi Arabia, and his heart began to gallop as if it intended to set a new course record at Aintree.

'Mr O'Neill? Are you still there?'

He could not speak. His life was swimming around the top of a whirlpool, which was making ready to suck it deep into its watery vortex. He knew that no amount of protesting of innocence would do any good. The rumours that he stifled for years through brutal intervention, were out of the box in the most global of arenas. There was no openly gay gangster, no matter how previously powerful, that could control a drugs empire in the West of Scotland. Liberal attitudes, acceptance, and equalities afforded homosexuals in the middle-class suburbs were strangely absent in the schemes and drug dens he ruled. Although, that was best referred to as once ruled now.

'Mr O'Neill? I just want to get your side.'

Danny clicked the button with the little red drawing of a telephone on it and dropped the handset. It rang again instantly, but he just hobbled over to his bed pulled the covers over his head, and for the first time since he was a small child, began to sob with self-pity.

24. The Way Out

The house was quiet, and save for the armed guard on the door, you would have been hard pushed to realise anything was amiss. Apart, of course, from the presence of a police van and a squad car in the driveway. The sky was a thick, threatening, grey and so low as to feel as if all one would need to reach up and touch it was a stool, or a small stepladder at most. The rain was the kind of rain that seems innocuous, but after a few minutes without a coat, you realise it has soaked you through. The Scottish descriptor is a “smir” and DI Gordon always found it a particularly evocative word. He shivered as he stepped out of the beautifully warm cocoon of his air-conditioned car, and jogged up to the door, whereupon the guard opened it for him and he stepped into the hallway.

“Thanks. Is he upstairs?”

“Right on the top landing, and then it’s the door at the end of the corridor,” he replied with a nod.

He closed the door behind him and returned to his silken drenching.

Gordon took the steps two at a time, almost jogged along the corridor and then stopped abruptly at the threshold of the bedroom. He entered slowly, surveying the entire scene.

It was a sumptuous room. A gigantic four-poster bed was the centrepiece, with red velvet drapes, and a

luxurious, eider-down duvet covering the enormous mattress. It was probable this one carpet cost more than the entire carpeting in his house, and most of the furniture for that matter. The wallpaper was richly coloured and patterned - in keeping with such a period property. The frame of the bed, and the wood of all the other furniture in the room, consisted of a dark mahogany, occasionally inlaid with lighter panels of teak or such like. There was a chest of drawers, and a dressing table topped with a mirror and strewn with the accoutrements of male vanity; deodorant, aftershave, cleansing lotion, moisturiser and each of these in a number of choices and flavours.

There were two chairs. Fully upholstered in a deep red cloth, with high curved backs and dark wooden legs and arms, scrolled and worked as exquisitely as all the other pieces in the room. One had a neatly folded pair of dark trousers hanging over the back of it. O'Neill was slumped in the other, his head on one shoulder and his arms dangling either side of the arms of the chair. His back was to Gordon, and from what he could make out, he was wearing a blue bathrobe with white pin stripes.

'We haven't touched anything sir. We were waiting for you to get here,' said the PC standing in the doorway.

'Good, good lad. Appreciate that,' replied Gordon snapping on his latex gloves.

'No-one else gets in or out until I've had a good look.'

He walked over to the body and stood facing his arch enemy. The face was peaceful and expressionless, but festooned with bruises and not yet fully healed cuts to the bridge of his nose and both lips - lips that were blue and skin that was otherwise waxy and grey. The oddest thing was his left leg though. It was in a plaster cast; one of the modern lightweight ones and coloured blue although, one had to presume that was not in anticipation of it matching his lips. He was not sure why this was odd. After all, people break legs all the time. However, perhaps it was because O'Neill was usually the one doing the breaking.

'Who called us?'

'The bodyguard found him about one o'clock this afternoon. He hadn't heard anything from him or seen him on the cameras since last night. He came in, couldn't feel a pulse, and as he was stone cold and goin solid, he concluded he was dead. Phoned us, and we were here about an hour ago.'

'Where is the bodyguard?'

'He's downstairs in the kitchen with the other driver slash bodyguard and a couple of our boys. You should see the size of this guy by the way! Absolutely fuckin enormous he is. I can see why O'Neill picked him for a bodyguard - you definitely wouldn't mess with him!'

'Ok, thanks for the update. I'll speak to them both after I get through here. Ask the officers to keep them here will you?'

The youngster nodded and headed downstairs to relay the message.

On the dressing table stood a bottle of pills, and a seriously depleted bottle of Scotch. The room reeked of its grainy, alcoholic sweetness. The pill bottle was unmarked but it would not be any kind of revelation if the lab found they were barbiturates or other painkillers of some description. It was impossible to tell how many he might have taken, but the bottle only had four pills remaining in it. There was also a very expensive looking laptop, which seemed to have been the victim of a fit of temper, as it was lying on the floor with its innards spilling from its casing and the screen cracked.

The rest of the room was undisturbed. There was little doubt in Gordon's mind that this was suicide, but what the hell could have caused this man to find life impossible to go on with? Surely not a guilty conscience? If it was, it had taken him quite a while to discover it. It must surely be something else. The obvious thing to look for now was a note.

Gordon reached gently into each of the robe pockets,

but found nothing more than some tissue paper. He opened the central drawer on the dressing table. Various envelopes and papers mingled with stationery in a haphazard fashion. On the top of the pile was a handwritten envelope. The writing was in neat capital letters, which drew his attention to it. It was empty.

There was also an ashtray containing three butts. It struck him that the amount of ash in the dish was greater than the three cancer sticks could possibly have produced. He took a pair of tweezers from his pocket and sifted through the remains. One scrap of paper appeared to have some computer-generated text on it, but it was too badly burned to glean any sense from it. It may have been the suicide note, and he thought better of leaving it after all. The lab boys were amazing, so it might be possible for them to make some headway with it, but in truth, it looked a lost cause. There was also the corner of what looked like a photograph, but again no useful area of the image it once contained survived the mini cremation.

Gordon pored over every bit of paper in the drawer, but could find nothing more incriminating than a bill from a solicitor, and nothing more enlightening than the offering in the ashtray. He looked in the chest, the wardrobe, under and in the bed, but no signposts or revelations appeared. As he worked, the forensic team arrived and on his nod, they began the more painstaking process of recording the evidence scientifically.

Back downstairs in the kitchen, Rab was sitting at the table grim faced and sipping coffee. The giant half man half mountain, Jimmy the chauffeur, sat opposite drinking some enormous protein shake using what looked like the jug from a food blender. The young officer was right enough when he reckoned there would be few men inclined to mess with him. There were two male officers in attendance, leaning against the counter and looking thoroughly bored. Conversation was not exactly sparkling.

'Which one of you found him?'

Rab looked at him and grunted in his usual jaunty fashion.

