

H1

THERE ARE
TIMES IN LIFE

WHEN HELL
IS THE
FAVOURABLE
OPTION

David C Jaundrell

These books are dedicated to
Banner
(Wendy Mansell)

Acknowledgements

For their continual patience

Adrian Frost	Grosvenor Casinos (Rank Group)
Chris Purnell	Attachment Theory
Clive Miller	Ex BSAC Advanced Scuba Instructor
Gavin Smith	Fight Tech
Jerome Hamilton	Consultant – Night Club Security
Kenneth KK Downing	Guitarist – Judas Priest (H6)
Liam Bell	Head Gamekeeper – Millichope Park
Mark Corbett (Dr)	Molecular Biologist
Mickey Wernick	Professional poker player and gambler
Neil Channing	Professional poker player and gambler
Roger Higgins	Ladbrokes
Roger Tucker	Ex Prison Governor
Steve Hindley	And the creatures in his dining room

And

Bank of England
Bell Helicopters
Christie's
Ferrari Dealer
Israeli Embassy

Landowners Association

Lear Corporation

Mercedes Dealer

Natural History Museum

Sotheby's

Telford Crematorium

US Treasury

Main Characters

Adrian	Casino Manager
Andy Pandy	Supplies muscle for 'dirty work'
Angelika Mauss	German wife
Sir Anthony Gibbs-White	Senior Partner – Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, City Solicitors
Arthur	Works on 'roads'
Benshima Reyes	Partner of H
Big John	Supplies muscle and transport
Biggles	Ex RAF Tornado pilot, now freelance
Billy Simmons	Poker player. Ex champion boxer
Brian	Manager – Secure Security Ltd
Byron Oberholser III	US company VP
Cerberus	H's poker name
Cleggy Jenkins	Ex gambling industry executive
Clown	Works 'on roads'
Elroy	Leader of gang of black youths
Ernest Hathaway	Successful British businessman
Mr Evans	Betting shop owner
Freddie	Rich property owner
James James	Owner of Night Clubs and Secure Security

Jorgen Mannesmann	Wealthy German
Mr Kaye	Private Hospital Consultant
Marion Hathaway	Ernest Hathaway's wife
Marty	Night Club Manager
Mary and Charles James	James parents
Michael Payne	Private Hospital Consultant
Miguel Carmena	Head of International Investment – Colombian Bank
Patricia Hathaway	Ernest Hathaway's daughter
Peter Nephew	Owner – Regent Capital Securities Ltd
Ramon	Leader of East European gang
Ramon Jr	Son – based in England
Senor and Senora Reyes	Parents of Benshima
Rico	Internet poker player
Sebastian ('Needles')	Doctor
Snowman	Seller of sun balms
Terry	City Financier
Toby	In charge of night clubs
Twins	Luke and Lliam

Contents

Chapter 1	The Cabal
Chapter 2	Poker
Chapter 3	H meets Benshima
Chapter 4	Big Tony
Chapter 5	The Cabal
Chapter 6	Ernest Hathaway
Chapter 7	The Job
Chapter 8	Nice walk home...?
Chapter 9	King Lear
Chapter 10	Freddie
Chapter 11	The Darkness
Chapter 12	Holiday
Chapter 13	James James
Chapter 14	Holiday
Chapter 15	Welcome....
Chapter 16	English humour
Chapter 17	The first club
Chapter 18	The twins
Chapter 19	Bogotá Butterflies
Chapter 20	Rico
Chapter 21	Angelika
Chapter 22	Needles
Chapter 23	The Ferrari
Chapter 24	The Cabal
Chapter 25	Nearly.....

Chapter 26	At the chateau
Chapter 27	Secure Security
Chapter 28	Boxing night
Chapter 29	A good view of London
Chapter 30	Senor Reyes
Chapter 31	Anmcioha
Chapter 32	A good job done
Chapter 33	Ringin friends
Chapter 34	Starting again
Chapter 35	The Embassy
Chapter 36	The Cabal
Chapter 37	The Consultant
Chapter 38	Toby explains
Chapter 39	Halstomicnili
Chapter 40	Poor H
Chapter 41	Back to Colombia
Chapter 42	The Cabal
Chapter 43	The go between
Chapter 44	Halstomicnili
Chapter 45	The in between
Chapter 46	The priest
Chapter 47	The Cabal
Chapter 48	Benshima
Chapter 49	Halstomicnili
Chapter 50	The Cabal
Chapter 51	Halstomicnili
Chapter 52	The hospital

Chapter 53	Halstomicnili
Chapter 54	White pussy
Chapter 55	Hfoomesmoctucoa
Chapter 56	Hathaway reflects....
Chapter 57	God visits
Chapter 58	A nice swim
Chapter 59	H is back
Chapter 60	The twins
Chapter 61	So how....?
Chapter 62	Team again.....?
Chapter 63	The Chateau
Chapter 64	Talking is good for you...
Chapter 65	Take a note.....
Chapter 66	The Wedding
Chapter 67	Marion
Chapter 68	The moon in June.....
Chapter 69	Mmmmm.....?
Chapter 70	Leave the girls to it...?
Chapter 71	Cleggy
Chapter 72	Ernest
Chapter 73	You may not know this..
Chapter 74	Helping your friends...
Chapter 75	Retired...
Chapter 76	H



Chapter 1

The Cabal

In a far off land several men were standing on the quiet roof terrace of their new, nearly built holiday hotel. The workers had gone home for the day and it was just them and their guests enjoying the sea view. The hot sun sparkled on the still blue waters and glinted on the soft pale brown sand.

Their guests, the women they had invited, were sitting in a corner and waiting for the men to decide what to do next. The men were drinking wine, laughing and enjoying the occasion.

The women, who had been defiled in every way possible, were bound, gagged and terrified. They had already watched the men take bets on how long it would take for a woman, thrown into the open, one hundred foot deep elevator shaft, to reach the bottom.

And now, not content with that, they were arranging a side bet: which part of the woman would hit the hard, unyielding concrete floor first...? Would it crush her skull or break her

legs like matchsticks.....?

The bets arranged, they chose one of the terrified women, dragged her to the open shaft and, for more fun, held her body diagonally over it so that her feet were still secure but her body hovered over the abyss, and her eyes could see the bottom.

One of the men said, 'Let her live.'

'Why?'

'She's already given us what we want so why kill her?'

'Why not?'

'I feel in a good mood.'

'Fuck you.'

'Come on...let's put her back with the others and fuck 'em off.'

They debated this for a moment and then all agreed. They dragged her back from the brink and stood her upright.

'You're a lucky girl, eh?'

She nodded frantically, and tears streamed from her eyes. Relief swept through her and her body started to shake uncontrollably.

Then they pushed her to her death.....

It added just a touch more pleasure to an already good game.....

Chapter 2

Poker

In his light, spacious study, 'H' lounged in a well-used, comfortable leather revolving chair, his feet resting casually on a large desk. On the wall in front of him, a 36" plasma screen took a feed from a PC which stood humming under the desk. Connected to an internet poker site the screen showed a green baize card table and six seats; four empty and two players left.

H had slowed played Ace King and been beaten by a Seven Three who had picked up two pair.

Well played, Jimmy boy..... A master class in how to lose money.....

From first to worst!

H watched the chips move over to Grungo. The chat box lit up with GG. Top pair with top kicker, thought H again. Fuck! He had wagered £500 with a £50 buy-in and forty-five minutes later it had all gone. Not quite all as he had finished second, but fucking hell.....!

In another time H would have ranted and raged about hard luck and that he was always getting *bad beats*, but he had read a book by Dan Harrington that soberly suggested you forgot your own good beats and only remembered the bad ones! True, H thought. Wise words.....