'So, what happened?'

'He was out and about unaccompanied on Friday night. At around nine o'clock, he activated his panic button. Turned out he was over by Alloa somewhere. When we got to him he was ragin about bein betrayed and how some lad had tried to kill him. His leg was busted from bein shot. That's why he's got the plaster on it.'

A quizzical look spread over Gordon's face.

'Some wee Ned apparently. Can't remember his name just now, but it'll come to me.'

'So what happened then?'

'We drove to a car park in the middle of nowhere, but there was nobody there. He was shoutin about gettin this wee guy...Andrew McCormack, no, no Zander McCormack, that was his name, and that he would pay for what he'd done. Reckoned he was the one that put his nephew Sean in a wheelchair a few weeks ago as well'.

'What do you mean?'

'His nephew Sean was shoved over a balcony late one night and broke his back. The boss seemed to think this McCormack had done it.'

Gordon was stunned. He was always sure there was a connection between O'Neill and Zander, but he never thought there was murderous intent. The revenge being sought by the young McCormack boy, for whatever wrongs he felt had been done to him, was apparently on a far grander scale than some informing to the police about drug dealing.

'So, how did O'Neill know this boy?'

The two men shrugged.

'And all the cuts and bruises - were they McCormack's handiwork as well?'

'Dunno. He wasn't all that talkative really. I warned him not to go out on his own, so he probably didn't want

to admit I was right, and I sure as fuck wasn't gonna point it out to him!'

'And after you found nothing what did you do then?'

'We headed to a doctor Danny uses in emergencies, and he sorted out his leg. Once all that was done, Jimmy took him back home in the limo.'

Gordon addressed the gigantic driver.

'Did he say anything to you on the return journey that would have indicated he was thinking of killing himself or reveal a possible reason?'

In a voice that may well have only been partially audible to humans, and otherwise intended for pachyderms, the colossal chauffeur rumbled his reply.

'No sir, he was very quiet. Never said a word really, and when we got back here, he just went straight inta the house and closed the door.'

'And that was the last you saw of him then?'

'Yes sir, suppose it was.'

'And you?'

Rab grunted and shrugged, and drained his coffee cup.

'What made you suspicious something was wrong?'

'I noticed him up an about mid morning on Saturday. Then he spent most of the day in his bed, I think, coz I never saw him again on the cameras until teatime. Anyway, he usually gets up to take a piss in the night, and he didn't, and it was weird, coz I'd seen him on the cameras takin a bottle of whisky up from the dinin room earlier. I knew he wouldn't be pleased if I woke him too early today - especially if he'd had a skin full, and what with his sore leg and all that. So, I left it until about one o'clock and then I went up to the house and knocked. Then I rang the phone, but I still got no reply, so I let myself in and went up to the room. That's when I found him.'

'Do you keep recordings from these cameras?'

'Aye. I've looked at the ones from the weekend, but there's nothin on them. He didn't have a camera in the bedroom, for obvious reasons, so all there is, is what I told

you about him goin to the loo mid mornin, then later on comin down for the whisky. Fact is, the cameras in the house are a bit pointless, it's the ones outside that matter.'

'Right, nonetheless, I'd like the recordings submitted to my team to look at in detail. There might be something there that you missed.'

Rab pouted at this apparent slur on his security credentials and sat back in his chair, arms and ankles firmly crossed and just shrugged again. Gordon ignored this for the petulant nonsense it was.

'I'd like you to give my guys a statement please. If we need to talk to you again, we'll be in touch. Thank you for your help.'

In the hallway, Gordon stood and tried to digest the feast of incredulity he had just found himself consuming. Questions were piling up in a Jenga-like column. Unfortunately, the answers to most of them were still evading him. The jarring ring of his mobile snapped him out of his musings.

'Hello, yes this is DI Gordon.'

The Jenga pile collapsed. He turned on his heel and stamped back into the kitchen.

'Ok, so we've just found McCormack's body. Which one of you wants to tell me what happened?'

There was genuine surprise in the reaction of the henchmen, and both of them shook their heads.

'No idea,' was Rab's predictably verbose answer.

'Really? Just two minutes ago, you told me O'Neill wanted to kill this lad, and now it turns out he's been found dead in the very location you told me you went with him on Friday night! I am not buttoned up the back you know boys!'

The surly and possibly grieving hulks exchanged glances before Jimmy rumbled his reply.

'Well sir, the boss did rightly say he fired a few shots in self-defence, but he didn't say he killed him, he said he was

gonna kill him. Maybe he hit him with a lucky shot? It was dark and the boss's leg was in a bad way, so we didn't hang around the car park for very long or search the place properly.'

Rab had a face like a smacked arse and suddenly felt compelled to interject.

'For fuck's sake! Why the fuck would we tell you about goin there if we'd killed him? We're not buttoned up the fuckin back either!'

This was of course a very pertinent point Rab raised, so Gordon abandoned that particular tack of questioning.

'Ok, fair enough. Did your boss mention anyone else being at this meeting?'

They shook their heads again, and Gordon admitted defeat in his quest to draw blood from these particular fleshy obelisks.

'Tell you what though. I don't believe all this pish about him bein a poof.'

Gordon turned back and looked at him quizzically.

'That website and they photos. It was a fuckin set up, I'm sure of it.'

Gordon felt flat footed, and not a little disconcerted. Even if this was becoming a depressingly familiar feeling during the course of this case, the increased frequency of its occurrence did not help make it more tolerable. He knew nothing about a website, or some photos, and he wondered if he was the only one in the room that was so lacking in intelligence: in both senses of the word. If a website had upset him, it would explain the vandalism of his computer.

'Have you something specific you would like to share?'

The hired muscle just shrugged and looked rather sheepishly at his hands, clasped in front of him on the tabletop. He had an intuition, but he was no grass, no matter the circumstances. If his hunch about Argyle was right, he would sort it out himself, and with a finality the police would be unable to provide him with.

Back in his car, Gordon sat and pondered the situation that just unfolded. His number one suspect in the killing of Smith was dead by his own hand, but appeared to have rubbed out his number one connecting link between them before doing so - even if it was in self-defence. The other missing link was...missing.

In some ways, he was relieved. With O'Neill dead, it was almost certain someone would come forward and try to claim the reward for information by implicating him, safe in the knowledge there would be no reprisals. Of course, they would not receive any reward, since there was no case to hear against a dead man. He supposed that maybe they would lead him to the shooter, but he would only be a small timer: a hired hand. In other ways, he was frustrated and bewildered. Gordon would probably never know for sure who killed Smith, and crucially, even if it was O'Neill, he would never know why.