Benny walked in from the lounge.

‘Tea, James? Coffee? Something cold?’ she asked.

Kicking himself away from the desk the chair circled to see her. ‘Yes, good.’

Benny smiled. This man would say yes to most things. Just prepare it and present it and he was happy. He didn’t really care what it was; only that he had been given it by someone who *did* care. She walked over to him, put her arms around his neck and kissed his forehead. ‘Winning?’

‘Nah..... Just try and find Rico and then get ready. What time’s the film?’

‘Eight thirty.’

He put his arms round her waist and snuggled his face into her bosom. Peace enveloped him as her warmth and scent filled his being. He softly kissed between her breasts and gently patted her bum. She kissed him again and moved to the door.

‘What are we doing after the film?’ he asked.

‘You’re doing me.’

She went out of the room, and he watched her hips sway, and her long, wavy, jet black hair follow her as though she had several tiny black lambs gambolling on her shoulders.....

You’re doing me. It was the price he paid for love.....

Chapter 3

H meets Benshima

H and Benny had been together for nearly eighteen months, and he had loved every minute. He still marvelled that she was his. H was a man's man. Always had been. H had bedded half London, not necessarily for the right reasons, but when he saw Benny some unaccountable switch in his brain decided to flip and so did he...

.....He was in a restaurant with the flavour of the month or at least someone who was going to get the flavour of the month. Classy, sexy, leggy, busty; not exactly bright but a reasonable evening's company. She had on a nice low top which highlighted her wonderful tits and some men in the restaurant had had a surreptitious look.

H was enjoying the meal, but in his mind, he was thinking about work. Tomorrow he had a meeting of the managers of his night clubs which they did every week, and he wanted to chuck a new idea in to get more customers through the doors.....and make more money. After those thoughts, he moved to having a good orgasm after the meal and a good night's sleep.

The entrance to the restaurant was in his line of sight, and he watched as a man and woman came in together. Friends, perhaps lovers....but nothing else. Something about the woman grabbed James' attention, and he felt instantly charged. His pulse raced, and he felt clammy. What the hell was going on? He watched them as they were shown to their table and he continued watching.....fascinated.

Watching the woman and completely lost in his own world, James' reverie was broken by a sarcastically abrupt 'Excuse me...'

'Sorry...' he said, turning to look at her annoyed face, 'bit of a problem at work occupying my mind.'

'I thought you said everything was going fine...?'

I said I enjoyed your fucking company, but that wasn't entirely correct either, thought H. 'Sorry...where were we...?'

'I was telling you about my new Gucci bag with detachable strap. It's wonderful.... they're very clever the French, don't you think...?'

H looked at her and wondered what the hell he was doing there? An expensive meal, a conversation that lacked any intellectual stimulation and all this for a fuck? Ah well...he had already spent the money so one more good fuck and she could *fuck off*.....

He watched the other table surreptitiously as the night dragged on and he knew he had to meet her. She was Latin, somewhere in South America. Brazil? Perhaps Venezuela? H

smiled inwardly to himself. As though he would know the difference between women in South America?

Bullshitter!

Physically she was tall, slim, nice bust and long legs, which was nice but he could get that anywhere. There were lots of women with good figures, natural or paid for, and most would be more than happy to be fucked by H. But for the first time in his thirty-eight years, H wanted to be with a woman. That woman. *The woman sitting over there with another man.* His pulse was racing... He made up his mind, excused himself from the tits in front of him and went over to her.

‘Excuse me,’ he said to her.

‘Yes?’

‘This is difficult to explain, so I will make it simple.....’ he took a breath and tried hard not to stutter..... ‘I don’t know you, have never met you, never spoken to you, know nothing about you,’ he paused, ‘however.....I would like to know you, be with you and I would like you to be with me. If you can do that, and you’re comfortable, I will take care of you and make you safe for the rest of your life.’

It was a peculiar choice of words *‘make you safe for the rest of your life....’*

In fact, the whole sentence was utter nonsense, and he knew it but it was what he wanted, or even needed to say no matter how ridiculous it seemed and sounded. A wave of

embarrassment flooded through him. Some part of H's brain wondered not only who had said that but should they be certified.....?

'Excuse me, pal,' said her dinner partner, 'I think you should fuck off before someone gets hurt.'

H ignored him and continued to look into her eyes. He was trying to tell her something.....with his eyes. *Please* look at my eyes.....

The man grabbed H's arm and tried to pull it towards him but it didn't move.

'Excuse me,' said H softly to the woman and turned very slowly to look at the man. 'My friend.....'

'You're not my fucking friend,' said the man aggressively.

H paused, moved his face a little closer to her dinner partner, his eyes boring down into him, telling him to be very careful.

'Would you prefer me to be your enemy.....?'

The man was about to say something but the part of his brain, honed over millions of years, that preferred life over death shut him up immediately and he said nothing. He sat there defiant for a moment, and then imperceptibly his body moved back in his chair.....

'My friend,' H continued, 'you are right to be annoyed as I've invaded your evening, but I am talking to this lady. Now she may be your lady but, according to her ring finger, she is not your wife. If she had been your wife, I would not have taken this liberty. I am not going to ask your permission to speak to this lady as I don't need your permission. She is your dinner

date, not your chattel, and so I'm asking you politely to allow me to finish this conversation..... The lady only has to say yes or no. It won't take long.'

H stared into his eyes. Not blinking. Waiting.....

The man thought for a second about what to do and started going through the options. If he backed down now the woman would see him as some sort of coward; if he decided to make a play it was likely he would see tomorrow from a hospital bed.....or he could call for the Manager. The last option was very tempting but was almost as bad as the first. Whatever happened he was not going to come out of this in a white knight sort of way. Aaah fuck! The second passed, and he moved even more imperceptibly back and lower in his seat.

He looked at H.

Looking at H made you realise why he was called H and not James. H was *huge* and the abbreviated version 'H' had stuck many years ago. It was not so much that he was actually huge, but his *presence* was huge. He was six foot two and built like a Greek God; ruggedly handsome with an athlete's frame, powerful but not bulky, menacing but not outwardly so. Men knew from looking at H that what he had available to him was an inner strength with an inner violence.

An inner violence that you didn't really want to unleash.

A voice squeezed its way between them, and they both looked at her.

‘Thank you for your rather crude and untimely offer but no thank you.’

Before H had computed the words, an old emotion reared its ugly head and fear and panic instantly flooded through him and immediately crushed him. His confidence gushed out of him as though a drain tap had been turned on, to be replaced by a pain and inadequacy that engulfed him and he fought hard to keep calm. H looked at her for a moment and nodded slightly several times as though he was trying to understand what she had said. He bowed his head towards her, nodded to her companion and walked back to his table and the waiting woman who had ordered a very expensive bottle of champagne in pique.

‘What an arsehole,’ said the wealthy, sophisticated man of impeccable breeding, ‘what an uncouth fucking arsehole.’

H went back to the restaurant every three weeks for three months to try to meet her again, but she was never there.

He gave up; without giving up.

Six months later in his large, modern, expensive apartment overlooking the Thames, H, a little worse for wine, was screaming abuse at his monitor as yet again that night someone had caught a card on the river, when the phone rang with the ‘internal’ tone.

He pressed the button. ‘Yes?’

‘A lady to see you, sir,’ said the concierge.

‘Who is it?’

A muffled sound. ‘She won’t give me her name, but the lady says you are going to look after her forever, sir.’

‘Tell her to fuck off; I’ve already got a mother.’