His other unsatisfactory line of enquiry was Jamie Argyle. The photos at the Scott house led to a bit more digging and finally the truth of his identity came to the surface. There were probably many reasons why Jamie became Davie. Although technically, he had perpetrated some fraud by making the switch, a good lawyer would make short work of it by claiming grief and a need to have his father back were at the root of it. Who knows, maybe they were. The dead drummer friend was disconcerting, but despite the masculine lady of the house appearing to thoroughly dislike Argyle, she could not really offer any plausible motive or reason for why he would torture, mutilate and kill his friend. It was too callous and gruesome for someone who had absolutely no track record of violence. The connection to O'Neill was there, and that evil bastard might well have been behind it. In fact, it may well be that Jamie would re-appear in a similarly incomplete state in due course, having fallen foul of his new acquaintance prior to his suicide - he would not have

been the first to do so. The luridly painted van Scott was driving when he disappeared, reappeared further up the coast from where the body washed ashore; burnt out and useless in terms of evidence. The sad truth was that this particular line of enquiry had gone as cold as the unfortunate decorator.

With budgets as tight as they were, and all hell about to be unleashed amongst the drug lords of the West of Scotland, thanks to the opening up of a very significant portion of the market, he decided there were bigger fish to fry than Jamie Argyle.

25. The Way Of The Dragon 2 (This Time It's Personal)

The life of a gangland enforcer and all round sadistic, evil bastard is not all it is cracked up to be. Sure, if you like hurting people, and Pat Connolly most certainly did, then it was fun a lot of the time. However, it was hard to lead any kind of normal life. People tended to be wary of you, and when they got to know you a bit better, they tended to ramp that up to avoided you like the plague. The only folks who were not scared of you were equally unhinged as you, and not the kind of boy you would like your sister to be going out with. His best mate John Findlay definitely fitted that description rather well. Connolly actually did have a sister that Findlay would very much have liked to go out with if the opportunity arose. However, Connolly and his sister barely spoke. The main reason was he could not stand her horrible little brats, and she once caught him teaching her oldest boy a rather harsh lesson in the importance of obeying one's elders involving a length of electrical flex and a cricket bat. There were other reasons such as; she was terrified of him, and he was always borrowing money he never repaid.

He had worked for Danny O'Neill for many years now. He was a sort of freelance torturer - called upon when the ends justified any means he happened to feel the need to employ. He loved the work and the handsome pay packets, even if both were a little sporadic in occurrence.

His house was a nondescript top floor flat in a standard Glasgow tenement. He had lived there for about two years and was as settled in the area as he had been at any time in his chaotic life. Work from O'Neill had dried up a bit since they dealt with the decorator, and so, on this particular Saturday evening, they were planning a night in with a couple of pornos, Match Of The Day, significantly more than a couple of lagers, and pie and chips for grub. All very normal stuff, for such abnormal people.

John arrived about an hour late, as usual. He was a notoriously unreliable bastard, and that might have been why they were not getting as much work as they used to. If Findlay had managed to piss off O'Neill to the point of rendering them both surplus to requirements, then Connolly would not be happy. He resolved to give the dick one last chance and if he fucked up again, then he would take him down the Clyde for a swim in some lead boots. He might have been his best friend, but he knew who buttered his bread, and when all was said and done, friendship was distinctly overrated.

'Where the fuck have you been? I'm fuckin starvin!'

'Ach give us fuckin peace you fat prick, I'm here now. You could live off that blubber for a fortnight if you had to!'

'That's good comin from you, you Sumo cunt! So, once again, where, the, fuck, have, you, been?'

'I got waylaid by the bookies and a dead cert for tomorrow's 2.30 at Sandown.'

'Dead cert my fuckin hairy erchie! No doubt that particular nag is destined to keep UHU in profit for the next couple of years!'

'Fuck off you wank! You'll not be fuckin slow in askin for a share of my winnin's though, will you?'

'I can get a share of that any time, coz it's the same as you've got just now, and the same as you've won from every other dead cert you've ever wasted your money on -

fuck all!"

'Prick!'

Social pleasantries out of the way, they settled down for the evening.

The pies and chips were up to their usual tasty standard courtesy of the local chippy. The pornos were up to their usual tasty standard thanks to the dodgy wee guy they knew down the Barras Market, and well, you can hardly go wrong with lager can you? As the evening wore on, and their inebriation advanced, they were actually having a remarkably good time, swapping callous war stories and embellishing their sexual exploits to a quite ridiculous degree. The football was mildly distracting, but since neither of them supported a particular team, the arguments that ensued about decisions and the abilities of players never became too heated. They had long since agreed never to watch Scottish football in this manner again after they both narrowly avoided hospitalisation at each other's hands when Celtic and Rangers played out a particularly controversial title deciding game a couple of years previous.

By one o'clock in the morning, they were definitely as pissed as amphibians feeding exclusively on beans and cabbage, and it was time for bed. Pat chucked John a spare blanket, and he settled down on the couch. He had already decided he would probably just stick the porno on again and knock a fly one off the wrist once Pat was ensconced in his pit. If truth be told, pornos only serve one function - facilitating masturbation - so they are not the ideal thing to watch when you have company. Findlay already made a pit stop earlier in the night, under the guise of a shit, which fooled nobody, as there was a total lack of the foul stench normally associated with his evacuations. However, as he was between partners at the moment, he did not care, and another hand shandy would be most welcome before entering the land of nod.

Pat bumped off to bed and as soon as his head hit the pillow, he instantly found himself in the comforting embrace of fatigue and alcohol. Back in the living room, John did indeed put the porno back on, but the alcohol did its worst with his libido, and he too was almost immediately snoring soundly as the pointless plots unfolded on the screen.

In the darkness below, Jamie had been waiting until activity in the street and the block stilled to a minimum. The pubs had long since emptied and it would be another couple of hours before any clubbers meandered home. He parked the car a few streets away and hunkered down on a bench in the park opposite the flat. He was well disguised and anonymous at the same time. Dressed in dark sportswear, with a woolly hat pulled low down onto his brow, and his collar zipped up over his chin, he looked like any other delinquent youth that may have chosen to hang around the park. As well as his low budget, supermarket plastic bag of essential tools, he brought a bottle of Bucky to complete the blending in exercise. There would be no red mouth for him until after the job was done though. He had been there for what felt like hours, and was stiff, cold and bored, and getting a bit anxious about an opportune moment ever coming.

The light in the top floor flat he was watching went out about one fifteen, leaving the flickering strobe of a TV to dance in the otherwise darkened window. He sat and waited for another fifteen minutes before he made his move.

Rising from his wooden outcrop, he walked as briskly over to the building as his taut muscles and tendons would allow, watching all the time for signs of trouble or reasons to abort the mission. He had not managed to get this far and endure so much, only to end up joining Tommy and Zander for a three part harmony in the great choir eternal. If anything looked off, he would be. He took off the hat,

pulled on his balaclava, took some deep breaths, shook his limbs and stiffened his resolve instead.