More muffled sounds.... A woman’s voice came on. ‘You were going to keep me safe for the rest of my life.’

‘Eh?’

‘If you make me repeat it I’m leaving,’ said the voice.

The wine which had dulled his head and fucked up his poker suddenly cleared. ‘Stay there...Don’t go!’ he screamed into the phone and hurtled to the door.

Ignoring the lift, he started to run down the ten flights of stairs to the lobby. Three-quarters of the way down he stumbled and slid on a step, his legs rearing into the air, levelling him out and crashing him down onto the hard tiled steps. His head banged against a sharp edge, and he saw stars in his eyes. Dizziness enveloped him, and he knew there was blood coming out of the back of his head. He wanted to sleep but thought *fuck this*, shook his head and dragging himself up he hung on grimly to the bannister and lurched on down. At the bottom, he stumbled again and smacked his head on the door and went down in a heap.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! He screamed to himself.

Picking himself up again he opened the door and almost fell into the lobby. Blood streamed across his face and he tried to focus through its red mist. She was there! My God, it was her!

H was oblivious to the fact that he looked like an escapee from the Texas chainsaw massacre and ignored the look on the concierge's face which was one of some concern. For who was debatable.....?

Benny stood there dressed in jeans and blouse and holding an overnight travel bag. H shuffled over to her, and she handed it to him, but he was close to passing out and dropped it.

'Can I help you, sir?' asked the concierge moving towards H but he growled like a big angry cat, shook his head, picked up the bag again and walked to the lift.

The concierge watched them get in, the lift start to move up, and he immediately erased it from his memory. He knew in this block of apartments you saw nothing and knew nothing, so he went back to his paper. Page three reminded him of his wife; not the one he had, the one he should have had.....

In the lift, she looked at him but said nothing. H's head was clearing, but it buzzed like a wasps' nest, and although the blood was flowing less he felt like shit.

In the apartment, H took her coat and wondered what to do with her travel bag. He put it on a large couch that sat in front of the towering floor to ceiling windows that looked up the river Thames. Desperate for something to say H asked, 'Drink?'

‘Coffee, please,’ she replied, ‘medium, small amount of milk and no sugar.’

H wandered into the spacious, hi-tech Poggenpohl kitchen with its gleaming stainless steel and his mind filled with questions. Firstly, what the fuck did ‘medium’ mean and what was a ‘small amount’ of milk? Was there a scale somewhere that he should use? A measuring thingy with small, medium and large on it?

Secondly, what was her name?

Thirdly, she’s arrived but with few clothes. What does that mean?

Fourthly, how did she *know* where he lived?

Fifthly, *that may not even be a word*. Am I going mad?

Sixthly, am I brain-damaged? He poked the back of his head with his finger, felt the caked blood, took some kitchen towel, wet it with cold water and wiped his head then rinsed it out and wiped his face.

She looked around the room. The Greenwich location had much to offer, and through the enormous windows she could track the river Thames; through the windows on the other side of the room, the Natwest Tower loomed in the distance. She reckoned he had paid about a million and a half pounds, maybe two, for the apartment and spent a fair amount furnishing it but it looked like any expensive pad that you would see in a ‘house and homes’ magazine. She debated whether he had bought the ‘show apartment’ and just kept all the furniture...

The odds and sods that made up the rest were an entirely eclectic assortment of what she would call bric-a-brac and at odds with the upmarket, state of the art, apartment. Objects bought from holidays abroad that he had taken a shine to but had no idea they did not 'fit in' with anything at home. Surprisingly the complete naivety of the 'eclectic' acquisitions and their total lack of pretence quite charmed her, and the very expensive Brioni jacket thrown over the back of a chair, in an absolute *who cares* fashion, made her smile.

H went back in the lounge to find it empty and the bag gone. For a second he panicked as he thought she'd left, but he also noticed his feeling was tinged with a tiny amount of relief. Why he had no idea.....? She walked in from the second bedroom.

'I've left my things in there for now. I hope that's ok?'

It was a question that wasn't looking for an answer. She indicated to the opposing sofas. 'Sit down,' she said quite assuredly as though it was her place, 'and let's talk.'

'My name is Benshima Reyes. My friends call me Benshee or Benny. I am from Colombia; thirty-four years old; divorced a long time ago with no children and *don't like swearing*.' She glared at him. 'I worked in publishing until four weeks ago until I told my boss what he could do with his suggestion.'

Her voice was just a touch husky, even earthy, but very feminine and warm. H found the word 'safe' coming to mind for some reason. She was 'safe'..... His body flooded with a

strange tingle and he felt emotional, but he controlled his outward demeanour. Her hands animated her words and made her look almost childlike as she expressed herself.

‘And you,’ she continued, ‘are James James. You own nightclubs and have a company that provides..... *protection*.’

She said the last word slowly suggesting that she thought it offered quite the opposite. ‘I assume that is not all you do.....?’

She waited for a response, but it was not really a question. And it was not going to get an answer...

‘Obviously, I know very little about you, but it seems that you are one of those rare people.....a thug with brains.....’

For a moment H bristled. Who the hell was she to judge what he was? He was not used to being talked to like this. Had a man said that he would now be apologising. And the word *thug* riled him. He was not a thug; what he did was done professionally with detail and planning. How was that thuggish? He knew the word had been bastardised. The thuggees from the Hindi word tuggee who were prominent in the seventeenth to the nineteenth century were organised and painstaking, but now the word included every drunken, punch throwing fucking idiot at a football match!

‘Does that description bother you?’ she asked.

‘A little. A touch harsh perhaps when you don’t know me?’

‘Which bit made you uncomfortable? Thug or brains?’

A huge grin spread across his face. He liked this woman. A woman you could talk to, be with.....*be safe with*.....?

She removed a speck of fibre from her Williams jeans, picked up her coffee and sat back, daintily sipping. H watched her full lips touching the cup.

‘Just one more thing,’ she said. ‘You are a man of means, power of a dubious sort and contacts. Why didn’t you try and find me if you wanted me so much?’

H paused for a moment. It had been his first response as he could easily have found her. The restaurant would have told him and he could have found her in minutes..... but he didn’t. H knew the answer.

‘I didn’t want to. It seemed to me that to find you would have been a bit.....businesslike. This wasn’t business. There are times when I need to find.....associates..... and I didn’t really want to go down that route.’

She smiled. ‘You softy.’

Another wide grin creased his face.

They continued with small talk for a while, but any probing from H was met with very little in the way of startling information. What did he expect? Later he took her for a meal and when they returned she thanked him, kissed him softly on the cheek then turned to the bedroom she had commandeered, left the door open and went to bed.

H was a bit lost. When a woman comes into your house, gets in a bed and leaves her door open you fuck 'em. What else? But Benny? For some reason, H had had the impression that if he went in he would come straight out with a knife in his eye. Why would he think that? Jesus! Was she a psycho? Why would he believe that? He shook his head to clear it. *Come on Jimmy boy, get your act together.*

He wandered into the study, turned on the computer and played poker for an hour and a half. Only part concentrating and with no patience he played bad hands, chased cards and lost money quickly. Then he went to bed.

Sleep eluded him, so he put on a tracksuit and went to the gym in the basement of the building where he ran, cycled and hit the shit out of a punch bag for an hour, showered and then went back upstairs.

He still couldn't sleep, and in the morning his head ached, and he still felt like shit.....

Chapter 4

Big Tony

.....She went out of the room; he watched her hips sway, and her long, wavy, jet black hair follow her as though she had several tiny black lambs gambolling on her shoulders as she went to make a cup of tea and he went back to find Rico.

He fucking hated Rico! Rico beat him at poker and H didn't like it. Rico was the luckiest bastard in the whole of the fucking world. When he was about to lose, the river would always save him. One day, if H ever found out who he was, the river wouldn't save him; it would be his grave.

H felt himself becoming destructive and stopped dead still. He didn't move for several minutes. He thought about his feelings and what they related to and knew it was nonsense to wish someone dead just because they beat you at poker. Killing and violence didn't bother H, but there had to be a specific reason. It may be self-defence, or it may be planned, but there had to be a rational reason. And getting beat at poker wasn't one, no matter how lucky the bastard was!

H started to scour the two poker sites that he knew Rico used. One was quite specialised and catered for more expensive games that the City boys, celebs and footballers

used. He was distracted when the phone went, and he pushed the speaker button. 'Yes?'

'H,' said Marty, the manager at one of H's five clubs, 'we have a problem.'

'Go on.'

'Big Tony's dead.'

'What? What the fuck do you mean big Tony's dead? Why is he dead?'

'We have no idea why. There was no fight, no disturbance. The cameras show a couple walk up to Big Tony, talk a moment and then walk away. After a few seconds, Big Tony drops to the floor and he's dead!'

'Marty, you're starting to piss me off. Tell me how he fucking died!'

'We're not sure, H, but it looks as though he was stabbed in the heart with something very long and very thin. A bit like a stiletto.'

Fucking great, thought H.

'With you in thirty minutes.'

He explained the problem to Benny and told her he would get back as soon as he could.

Chapter 5

The Cabal

Several thousand miles away on the roof garden terrace of a nearly completed ten-storey holiday hotel, five men sat around a table. It was the only furniture in the whole building, and the small table and few chairs made the ten thousand square-foot floor look enormous. The three Russians and two swarthy Albanians all had expensive black leather jackets, large aviator watches and were partners in several lucrative businesses: prostitution, extortion, people trafficking and supplying little children to those that had need of them. They regarded themselves as businessmen, but they were essentially animals who traded in flesh, violence and misery, and human life meant nothing to them. To them, there was a direct correlation between misery and profit.

The more the pain and suffering, the more the profit. No pain.....no gain.

Their main area of operation was Russia or at least a small part of it, but Russia was getting a bit difficult. The 'mafia' in Russia were now incredibly powerful and didn't take kindly to local competition. In the old communist days it wasn't a problem, but the mafia, now with their vast wealth and enormous influence, bribed government officials quite openly

and had 'competitors' shut down for some technical planning reason. It was easier than blowing the place up, and you could move in afterwards.....

The nearly finished building they were sitting in was theirs; built with the illegal fruits of their various enterprises. They knew their country would be a tourist goldmine and this was their opportunity not only to reap great rewards in building appreciation but also to have a legitimate operation. On top of that, as part of their expansion plans, the men had looked for pastures new, less hazardous pastures, to which to move their base. They looked at France and Spain but knew in both countries if you crossed the line a bit too far, the Intelligence Services would just come and kill you. It was easier that way. No trials, no embarrassment. Easy.

But in Britain..... Britain had no idea how to cope with organised crime and still, according to their information, saw itself as a democracy. So you could do most things, and some idiot would come to your defence in the name of 'freedom' and 'human rights'.

But they needed a platform and didn't want all the effort of building one. They needed clubs to operate from and use as a front, and they had been told about one little business that interested them. It just needed a bit of pressure on the owner before they made their offer. They would have usually just bombed one of the clubs, but they felt they could muscle him out instead. Why destroy valuable assets?

Violence had got them everything in the past, and it would surely get them what they wanted now. They chatted amiably about this and that and then a mobile rang. A man answered and spoke in Russian.

‘It’s done,’ he said to the other two Russians and the Albanians. ‘It’s started. The clubs will soon be ours.’

They had a glass of expensive French wine which they raised in a toast, swilled it back then went downstairs to the cavernous basement under the hotel which would be an underground car park and service the hotel. Their anonymous, black-windowed SUVs waited to take them to another place where the women did as they were told, and if they didn’t, they wouldn’t be missed.....

Chapter 6

Ernest Hathaway

Ernest Hathaway looked from the third-floor window over the magnificent lawns with the eight Indian blue peafowl wandering around. Approaching the mating season, the three peacocks were already strutting their stuff; the iridescent tail feathers were extended, making up sixty percent of the bird's length and showing off their blue, gold and red 'eyes' to spectacular effect.

His gaze carried on out over the beautiful French countryside beyond.

He let out a long sigh.....

Although he stayed there infrequently, it added a spiritual meaning to his life. Its peace, its beauty, its timelessness gave him a rebirth each time he was there. It was an oasis here, away from the 'madding crowd' of the City, its inhabitants and his businesses. One day, maybe, he would retire here.....?

Ernest owned car dealerships, betting shops, a casino and many other companies. These activities made him considerable amounts of money, and they paid for the palatial home in the Surrey stockbroker belt and a large holiday home in Spain where his family currently were.

The chateau in France had been picked for its privacy, located as it was on nearly one hundred acres of woodland which screened it from prying eyes and known about by very few people. That was what Hathaway wanted.

By Chateaux standards, it was modest with its three storeys housing ten bedrooms, but it was immaculately kept and expensively furnished, coupled with all the latest electronic gadgets piped through to every room. The latter cost a fortune, as Hathaway was a man of taste and so the broadband and audio/video feeds were mainly wi-fi, and any necessary cabling was hidden with subtlety, taking care to not intrude on the muted splendour and elegance of the residence.

Outside, about two hundred yards away and hidden from the house behind trees, lay a helipad that he had built to allow him to get around quickly.

Spiritual it may have been, but from the chateau, Ernest also directed his other activities which included theft and related operations. Ernest did not get involved himself but did two things: he either arranged operations on behalf of others or he found the opportunity and arranged it himself.

Hathaway had heard of an upcoming opportunity. One of his longstanding moles had, at long last and much expense, come up with a gem. The mole was a shipping router with one of the major security companies who was overseeing a shipment from the US to the Middle East. Unusually, the

plane was going to touch down briefly at a local UK airport rather than a national..... The plane would be a company Lear and carrying gold bullion. Not an enormous sum, only about seven million, but enough after expenses to buy a decent meal.

He picked up the phone and dialled England.

‘Yes?’

‘Evening,’ said Hathaway, ‘how are you doing?’

‘Good. You?’

‘OK.’

‘Just saying hello and not stopping, so take care.’

‘See you.’

H put his phone down, waited a moment and then it rang again; he pressed a button on a small console and waited another moment as the two scramblers talked to each other to agree on a set of protocols which would then change continually as they talked. The line went quiet, and he heard Hathaway. Well, he assumed it was Hathaway as the scrambler tended to make the voices a touch ‘tinny’.

‘Evening, H,’ said Hathaway, ‘everything good?’

H snorted. ‘Excluding the fact that one of the doormen got killed for no apparent reason, things are ok. You?’

‘Betting good, but the motor trade is a bit quiet with all the panic about the green nonsense, although I have just managed to buy the franchise down the road which will give me a deal with Japan for one of the hybrids. Otherwise, I can’t generally complain.’

I bet you can't, thought H, but said, 'How can I help you?'

'A little job. Airport in Southern England. Few quid in bullion on a Lear. Need it taking off and putting somewhere safe. Seven mil in dollars and gold. I will move the gold, and there's two mil left in dollars. You can either take it, or I will sort it out within four weeks.'

'How much more detail?'

'Lots. Time, place, personnel, everything. You will have everything you need.'

'When?' asked H, knowing this would be the problem.