The close had no main door, so he climbed the stairs carefully and quietly. A cat shot past him at the first landing, almost causing him to tumble backwards whence he came, while simultaneously experiencing a cardiac arrest. Composing himself and allowing his respiration to return to a more steady state - more akin to doing a bungee jump for instance - he continued to the top of the staircase.

The flat was the only one on the top landing, so he would not be in any danger of being spy-holed and scuppered by a neighbour. He set his bag down on the floor and gently opened it. Straight off he had to superglue the lock. This would make sure it was as difficult as possible for the evil bastards to get out, and the longer he could contain them, the greater the degree to which they would suffer for what they had done.

Jamie jammed open the letterbox as quietly as he possibly could and listened. The only sounds coming from the flat were the ooh's, aah's and uhh's of the thespian lesbians writhing in professional ecstasy on the DVD to his right, and loud, sonorous snoring from a room somewhere to his left.

He took out the bottle of ethyl alcohol and attached the nozzle that would create the aerosol. Next, he took out the rag and soaked it in the kerosene he also brought along. The smell made him slightly light-headed, and a tad nauseous, but it was strangely appealing at the same time.

The cat reappeared and sauntered toward him tail held upright and almost goose-stepping with a new-found poise and assurance. Jamie fucking hated cats, and on top of that, he was allergic to them. The last thing he needed was this frigging interfering fur ball causing him to sneeze and splutter his way through the next few minutes. He wondered if it belonged to the occupant, and briefly thought it might be even sweeter revenge to add it to his

hit list. In the end though, tempting as that sadistic thought may have been, it was unnecessary, distracting and pointless. He squirted some ethyl alcohol towards the mangy moggy and it hissed defiantly before a second squirt made it turn tail and scamper back down the stairs.

Re-focussing on the real task in hand, he picked up the rag by the dry end. He ignited it and as it burst into flame, he quickly dangled it through the letterbox and down onto the floor of the hallway. Next, he picked up the bottle and set his lighter flame as high as it would flare. He flicked the flint and held the three-inch high flame at arm's length in front of the opening. Finally, he took the bottle and sprayed the nozzle into the flame with a firm action. The fire whooshed into the hallway rather more fiercely than he expected and the paint on the outside of the letterbox scorched and bubbled with the heat.

Standing back, he waited to see how well the conflagration would take hold. He could hear spitting and crackling, and black smoke was starting to seep into the stairwell. Flames were licking into view on the other side of the door. Thankfully, there was no indication that the householder had taken the slightest notice of the public service broadcasts on TV regarding the importance of a smoke alarm.

Inside the flat John Findlay stirred slightly. He coughed and came to rather groggily. What was that smell? He coughed again, and opening his eyes, realised to his horror that it was smoke and not from a fag either. The DVD was still banging away relentlessly, but who was coming on screen was nowhere near as compelling now as what was coming from the hallway.

He rolled off the couch, vaguely remembering some fire safety bollocks about staying low, and crawled manically to the living room door like some overgrown baby.

'Pat! Pat! There's a fuckin fire, wake up man, we need to get out of here!'

He could see flames leaping around in the hallway and smoke billowed across the ceiling towards him.

'Sweet holy Christ!' he muttered.

Meanwhile, Pat Connolly slept on, blissfully unaware that his flat was about to burn down around his ears, and therefore, burn said ears in the process - as well as the rest of him if he did not wake up soon.

PAT! WAKE THE FUCK UP! THE FUCKIN HOUSE IS ON FIRE!

He hollered this rather urgent message three or four times, but it was no good, he could not rouse him from his intoxicated slumber.

Findlay was now very worried. The bathroom was beyond the flames, as was the kitchen, so he had no obvious means of dousing the blaze. The only liquid within easy reach was alcohol, and even a moron like him knew that would merely make things worse. He thought about pissing on it, but in fairness he held out little hope that this would result in anything other than bringing a whole new meaning to the phrase 'feeling a burning sensation when you pee'. He was coughing constantly now as the heat, the smoke and the fumes intensified.

He ran to the door and as he reached to try and open it (instantly scalding his hand and arm), he noticed the letterbox was open. Yelping in pain, he recoiled from the flames. He dashed back into the living room and wrapped his coat around his arm to try and protect it.

This time, he inched towards the door in stuttering, tentative moves. The heat was threatening to take his facial hair and his eyes were streaming as if two, tear-duct taps were jammed on full. His lungs were wheezing like an old pair of bellows; forced to filter the noxious air in a desperate search for oxygen molecules. He managed to get to the lock and even grabbed hold of it. In his confusion, he allowed the jacket to slip from covering his hand. The flesh sloughed off as it came into contact with the superheated metal but, with impressive determination and

tolerance of the pain, he tried in vain to open it. The bastard thing would not budge.

In the hallway, Jamie could hear Tommy's murderer going through these tribulations, but rather than feel sympathetic, he felt righteous and vibrant. He took the aerosol and sprayed it through the letterbox again with gusto.

The screams of agony from John Findlay were unsurprisingly profuse but surprisingly high-pitched. To all intents and purposes, every inch of him had been set ablaze by the ethyl alcohol, and he stumbled blindly through the flat setting fire to all manner of objects as he went, until he finally tumbled into Pat Connolly's room and set the bed on fire with him still in it.

Jamie tossed the bottles of accelerant through the letterbox where they exploded with a dull whump. As flames shot out of the opening and smoke began to pour into the vestibule, he grabbed his bag and ran down the stairs as fast as he could. The neighbours were beginning to stir with all the commotion. He barely made it into the street and on into the darkness of the park before the first of them burst out of their flats shouting and fleeing in blind panic. He did have some feelings of guilt about this, but he thought it a relatively safe bet that no one else would come to grief before the fire brigade got there.

Before he went back to the car, he stopped in the park and looked back. The top floor was now fully ablaze, and as he watched, a television crashed through the window and smashed on the ground below. This was no show of rock star petulance as Connolly, fully alight, swiftly followed it in an Icarus dive to the pavement.

In the distance, he could hear the wailing of sirens. He won his wager thanks to the rapid response of Glasgow's finest.

Jamie raised his arm, extended his middle finger, and took a swig of the tonic wine, reddening the inside of his mouth.

IN MANY WAYS

"That was for Tommy you bastards!"

26. The Way Of The World

Betty McCormack heard the letterbox rattle and walked through to the hall. She picked the envelope up from her doormat, gently opened it and pulled out the contents. The letter was written in neat and tidy handwriting. Jamie told her that Zander died trying to blackmail Danny O'Neill and that it was O'Neill himself who killed her son. Jamie tried to save him, but there was nothing he could do. He apologised for not being at the funeral, but felt it was too risky, and might have led the police to implicate both of them in some of Zander's less desirable activities over the past few months. He also let her know he would be sending her some money every month to help her out, and if she ever needed anything she was to contact him. There was five hundred pounds in cash inside a second envelope, and an email address for communicating through. He said he was going to move away from Scotland and start a new life, far away from his memories and reminders of a past only worth forgetting.