'This weekend.'

'That's cutting it a bit fine, but possible. Tell me everything you have and let's see whether it's do-able within our parameters.....'

The parameters were all-important. They had been developed between them over a number of years, and basically, it meant that if there was any chance it could end as a balls-up, they didn't do it. There was enough loot in the world waiting to be grabbed, so they could happily wait for the next idiot to give them an opportunity to take it. After another hour of questioning, '*what ifs*' and '*you must be fucking jokings*', H had enough to allow him to proceed with setting it up. He also decided to let Hathaway sort out the whole consignment, and he would get his cut in four weeks in an account in Belize. There would be a bit off for Hathaway to move it, but that was ok, and after expenses, it would still be just over a mil.

The whole thing was a bit daft really. The company had decided to use a local airport as they were concerned about security at the nationals, what with the terrorists and all. The fact that there were only four days to plan meant they would not be expecting anything and so there would be security but not heightened. And at a small airport, you could get in and out fairly easily. Hopefully.....

He thought for a while then picked up a phone.....

‘Biggles. How the fuck are you?’

‘Better than you, you pox-riddled son of a barnacled whore.’

H smiled. You would have thought that Biggles had spent all his life on a galleon rather than sitting in a cockpit of a jet fighter. It was, thought H, people like Biggles that made criminality rewarding. Surely people in a factory weren’t like this.....?

Biggles had been a Tornado pilot in the RAF, and when the Iraqis invaded Kuwait, Biggles was in one of the squadrons sent over to help liberate it. As the battle tide turned in late February 1991, the Iraqis fled home in fourteen hundred mainly Kuwaiti commandeered vehicles along the main highway north of Al Jahra. American F-15 Eagles and Strike Eagles along with British Tornados pursued them and relentlessly bombed them into oblivion, but Biggles had bored of this successful but essentially easy target practice and had changed his *modus operandi* to liven things up.

A keen arcade game player, Biggles decided that a bombing run as commanded was no fun and so he changed the rules of engagement. Instead of just firing off the rockets from a safe height, he flew in low and from the side. His main objective was not to kill Iraqis as such; he wanted to see how high he could make the tanks and lorries jump in the air which he did by directing the rockets to hit the ground under the vehicles. It was spectacular! Lorries went amazingly high, their occupants even higher; and tanks, due to their massive weight, flipped over. An American Eagle pilot came over the radio with 'Heavy shit dude.... awesome.....freakin' awesome....right on.'

Biggles grinned and waved in appreciation as he went in low again.....

Weeks later, even the top brass, unofficially watching the cockpit video in the mess, had marvelled at his accuracy and the vehicles jumping around like nine pins. Although it was flying at its most skilful, it was another step too far for his superiors who decided, yet again, that political life and their pensions would be safer without Biggles. An injury in battle (Biggles had once snagged his flying jacket and fell out of the plane as he was disembarking and sprained his ankle), allowed them to give him an honourable discharge and a pension and that was the last they saw of him.

In due course, Biggles leased his own small plane and flew businessmen to meetings, golf, mistresses or whatever until one day he met Hathaway, who had mentioned him to H. H occasionally needed things moved from here to there, and Biggles not only enjoyed the extra money but the excitement and danger. His true worth became apparent when H had a small problem with someone. The someone needed to be out of the country quick as he was soon to testify in a small case that H knew could lead to other things if anyone understood the ramifications. H arranged for him to be snatched and Biggles to take him across to Ireland until until.....?

‘Do you want me to bring him back in due course?’ asked Biggles.

H thought for a moment. It was a balls up this trip. It hadn’t been thought through; it had loose ends. What happens when he comes back? What? What? What? H shrugged his shoulders in despair. He had enough on his mind...

‘I could teach him to fly,’ suggested Biggles.

Well, thought H, at the moment I really don’t care if you teach him to play the fucking piano, just get him out of here. H nodded.

Several days later H rang Biggles and asked if everything had gone ok.

‘Flew like a bird,’ said Biggles. ‘Only one attempt and he was perfect.’

H shook his head and took a deep breath. Much as he liked Biggles, he was hard work at times and could be really fucking irritating..... How could you teach someone to fly a plane in one go, for fuck's sake? At that point, H had a small touch of unease.

'Biggles,' asked H, 'where exactly is young Trevor?'

'Difficult to say exactly, H, what with the tides and all, but I would say about half way between the Isle of Man and Dundalk.'

H was horrified but had to smile. Rid me of this priest indeed!

'Biggles.....you may have misunderstood what I wanted by just a tad.....'

'How's that then, H.....?'

And so Biggles acquired another skill on his cv.

Teaching people to fly.

Chapter 7

The Job

H sorted out the killing of the doorman at the club with the men at the Met. It was the kind of thing that you didn't really want, but the video had shown nothing that could hurt the club. That was what was needed. The Met knew who H was and what he did, and they kept a healthy, respectful distance. H kept his clubs in good order, and the Met left him alone. They had better things to do than deal with *businessmen* that could afford the best lawyers. H also paid a fair amount of money to a third party which was passed on to the appropriate people which also helped. Indeed, an Assistant Commissioner, at that very moment, was staying in a small hotel in Thailand that an associate of H owned and would no doubt be sampling the local cuisine: crab, lobster, catfish and the local delicacy.....hot pussy.

All on the house, of course.

H had spent two days solid organising the Lear job. Separately H and Biggles had been down to have a look and so had Big John. Big John provided the muscle in these jobs with his own specialist team for particular operations. Big John was expensive but highly efficient. He looked something like a laboratory experiment gone wrong, and most people

thought he was dumb. The people that knew him didn't, and even if they did, they knew it wouldn't be a good idea to tell him as death was a permanent state.

They had all got together and gone over the possibilities. The room was kitted out with maps and big white boards to write on. Nothing was left to chance. The airport was not a problem, and it was obvious the security company who were in charge of the company plane had been sloppy. This wasn't the place to touch down if you wanted security. It was the place to touch down for a snack and a fuel up. Good.

They went through all the scenarios. The price of gold currently meant that five mil weighed just under six hundred pounds, which wasn't too bad. Big John had fast cars that had modified rear suspension to allow for heavier weights in the boot so that the car's handling became neutral rather than tail waggy.

Late on Friday it had all been agreed, and then it was up to the people on the ground, i.e. Big John and the crew...

Chapter 8

Nice walk home...?

H asked Benny whether she would like to go for a meal to make up for the fact that they had missed her film due to the stabbing of the doorman, and they agreed to go to the Floridata in Wardour Street. A Conran Cuban-style restaurant that also provided Latin fare, it was the nearest Benny could get to home cooking. H decided to find Rico online before he went and try and take his money, but at the last minute thought, fuck it. Let's just have a nice night and fuck him!

Leaving the big Merc in the underground garage with the Ferrari, they took a taxi. The meal was arranged for eight, as Benny liked to digest her meal before going to bed. Benny said a full stomach got in the way of sleep and sex, and Benny knew these things. They had a lovely evening and enjoyed the speciality of Posta en Frutas Secas, a beef and dried fruit stew. Dancers had been hired, and the night was full of music and activity, and they thoroughly enjoyed it.

Outside, Benny suggested they walk a little before getting a taxi to take some air, so they strolled off. H had his hands in his overcoat pockets, and Benny had her arm linked in his. Yet again H marvelled that he looked like a domesticated married man and how much he enjoyed it. His mind went back.....

.....*Benny had stayed that first week.* He had hardly seen her. She slept in her own room, they had breakfast together in the morning, then she wandered off to God knows where, to return late afternoon. They had an evening meal, but then H had to go and make sure the Clubs were ok. When he returned, she was in bed and fast asleep. There had been no intimacy, no sex. H thought he would have felt rampant, but he didn't; if anything, he felt even closer to this woman he wasn't close to.

The last evening was different and took him by surprise. She told him that there was no going to the Clubs that night and that she would cook for them, which she did. Grilled salmon with a light salad. She bought two bottles of champagne which she put in the fridge to chill but did not take out again. They chatted amiably, and after the meal, they went and sat down.

'I accept your offer,' said Benshima.

'Eh?'

'If I have to say it again, I will leave.'

'OK,' said H, and a big smile beamed across his face. And that was it..... From that point on, they had been together spiritually and physically. Although H found that his past unexpectedly, quite unexpectedly, affected the latter.....

.....*Something entered his subconscious* and brought him instantly alert. Three black lads who had been on the other side of the street in front of them were crossing over. H

already knew what was going to happen, and he immediately turned round to head back the way they had come and where it was more public. He heard running feet behind them and knew they weren't going to make it. There was no way Benny could out run them in her pretty little stilettos.

'Benny,' he said, 'We have a problem which I need you out of. I want you to go into that doorway, into the shadow and stand perfectly still. Don't move. Not one muscle. Got that? If this all goes wrong, I want you to take off your shoes, run towards the main road and scream as hard as you can. Keep shouting *rape, rape, rape!* Got that?'

Apprehensively she nodded and went into the doorway. H turned round. They were just ten yards away; they stopped running and started walking towards him. A quote from Amir Vahedi clicked into his mind: *Sometimes you have to be willing to die in order to live.* So true.

H willed his body to relax. Every muscle *relax*. This would need as much speed as he could muster, and to do speed you had to *relax*...

'You want something, fellas?' he asked in a non-aggressive tone and keeping his hands in his pockets.

'Your money,' said one, 'and maybe her.' He looked to the doorway.

'You can have the money and then go away.'

'White pussy, man; nothing like it. Especially when it's someone else's.'

They laughed.

H now completely understood the situation. That was all he needed. When you know what your opponent wants, you can beat him; it's not knowing that's dangerous. Within his large overcoat pocket nestled another small pocket. His fingers found the knuckleduster waiting there and inserted themselves into it. He didn't like using a duster – his fists were usually more than adequate – but sometimes you needed an edge...

They were now within feet of him when he said, 'The trouble is, Nelson Mandela and Eminem both grow roses. Some are yellow and some red.'

It was nothing. It was a sentence that didn't fit, but it had words in that did. It was confusing..... and in the split second that they were processing this nonsense and trying to make sense of it, H had smashed in the face of two of them and turned and kicked viciously downward onto the knee of the third one, and he heard the loud crack as his leg broke. He went down after him, grabbed him by the hair, smashed his head on the pavement and saw his eyes close. The other two were lying on the ground whimpering in agony.

H dragged them together and knelt with his shin on the throat of one and his hand around the throat of the other.

'Fucking idiots,' said H, and let out a long, tired, *what-a-chore-this-is* sort of sigh. 'You have sort of fucked up my evening, so I want some compensation. Money....and watches.'

He held out his hand. They found money and took off their watches. Rolex's no doubt nicked from some other victims.

‘Stay there,’ said H rather unnecessarily and moved to the unconscious one and took his money and watch.

‘Now here’s the deal. You are out of your league, but if you want to make real money, and I mean big money, then ring a number I am going to give you. Ring in two months’ time when you have healed. You guys have possibilities, but you need training and help, and then you can work for us and have all the white pussy you want. OK?’

They said nothing, so H went to one and stamped on his balls, and he yelped with pain.

‘I asked you a fucking question,’ said H, with a voice heavy with menace, ‘and it is impolite not to answer me. You’ve really gotta fuckin’ learn that when you’re on the fucking floor with a big evil bastard standing over you, you really should pay attention..... Now, you have a choice. You either ring the number I am going to give you, or I can kill you now or have you killed later. What’s it to be?’

H put his foot above the one’s head. He tried to move his head into the pavement to miss the kick that could come down and cause even more damage, and then mumbled something through a bleeding and swollen mouth that sounded like ‘phone number’. H tore a scrap off a piece of paper in his jacket pocket, wrote the number and gave it to him.

‘Two months,’ said H, ‘and you will have money like you have never seen.’

Getting up to leave he said, 'You thought you got me there, eh? Cunt doesn't know who we are or where we live, eh?..... Better give me your driving licence and credit cards.'

Neither moved to do so. H kneeled down over the one on his right, grabbed his throat and raised his knuckle-dustered fist in the air. The effort to get the cards was not quick enough, and H smacked him on the ear with the duster. The pain was overwhelming, and the man whimpered, and tears flooded down his face. The cards came out quickly, and H put them in his pocket. Satisfied, H went to walk away, but before he did, he took the Rolex's out of his pocket and was just about to drop them on the ground and smash them with his foot as a further display of dominance when he changed his mind. He would use them as bonuses for the club managers...why waste good watches?

He turned round to find Benny looking at him....held around the throat by another black lad. Where the fuck had he come from? Not very clever, Jimmy boy. Not very clever at all...

In the lad's hand a long knife blade glinted. H looked deep into Benny's eyes, but surprisingly she was not panicking or terrified. She was handling the situation well. H was impressed with his woman. H waited.....

'Who's the man *now*, motherfucker?'

H said nothing. He waited. What were the black lad's options? Very few. He certainly hadn't thought them through. Seen too many comic book heroes. Fantasy land..... Where everybody

gets hurt, but no one feels it. Or you run round in a gang beating up other people and it never happens to you...until the day it does.

The black lad had made an error, although he could not have known it. The other three were alive because they had attacked H. While they had wanted to hurt Benny, she was always safe as long as H was between them. But this....idiot...was threatening Benny and that was unforgivable. It had moved on from self-defence with a degree of pain and vengeance. If you hurt Benny or indeed anyone who H saw as someone within his protective wall, you would end up dead. It was that simple. Complete and utter annihilation!

Slowly he moved closer to them.

‘Not too close, motherfucker, or she gets the blade across her face,’ he snarled and held the knife closer to Benshima’s face. ‘Let’s talk about this,’ said H. ‘You have just seen what has happened. Your friends are in a mess. You should also have heard what I offered them. A job and lots of money.....so what’s the point of this?’ The black lad listened. ‘If you hurt her, I give you my word that you will die here and now.....and please, not for one second doubt me..... And let me make this even clearer, by hurting her I don’t mean slashing her with your knife.....hurting her, to me, means the faintest scratch, the mildest of bruises and you die. In a pool of blood, in unbelievable pain, here, now.....’

Benny shuddered.....

The youth was confused. He hadn't seen it this way. He had a knife. He had this man's woman, yet the man in front of him was calm and confident. Why was he worried? Why was he scared?

H saw the indecision. 'I suggest this.....I am prepared to move away two paces. You let my woman go, and I won't hurt you. If you do that, I am prepared to include you, with the others, with their deal. Lots of money and white pussy. If you walk now, it shows you have brains, and we need people with brains.....'

The lad thought about it. He could just knife her and run...?

'Don't think about knifing her and running. I have told you what will happen...you will die tonight. It's that simple.....do you want to die? Now....in a pool of blood on this street?'

H saw the black lad was close. 'What's your name?' asked H as though it was his mate.

'Phillip,' he said instinctively and without the street patois.

'Phillip...let go of my woman and help your mates and then ring me in two months. OK?... Come on, love, he'll let you go now....' and H moved as though he was going home and it was a done deal. Subconsciously coerced, he let go of Benny, and she went to H. He held her hand, and they both walked away.