She wept another stream of tears as she put the letter back in the envelope. Her bags were packed and her ticket to Dundee booked. She would be leaving Glasgow forever, and she would be taking Zander with her: in the urn she lovingly tended every day, and sat clutching to her bosom for hours on end. It was her desperate attempt to show him the kind of devotion and love she so regretfully failed to do when he was alive. Ruth and Jonny would be there

to envelop her and give her reason to continue. Her grandchildren had been strangers for too long, and she meant to put that right.

After spending a few months living with Emma, Jamie realised the memory of their passionate Far Eastern romance was far more alluring than the reality of living together forever. The bickering over toilet seat lids left up, what film to go and see at the cinema, and any other number of domestic altercations were not in the slightest bit attractive to him. The normality and domestic bliss he thought he was pining for in the aftermath of the hell unleashed around him in Hull, was not actually for him after all. His feet were distinctly itchy. Even Emma cooled on the prospect of committing to this will o' the wisp. Her initial euphoria at his return gradually wilted in the slow burn of suspicion and distrustfulness as to his motives for doing so, and the sincerity of his proclamations of love. She could see history repeating itself and she wanted, and believed she deserved better. They agreed to part on good terms and he headed out into the world to reprise his adventures of yesteryear. This time he would enjoy it in relative sobriety and with less pecuniary recklessness.

Jamie tried to visit Tommy in order to retrieve his possessions but was shocked and stunned when a very angry and bitter Helen told him Tommy was dead. She also let him know that she dumped or sold all of his stuff, that he could quite clearly fuck off any time he liked, and that, by the way, she told the police she thought he might have something to do with Tommy's death. He tried to tell her he definitely did not, and he was sure Danny O'Neill was behind it, but in truth, he was happy to escape with all his limbs attached when he left Stuart Drive. The problem was, he knew he did have something to do with Tommy's death. If he hadn't started this chain of destruction by pursuing his vendetta against O'Neill, Tommy would never

have become collateral damage. He felt an overpowering desire to assuage his guilty conscience, and left Ayrshire vowing to avenge Tommy. He had been working with the heartless bastard long enough to know exactly who O'Neill would use to torture and kill his most syncopated friend.

All of this made his escape to hollow victory all the more important. It was likely the police would be making the connections between the various players, and he was sure Helen would be straight onto them after he left to let them know he had resurfaced. In fact, she never did. She did not actually believe he was involved. He might have been an insufferable little smart arse, but his visibly genuine shock and grief when she told him of Tommy's death convinced her: he had burst out crying for fuck's sake! Apart from anything else, if he had killed him, there was no way he would have swanned up to her house looking for his poxy guitar and amp. He was just not brave enough or stupid enough. In any case, co-operating with the police was not a comfortable thing for her to do, so she stopped.

The website did its job. O'Neill's humiliation played out relentlessly in the tabloids with salacious stories about his suicide. The revelation that rather than being a hard man, he wanted to have a hard man was the talk of Scotland for at least a month. Several rent boys and victims of his violence came forward to regale the nation with their relief at his death and what a sick, twisted monster he had been. It pressed all the worst prurient buttons in readers that the tabloids so relied on to make their living from. It also filled endless hours of discussion programmes, news channel schedules, and daytime television, human-train-wreck, chat shows.

The empire that O'Neill spent so long building collapsed when he killed himself, and since his only apparent heir was wheelchair bound and his siblings were all female, there was nothing to deter the vultures cashing

in by feeding on his corpse. This would cause DI Gordon's colleagues much angst of course, as turf wars raged and new pretenders to the throne battled it out over a very long winter of discontent. The problem with drug barons is that they are just like foxes; as soon as you take one out, unbeknownst to you there was another one without a territory waiting to come in and take his place. It was ever thus.

This was not really the concern of DI Gordon himself however. He indeed ended up pen pushing and settling disputes over privet hedges in a sleepy county town in rural Wales. Reward for his failure to crack the case comprehensively and prove that O'Neill was behind Smith's murder. He was also thoroughly reprimanded for the incompetent manner in which he pursued Jamie during the investigation. In particular, his scandalous (the Chief Inspector's humble opinion) decision to leave him alone long enough to flee the country after his fraud and links to a murdered man were uncovered. His father was mortified and had not spoken to him in months, which was less disappointing than he thought it might have been. As potentially humiliating as it was to be so blatantly demoted, there was an upside. He did find that elusive relationship, and better than that, his chosen partner did not have four legs and an aversion to mint sauce. He might have been put out to pasture, but it didn't mean he had to seek solace with his ungulate neighbours just yet.

The very public ruination of O'Neill's hard won reputation was revenge far beyond what Jamie could have hoped for, but it was tarnished. Zander and Tommy died trying to get it, and he would have to live with that guilt and regret forever. Still, at least he managed to put at least one thing right for each of them before he buggered off from this depressingly wet and windy corner of planet earth.

Revenge may well have been a dish best served cold, but he was more inclined to eighty in the shade, a white

IN MANY WAYS

sandy beach and a clear, cerulean sky

He sat in the departure lounge at Edinburgh airport watching the planes come and go to all manner of locations. He would get on one of them soon and head out into the wide blue yonder, carrying the burden of his ghosts and regrets, but at the same time, feeling hopeful that somewhere out there was a reason to look forward.

Epilogue

The beach was, as usual, utterly, and blissfully deserted. Jamie loved the solitude and tranquillity of it. The warm sand between his toes, the sun on his now bronzed back. This was the life. His memories of rain were becoming as distant as his now permanently abandoned, waterlogged, homeland. He had been for a swim in the sea and was now meandering languidly back to his beach-front hotel to have a light lunch; breakfast having been well and truly slept through. After sating his hunger, he might take a short nap, before heading into town to pick up a bit of dinner and perhaps ogle a few of the lovely local ladies in a bar or two.

The hotel was a simple affair really, but comfortable and clean, and all the staff were very friendly. He skipped up the front steps and into reception.

'Hello Mr Smith.'

The greeting from the porter at the desk was as jovial and good-natured as ever. His smile was uplifting, and his manner the epitome of customer service.

'Hey Henry, how are you doin this mornin?'

'Oh, just fine sir. Thank you for asking. Mr Smith sir, there was a young lady here this morning asking for you.'

He stopped abruptly and turned to face Henry.

'Really?'

'Yes sir. Very pretty, and had a funny accent. Not Scottish like yours, but she was speaking English.'

'Did she say who she was?'

Jamie was wracking his brains trying to think who this could be. He had been indulging in very little shenanigans since he arrived on the island - just enough to keep his hand in, so to speak - and as far as he could remember, none of his conquests were British.