After several hundred yards and when her heart had stopped pounding, she said, 'Let's go home. If I'd known you wanted sex and violence, we could have stayed in.....'

H grinned.

Benny knew about H's reputation but had never seen him display any aggression whatsoever. With her, he was gentle and kind. She had missed the first part of the fracas as her eyes had taken a moment to adjust to the light change in the dark doorway, but then she had watched with wide-eyed fascination. The man was an animal. Pure, controlled aggression.

It had been so quick, so lethal, so violent, so.....pure. It was the Black Knight. It was the Devil..... And then she had been held by the other lad who came from nowhere...

'Would you have killed him?'

'Of course.'

'Just like that...?'

'Just like that.'

She looked at him. There was nothing to see. No anger, no rage, no bottled-up fury. It was as though they were just taking a walk after Sunday lunch. He would have killed him.....just like that!

'Would you have killed the others there and then? Or later?'

'Nah. You can't just go round killing people on the streets; the Refuse guys don't like it.'

H smiled at his own little joke.

'And the phone number? What's that for?'

'They get in touch with Andy Pandy, and he will give them some work.'

'Really?' she asked incredulously.

‘Sort of.’

‘And they’ll get white pussy?’

‘Sort of.’

It was another several hundred yards when Benny said, ‘We have to go home now, James.’

‘OK.’

‘I mean *now*, James,’ she said with urgency. He looked at her eyes and the lust in her dilated pupils and realised the violence had turned her on. The street was deserted, and the street lights cast dark shadows where their prying light was repulsed.

‘How *now*?’ asked H, resisting the urge to follow up with *brown cow*. She took his hand and put it up her dress. Her pants were soaking. She looked at him longingly, her eyes pleading. H looked around and saw a doorway that was recessed and bathed in blackness. He hooked his hand in her pants and led her over to the doorway, where the darkness cloaked them and kept out prying eyes.

She faced the wall, put her hands on it and leaned forward. He lifted her skirt and with two hands ripped off her Italian lace pants, undid his zip and gently put his cock in her. When he was sure she was comfortable, he held her hips and pushed into her with his own. He knew what Benny wanted.

After a few minutes, he put one hand in her soaking vagina and ran it up to her bum and inserted a finger. He did this several times, each time with a different finger, until her arse

was as wet as her vagina; then he put his cock in her one last time for lubrication and moved it up to her bum.

Again, he did it gently. Don't force it, don't hurt. H knew there were many ways of giving pleasure through pain, but tearing someone's arse wasn't one.

He started moving in and out of her arse.

His hand went round to her 36D tits; he pulled her bra down, and she moaned with the sensation of being taken. He became rougher and banged into her, his groin slapping her bum. She moaned and gasped for breath and said softly but urgently, 'more.....more.....more....'

His pace quickened, and he felt her start to shake. Knowing she was near, he lightly squeezed her nipple, and she let out a muted moan which took her over the edge and she began to convulse as the orgasm ripped through her. Her scream pierced the night and H quickly put his hand over her mouth to quieten her, and when her body eventually stopped convulsing, he gently pulled her hair back from over her face.

'Come in me.....' she said.

James said nothing. What could he say?

'It's ok,' she whispered gently, 'I'll help you.'

'I can't go back up you.'

She paused for a second, not quite understanding.....

'Then go back in my bum....'

Still quiet, he did as he was told; she moved her hand down and encircled his cock with her fingers, stimulating him as he went in and out of her.

‘Come on, my love....it’s ok....it’s ok,’ she whispered.

James willed his body to feel. Please feel....something....anything. He tried to banish all doubt from his mind and think of anything erotic that he could. He saw her lovely nipples and concentrated....concentrated....until his brain allowed the present to override the past. For a few seconds, the orgasm racked through him and then his body became numb again.....

It was several minutes before they could rearrange themselves and both were exhausted. Benny’s ruined pants were on the floor, and her bra was ripped. She took it off and dropped it with the pants. Looking at him she started to giggle hysterically.

Adults fucking in the street.

Whatever next?

Chapter 9

King Lear

The planning for the Lear had been completed, but due to a rethink, everything had been changed.

Times had been checked with the mole, and they knew what and who was on the plane and when it would arrive. The Lear, with a crew of two, one vice president plus a secretary and two security guards would fly from Seattle, refuel in New Hampshire and then on to H's happy band of waiting robbers. The sensitive cargo was destined for the Middle East, where it would be handed over to a Ministry of Defence official who would then hand it over to the Crown Prince to put towards another palace somewhere in the world. Everything was ready, and now it was over to meticulous planning and the Gods above.....

Due to a cross wind, the eight-seater Lear landed with a light bump, one wheel catching and then the other. A puff of smoke blew up as the imbalance of the wheel rotation and the ground speed equalled, and then taxied to a halt away from the small main building. The pilot shut everything down, and after a few minutes, a tanker ambled up, and the co-pilot went to sort out the fuel. The two guards stretched their legs at the

front, and the VP, who was sitting on a three-seater bench seat with his secretary, said, 'Go and get something to eat, boys. We've got a few minutes; there's no rush.'

There was a brief silence, and then one said 'I'm sorry, sir, but that's not allowed. We have to stay with the caree.'

'Excuse me?' said the VP, 'what in the hell is a caree?'

'Sorry, sir, it's the shipment. We get a bit used to talking in security jargon. We are the *carers*, it is the *caree*.'

'Well,' said the VP, stepping towards the security man and prodding him in the chest, 'as the *carer* of you, the *caree*, I am telling you to go and get some fucking air.'

Another brief hesitation. 'Yes, sir.'

They walked outside, down the few steps and stood either side of the door. They had done as they were told – they were getting some air, but no way were they going to leave the caree alone!

The pilot and co-pilot smiled to themselves; old hands at these trips, they knew you just did your job and kept your mouth shut, so they deferentially said goodbye to the VP and walked directly to the main building to log off and be relieved by the backup crew.

'We've got a few minutes,' said the VP, beckoning to his secretary to sit down. He stood in front of her and pulled down his zip. Her head moved backwards and forwards while he stood perfectly still. He was paying her, let her do the

work! After a couple of minutes, the VP made a small grunt as he came in her mouth, then immediately sat down to start making phone calls.

Outside, a small catering van arrived to replenish the Lear with food and drink. Two men from the truck jumped out and were immediately stopped by one of the security guards. As they were on English soil, neither of the guards was carrying a gun, which they had left under one of the seats on the plane. The company had learned from bitter experience that guards brandishing guns looked good in the USA but created panic in other countries, so now they were a touch more subtle.

‘Whoa, fella,’ said one of the guards, walking in front of the catering men and holding his hand up.

The man held out a sheet of paper. ‘I’ve got to get this food manifest ok’d and then we can bring it on. It’s a lot easier than taking it on and then finding out it’s the wrong consignment.....’

‘I’ll do it,’ said the guard, took the paper, climbed the steps and went to the VP, who was talking on the phone. He stood in front of him and waited. And waited. The VP had a reputation for showing all around him who was the boss. After a few minutes, he clicked off the phone and with an exaggerated sigh said, ‘Yes?’

‘Catering truck outside, sir, and they want to know whether this is the right food?’

He held up the paper for the VP. The VP moved closer to the guard and poked him, yet again, in the chest with a finger. 'Do I look like a fucking catering manager to you?'

The guard moved back a little. 'No, sir.'

'Do I?' he said menacingly.

'No, Sir!'

'No, sir, is fuckin' right,' said the VP, 'so I suggest that if your company wants to keep this contract, you'd better sort it out.'