'No sir, she did not. She asked if you were around, said she was an old friend, and when I told her you were out, she said she would come back later.'

'Right. Thanks Henry. I'm off to my room. If she comes back, you'll let me know won't you?'

'Yes sir, I sure will. Do you want me to send her round to you?'

'Eh, no, I'm not totally sure who it is, so I'd rather meet her out here.'

'Right you are sir.'

Jamie nodded and headed for his room feeling very slightly uneasy. He was also feeling distinctly intrigued. Could it be Emma? It was possible Henry had not taken her accent as Scots because she was far more refined than he was. But no, the porter definitely said she had a funny accent. Emma's accent was not 'funny'. Anyway, how the hell would she have tracked him down? He had not been in contact with her since the day he left Scotland, and he was here nine months later under a false name, and via at least three other far-flung parts of the world. His unease was growing.

The net curtain billowed out from the open patio doors, and Jamie stopped momentarily. Had he left his door open when he left for his swim and late morning stroll? Maybe. He might have left it open as there was no reason to worry about anyone robbing him. His passport and bankcards were in the hotel safe, he was wearing his watch, and he made a habit of having as little cash on him as possible. However, the fact remained, the door was open. Ach, it was bound to be the maid. He had no idea why he was

being so jumpy. It was just that he was sure he closed and locked it - just as he had every other day he'd been here.

It felt as if his approach to the room was like a pantomime thief. Exaggerated steps attempting to mask any footfall. The only things missing were a stripy jersey, a mask and a bag marked swag.

He stopped at the threshold, almost paralysed by uncertainty. This was ridiculous.

It was the maid! IT, WAS, THE, FUCKING, MAID! He just had to step inside and ask her to finish up because he wanted to enjoy a coffee and croissant. So why could he not take that last step?

Henry Abrams had been working at the hotel for over twenty years. It was a small island and employment opportunities were limited. The hotel once belonged to a cousin of his, but a big multi-national tour company, and their bottomless pit of money, severed the familial link. Since this windfall came his way, his cousin blew all the proceeds of the sale on drugs and drink, and was ensconced in a cemetery in the North of the island.

The various companies selling holidays to the island liked to call it "exclusive", "idyllic", "life-affirming" and any other number of marketing bullshit bingo terms. Rich Western tourists flocked there in their droves all summer and in the main, the racist fuckwits treated him like something they stepped in. He was a servant, a subject of the Empire, there to be trodden upon, drenched in disdain and talked to as if he was hardly worth the effort of expending the breath required to form their words. In fact, many guest resorted to hand signals and finger snapping as their way of attracting his attention and getting him to do their bidding. He hated those people, but he did love his job.

The job was easy. It was essentially about being nice to people and standing about all day. Occasionally he helped with luggage and sometimes he answered the phone. From

time-to-time he did some paperwork, he snoozed a fair amount, and he was usually nice to people - many of whom were thoroughly despicable to him. He also sold confidential information and drugs to anyone who cared to pay the going rate for them.

The young woman was very pretty indeed, even if he struggled to understand a word she said. He felt a tiny bit bad about divulging the room number to her, but hey, for all he knew she wanted to ride the Scottish lad like a cowgirl and he just did him a massive favour. Whatever, as much as Smith had been perfectly pleasant to him, and appeared not to consider him a serf, business was business. He did not suffer much from pangs of conscience when it came to inconveniencing affluent foreigners. Anyway, he'd done the decent thing and given him a bit of a heads up on the request, so at least the boy would be alert.

The end of his shift was fast approaching and it was almost time to wander back to his house in the town and have some dinner. He rounded off some paperwork, and exchanged pleasantries and updates with the incoming night porter before setting off down the road, a couple of hundred surreptitious dollars to the good.

He barely made it out of the driveway and onto the main road when the car pulled up alongside him. The driver made it very clear that he should get in, and under the watchful gaze of the pistol the passenger was holding, he climbed into the back seat where a second passenger was waiting for him. His hands were bound together with a plastic pull-through tie, a cloth bag was pulled over his head, and his natty little prisoner ensemble was completed by a gag forced roughly into his mouth through the bag.

The car sped along the narrow roads that hugged the coastline, before veering sharply right down a bumpy dirt track. Henry lived on the island all his life and he knew every inch of it - even with a bag on his head. He knew exactly where they were going, and now understood that he would not be coming back. He cursed his God, his own

stupidity and greed, but most of all he cursed the girl with the funny accent.

The waterfront bar was busy, and Jamie was enjoying drinking in both liquid refreshment and view in equal measure. The night sky was like a huge, sumptuous theatre curtain spangled with a staggering number of twinkling sequin stars. The lack of light pollution meant the sky here was almost painful to look at it was so bright. What few lights there were in the town reflected in the gently rolling sea. Reggae music pumped from the stereo system, and although far from his favourite musical tipple, it somehow seemed perfect. There were a mixture of locals and tourists propping up the counter. One or two of the local girls dazzled him with their stunning smiles and as the rum started to do its magic, he felt sure that he was going to get lucky tonight. The edginess and unease of earlier was chased away, and he sat in his chair sipping and swaying gently to the beat.

The girl sat down beside him on his blind-side, and he started slightly when he turned to find her smiling at him. She was stunning. Long, oily-black hair, flowing like a slick down beyond her shoulders, perfect, white teeth almost glittered, and her eyes were a truly remarkable emerald green. Her skin was pale, almost to the point of indicating ill health, and suggested she either avoided the sun, or perhaps had only just arrived on the island. Bizarre as it might seem, he thought that maybe Snow White had just taken up the adjacent chair.

‘How are you?’

She spoke with a gorgeous, lilting, Irish accent. She was probably from the North, but not definitely. Perhaps she was from the border region, but there may well have been a wee hint of Scots in it too. Somehow, it seemed to suit her perfectly.

‘Aye, eh, not bad.’

His usual confidence with women seemed to have

taken the night off, and he found himself stammering and instantaneously clammy with sweat. He was sure he was blushing too! Blushing for fuck's sake!

'I was watching you from over the way, and I thought you looked nice. I hope you don't mind me being so forward?'

This was a first for him. Not a woman chatting him up - that had happened a fair few times before. No, it was such a stunningly attractive one doing so that represented his inaugural moment. His cool and calm, smart arse persona, so carefully honed over the years, was proving ill suited to this moment.

'Well, to be honest, I was thinkin of tellin you to fuck off and leave me alone!'

He could have smashed his own face in right there and then. It was about as cringe-worthy and arrogant a remark as he could possibly have conjured up. She looked less than impressed.

'Obviously, I didn't mean that! Sorry, I'm a bit out of practice with this sort of thing, and to be honest, I don't usually have gorgeous women come up to me in bars and chat me up.'

She shook her long hair and laughed heartily, simultaneously patting him on the hand, and sending a wave of tingling excitement pulsing through him.

'Oh, it's ok! It's better than some of the crappy lines I have to endure on a nightly basis. So, I'm Mary, what's your name?'

A sense of humour, and still sitting there after that nonsense? His luck was most definitely in. He extended his hand and prepared for the rush that would sweep over him when she accepted it.

'Davie, nice to meet you Mary. Can I buy you a drink?'

It was sublime. As was she.

'I thought you'd never ask! Rum and coke please.'

Perhaps her bewitching looks caused him to overlook Henry's information from earlier in the day, but now it

came back to him.

'By the way, did you come up to my hotel today and ask for me?'

She looked at him quizzically.

'Err, no! Why would I do that? I had no idea who you were when I sat down, and I have no idea where you're staying. Is it not enough that I chatted you up in the bar? You make me sound like a stalker!'

'Naw, naw, forget it! It's just a weird coincidence obviously - some lassie with an accent came lookin for me today at the hotel, and I've no idea who she was. I'll get you that drink. Please don't leave me!'

He winked and made as if to get on one knee and beg forgiveness. She laughed and the moment passed.

They began to chat in earnest and her easygoing nature helped Jamie find his feet and relax. He was swimming in her eyes and undressing her with every look. He never felt so physically moved by a female ever before. Nerves, stomach, muscles, groin, eyes, heart, sweat glands, throat, lips and all, were united in a tumult and symphony of joyous wonderment and anticipation. It was clear from almost the moment she sat down that she intended to bed him. Maybe it was the sea air, the holiday atmosphere, or the rum, but whatever it was, he was truly thankful for it.

They danced, and drank, ate some seafood, and drank, danced some more, and drank, and then went for a stroll along the beach. She linked arms with him and he was sure he might dissolve into the sand. Under the moon, on a secluded stretch of beach just out of sight of the revellers on the waterfront, she pulled him to her and kissed him with a ferocity and passion he could scarcely believe. After what seemed like an eternity, their clinch broke and she whispered in his ear.

'Take me back to your room.'

She did not have to ask twice.

Jamie paid the taxi driver and tipped him generously. They embraced again, before trotting up the driveway and

round the back of the main hotel building towards his room. This time he definitely did leave the door open in order to keep the room cool, and he was so happy he did. As they approached the gently swishing net, Mary suddenly stopped.

'You go in first, take off your clothes and lie on the bed.'

'Eh? Aye, ok, fine.'

He was already sporting an erection so hard he could chop logs with it, so the excuse to free it from his trousers was a most welcome one.

Something stopped him just as he was about to enter the room. Something was not right. Deep down inside him an alarm bell rang, rather belatedly it had to be said, but nonetheless, it was now jangling rather insistently. Why did this girl pick him out at the bar? Why did he accept her denial of asking for him with Henry so easily? That was actually very straightforward. Like most men in such situations, he allowed the deadly duo of his penis and too much alcohol to dictate his actions and reactions. Why would someone who could clearly have her pick of the millionaires who frequented the island, take up with someone who was only one step removed from a backpacker? How many gorgeous girls with funny English accents could there be in this off peak season? All these thoughts chased through his mind in an instant, but it was an instant too late as it happened.

As Jamie turned to ask Mary for some re-assurance, she hit him with a full roundhouse kick to the temple. She was obviously more than a little useful at martial arts, and as he toppled through the curtain, pulling it around him like a shroud as he went, she dived on top of him and started trying to knock seven bells of shite out of him. As much as it went against the grain to do so, he felt compelled to defend himself and was grateful for both his boxing skills and his inherent strength advantage. With the element of surprise no longer on her side, he was soon able to pin her

to the floor, spitting and snarling and hissing profanities that would have made a navvy blush.

'Get the fuck off her Argyle! Now!'

The voice was a deep Ulster brogue that was familiar and yet not. As Davie looked behind him, a second woman smashed him round the side of the head with a pistol, and he fell sideways onto the bedroom floor, groggy and surprised for the second time by the onslaught of a female assailant. Both girls now dragged him to his feet before roughly pushing him onto his bed. If this was some weird sex game, he had to say he would have preferred good old missionary position any time.

Jamie's eyes adjusted and the grogginess cleared a little, but he thought he must be dreaming. Sitting in his wheelchair in front of him was Sean Duffy! Jamie was staggered. How the fuck did he find him? Why had he felt the need to chase him half way around the world? And, who the fuck were the two women flanking him? Mary the Snow White ninja and this other, almost as beautiful, raven-haired gun-slinger.

"So Davie, or is it Jamie, or have you got another name up your sleeve?"

He cocked his head in a familiar fashion and waved his silenced pistol in Jamie's direction.

"I bet you're wondering how the fuck I managed to find you, so you are. Well, let me tell you. It wasn't fucking easy. You're a slippery wee fish and no mistake!"

This was not a good situation. It made his discomfort and concern in the Hull car park feel like a warm up gig. He was sizing things up rapidly. Duffy sat in his chair in front of the doors, the net curtain strewn all over the floor under the wheels now. Mary was at his right shoulder, hands on hips and licking her slightly fat and cut lip - in a manner that in other circumstances would have been highly arousing. The other girl, dressed in tight jeans and a t-shirt, stood at his left shoulder. She held an identical

silenced pistol to Sean's in her hand, and pointed it directly at Jamie.

'So, what do you think to my sisters then? Mary you already met and became rather enamoured with it would seem, and this is Brenda.'

'Sean, what the fuck are you doin here and what the fuck is it with this pair tryin to knock my fuckin head off my shoulders?'

He gingerly patted the area where the gun stock connected and found it was bleeding.

'What am I doing here? Well, I thought that would have been fucking obvious Sherlock! I'm here for my revenge. My pound of flesh. I'm here to repay you and your fucked up little brother for putting me in this chair, and then sending my uncle to an early grave.'

'The girls are here to get their revenge, oh, and to look after me so they are. You see, some little bastard crippled me a while back, but then, you already know that.'

'Look Sean, I'm really sorry that Zander did that to you. I had no idea he was plannin to go after you. My gripe was with your Uncle Danny. He killed my Mum.'

Sean and the girls exchanged glances that suggested he just mentioned something they were not so sure about.

'What the fuck are you going on about? You were in it together - I know you were. You see, Danny left me all his money so he did, and there was plenty of money, and plenty of money buys plenty of information. I've had a lot of time on my hands since the attack, and I've had some willing helpers.'

At this point Mary decided to chip in.

'What did you mean when you said Uncle Danny killed your Mammy?'

Jamie had to try and take advantage of this moment of doubt and potential sympathy.

'He sold her drugs, and when I tried to stop him, he pushed me away and laughed in my face. I was fifteen for fuck's sake and within a year my Mammy was dead, and it

was down to him sellin her the poison to do it with. It took me a long time, but I got my own back. He killed himself though. I didn't have to. Oh, and he also killed Zander, so he got your revenge for you.'

There was an uneasy silence, and all four parties became palpably ill at ease and unsure of what to do next. Well almost all four. Jamie was absolutely certain of what he needed to do.

He had been ever so slightly shifting his position on the bed as they talked, and was now almost on the edge and up near the head board. He took advantage of the distraction offered by the verbal exchange to get set. Now he went for it.

Rolling off the bed and thrusting his hand under the mattress, he retrieved his gun, and to the great shock of his audience, he let off a round as it came free from its hiding place. It whanged into Brenda just above her right hip. She screamed in agony and fell to the ground, dropping her gun in the process. Instinctively, Mary ran to her, and as Sean looked on in disbelief, Jamie rolled forward, stood up, picked up the net curtain by its edges and wrapped it right over his head, and then around him, pinning his arms to his side. He ran, rolling him out of the room and across the grass in front of his cabin.

Behind him, he could hear Mary wailing and sobbing as she cradled and consoled her injured sister, and Sean was calling him all manner of names. The gun was being fired randomly and mostly into the ground, but he knew that at any moment Sean would use the advantage of his upper body strength, wrestle his arm free and get a clear shot at him. Enough people had died already and he did not intend to add to the body count - his own body or anyone else's. He drove Sean straight into the swimming pool.

The shock from the impact of the cold water was fearsome, and the temperature and the darkness rendered him completely disorientated. At this time of night the pool was no longer lit, and he floundered, tangled in the

net and unsure of whether he was at the bottom of the pool, near the edge or right on the surface. His legs were useless and as strong as his arms had become, Sean could not seem to get any stroke going. He choked and snorted, trying not to breathe the water in. The chair also tangled in the net, and sank to the bottom, weighing him down. He struggled and tugged and rolled, and his chest heaved because he was travelling backwards and did not have time to prepare for his dunking. He inhaled some water and his head spun.

Jamie stood on the edge of the pool panting heavily, watching his disabled adversary struggling in the water. He turned to check if Mary had decided to come after him, and to his relief she had not. He jumped into the pool and dragged Sean to the shallow end, and then up and out, and onto the grass surrounding it. Checking he had a pulse, which he did, he got back in and dived down to retrieve the silenced gun.

As he resurfaced he found Mary standing at the side of the pool with Brenda's gun in her hand pointing it at him. He returned the favour two fold.

'Mary, I don't want to shoot you, but I will if you don't put the gun down.'

She was snivelling and shaking, and clearly well outside her comfort zone.

'You, you bastard! You shot Brenda. You shot my wee sister right in the fucking stomach!'

'That's as maybe, but it was self defence, and I only wounded her Mary, I didn't try to kill her. And I only dooked Sean to stop him killin me, I didn't try to kill him either. I'm sick of all the killin and the violence. I just want to be left in peace to live my life. So please, put the fuckin gun down!'

She was shaking uncontrollably now and let out a huge sob, before dropping her gun to the ground, dropping herself to her knees, and weeping into both hands between sudden inhalations of self pity. Behind her Sean coughed

and spluttered, and moaned as he came to.

Jamie waded out of the pool, picked up the last gun from beside Mary, and as he headed for the hotel reception, turned and addressed her.

'Go and sit with your sister, I'm away to phone an ambulance.'

Three days after Sean, Brenda and Mary bid their less than fond farewells to the island; a certain Mr H. Abrams sauntered up the steps of the hotel to report for duty. This greatly surprised his employer, and his wife, both of whom were convinced he either eloped with some cheap floozy, took a swim with the sharks thanks to some angry, cuckolded husband, or was buried by some rival drug dealer; depending on which scurrilous rumour best suited their audience at the time. Small islands, where nothing much happened, thrived on such tittle-tattle.

His cover story was that two burly attackers mugged him while he walked home and this caused some form of amnesia. He spent the last two weeks wandering the beaches in the south of the island, scratching a living from kindly tourists and friendly natives. On the morning of his re-appearance, he claimed he suddenly regained his memory and returned home, collected his uniform and headed to work.

In reality, the Duffy's paid him a relatively large sum to stay out of the way until they dealt with Jamie, and to stay quiet after they were long gone back to Ireland. He, of course, was living it up at their expense in the south of the island, but decided to get back north before he incurred the wrath of a wronged, cheap floozy, an angry, cuckolded husband, or a rival drug dealer.

As Jamie stood in the prow of the small fishing boat that would smuggle him off the island and deposit him on the mainland (before he flew onwards via a small airstrip to another far flung destination), he was grateful there were

still some places where corruption was easily obtainable and the mighty dollar still talked loudest. He made his peace of sorts with the Duffy's. Brenda would be fine. More by luck than design, he winged her, missing any vital organs or arteries, and with some TLC she was back on her feet in a week or so. Sean accepted that there were no more wrongs to be righted between them, and that the pointless cycle of vendetta had to stop before any other 'innocents' were caught in the crossfire.

Jamie made his financial peace with the local constabulary and promised them he would never darken their shores again - as did Sean and the girls.

Somewhere in the South Pacific, there was a beach hut and a cocktail with his name on it. Which particular name? He would decide once he got there.

The End



Thank You!

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Look out for my other novels *Pandoras Pitbull* and *Stark Contrasts* which are both available on Amazon Kindle

All the best

Peter

About The Author

Peter grew up in Scotland near Alloa and now lives in Dunblane with his wife and daughter. He's a musician and plays bass guitar in a rock band. Peter is also a keen birder and loves travelling – often combining the two. A committed conservationist, he worked for the RSPB for over 13 years and now works as a freelance wildlife surveyor. This is his first novel.

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IN MANY WAYS

A young man is abducted and mutilated for talking out of turn, and a policeman is murdered as a result – all in a day's work for Danny O'Neill, Scotland's most notorious gangster.

Meanwhile, small-time drug dealer and shop worker Davie Argyle has just crossed O'Neill's path. Davie has been waiting a long time for this. He needs to swallow his pride and convince O'Neill to trust him. Thing is, can he stay alive long enough for his plan to work?

Torture, murder, rock n roll and bloody revenge ensue as pasts unfurl and long-held secrets reveal themselves.

In many ways, it was only a matter of time until it all kicked off...

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In Many Ways is everything a thriller should be, (fast-paced, great plot, unforgettable well-observed characters, with more sharp twists and vertiginous turns than a drive through the Highlands) but with two bonus extras: a fresh, inventive use of language and a sense of fun.

A great entertaining read, with so many twists and turns, that just when you think you know what is going to happen next, something else comes along and pulls the rug from under you. Very well thought out plot line and in depth characters. Highly recommended.

Wow what a good read; plenty of pace and action a real page turner really enjoyed it.



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