The guard was about to say something but shut up. What was this to do with him or his company? It was fucking food for Christ's sake, not a *caree*.

'Yes, sir,' he said and went back outside.

The two caterers had been looking at the plane, suitably impressed.

'Ready?' said one to the guard. 'We've got other things to deliver, you know. We haven't got all day.'

The guard didn't really know what to do. He scanned the food list, and it looked all right to him. 'OK, but make it quick, and for Christ's sake don't go near the guy with the suit.'

The guard was feeling uneasy. Something wasn't right about this. It was all a bit unprofessional and amateurish - although this was England. The guard knew from experience that service in the USA and England were quite different with a lot more deference and better service in the States. Either way..... The first caterer had gone on the plane and now the second was following. He was carrying a box with two hands,

but under his jacket, held between his arm and his body, was something else. The guard rushed up the steps, grabbed the caterer and pinned him against the wall of the plane.

‘Nick,’ he shouted to his partner, ‘get a gun.’

Nick bolted up the steps, got a gun from under the seat and pointed it in their general direction.

‘Now,’ said the first guard, ‘what is freakin’ going on?’

The second caterer panicked and stumbled into the guard, who fell over onto the lap of the secretary. The VP screamed at the top of his voice, ‘What the fuck is going on?’

‘Reason to believe we have insurgents aboard. Sir!’

The guard had gone into US marine mode. The VP, whose dick ruled his life but he didn’t get where he was by being completely stupid, looked at the caterers and found it hard to believe. ‘Open the boxes.’

‘There’s something hidden in his jacket. Sir!’

‘Then look to see what the fuck it is.’

‘It could be a bomb. Sir!’

‘Then take him outside and look,’ said the VP, who was also known to be capable of sacrificing anyone at the altar of his own glory. The US Marine was now totally immersed in his role as protector and ready to die for his employer. The guards and caterers went outside while the VP moved to a safer part of the plane in case limbs hurtled through the door at him. It was a very expensive suit, and blood stains were so difficult to remove.....

The guards moved a short distance from the plane and, guns at the ready, made the caterers put down their boxes, and the one take out the parcel from under his arm. They made them open the boxes, which turned out to be..... food.

‘OK,’ said the guard with the gun, beckoning to the caterer who had delivered the parcel, ‘you take that over there, and you open it. If you so much as move suddenly, I will blow your freakin’ head off.....’

The caterer looked terrified.

‘I thought so, you freakin’ terrorist,’ said the guard, ‘it’s goin’ to blow you the fuck up isn’t it...?’

The guard thought for a moment. ‘OK, you. Take it over there,’ he pointed about twenty yards away, ‘put it down very carefully and stand by it.’

The caterer, hands shaking, did as he was told, although he slowly moved several feet away from the parcel. The guard took careful aim at the package and let off a round. Everyone flinched at the sound and the expectant explosion, but the warm shrimp in the parcel, specially cooked for the VP, cascaded into the air and landed softly on the ground with a gentle splat.

At that point, airfield security arrived with klaxons blaring and guns at the ready. The VP moved to a window to find out what was happening and couldn’t believe it.....

The guards tried to explain, but it sounded ridiculous. The caterers were – possibly were, but perhaps were not – insurgents.

‘Eh?’ queried one of the airport staff who had misheard.
‘What’ve detergents got to do with this?’

What was ‘an insurgent’, wondered airfield security, who were actually more used to shooing pigeons off the runway than apprehending.....insurgents?

The entire contingent was taken to a room in the small main building where they were questioned. The VP tried to explain about their precious cargo, but no one was taking any notice of him. Cargo was not their business if it had not been unloaded. Americans letting off guns and almost killing British caterers on British soil was their business. Someone pointed out that Americans letting off guns on any soil was usually a fucking disaster, but the VP, in the interest of Anglo-US relations and trying to salvage something from this fucking God-awful situation, let it go.

Three hours later, after much apologising, series of mistakes, wrong assumptions, etc., etc., it was turning dark and they were allowed to return to the plane. From the building to the Lear, the VP had screamed at the guards at their imbecility and incompetence. There was no food on the plane as it was still sitting on the runway, and they had to buy sandwiches and bottled water from a machine to take on the flight. Even that had gone wrong as they had no English currency, and so the VP had stuffed a wad of dollars in the hands of a cleaner

who had given him some pound coins. The non too bright but trusting cleaner had actually received a hundred and fifty dollars for about fifteen pounds' worth of currency.

Back on the plane, the VP went straight to the container with the gold and money, punched in the combination, to find..... everything in order. He let out a deep breath.

He was safe.

Not even he could have escaped the blame had that gone. He looked around at the guards and growled but said nothing. After fifteen minutes, everyone had settled down, and a degree of organisation had resumed. The VP had relaxed somewhat, and the guards had somehow managed to make themselves invisible, which wasn't easy when you are only a few feet away from someone who hates you and is more than likely going to get you fired. The flight crew were going through their pre-flight check and getting air clearance.

Out of the gloom a large black BMW 4 x 4 with tinted windows headed for the plane. It stopped just short, and a smartly dressed man jumped out and ran to the window where the VP was sitting. He stood on tip toe and waved a CIA card at the VP. In a moment, the door opened, and the man and a colleague went quickly up the steps. The CIA man looked quickly around and then moved to the VP.

'I am sorry for this, sir,' he said in a midwestern accent, 'but I am from the CIA, and this gentleman is from the British Security Services. Are you Byron Oberholser the Third?'

‘What the?’

The CIA man cut him off. ‘Sir, I am sorry, but time is of the essence. You have a daughter, Sarah Jane Tucket Oberholser?’ The VP nodded. ‘And she is currently in Europe with a friend?’

The VP nodded but wasn’t entirely sure. He was a very busy man and what with one thing and another.....and she spent a lot of time with her mother.....or somewhere....?

‘I am sorry, sir, but she has been kidnapped by Islamic Extremists who are threatening her life unless you pay them money.’

The VP was about to say something, but the CIA man carried on.

‘We are taking you and your secretary and one of your guards to the US Embassy immediately. He has been assigned to stay with you until you are back in the USA.’ He turned. ‘Which one of you is the marine?’

‘Sir!’ snapped the marine.

‘You will guard this man with your life,’ said the Agent, and the Marine’s chest swelled with pride at his mission.

‘You will leave one guard with your cargo, and the British are going to help by providing two agents on the plane in case someone has found out your flight plans.’

‘Right, sir, please follow me,’ and they clambered out of the plane to the waiting car while the two British MI5 agents replaced them in the Lear.

The BMW left, and the Lear taxied down the runway to the Middle East and safety. As they crossed the southern English coast, the cockpit door opened, and a man put a gun to the side of the pilot's face.

'Listen to me,' said the man, 'and don't be a hero, either of you. We are not interested in you, and in a few hours, you will be back with your families. That is a promise. Put this immediately on auto pilot and get out of your seats and go back there. If you make any move to press any alert button or do anything stupid, you have my word you will both die.'

The pilot and co-pilot did as they were told and moved aft where they found the guard tied up and sleeping soundly.

'This is what we are going to do,' said the man. 'My partner here is going to tie you up. Again, please do not try anything, or we will kill you. We will give you a tablet, and you will sleep like your friend here. It's that simple. In due course, we will land, and you will be left on board still asleep, but we will untie you. You can then leave when you wake. Is that understood?'

The man's voice had not been menacing, and so the crew gave no resistance. Minutes later, they were asleep, and Biggles was banking the Lear through ninety degrees. He took the Lear low over the channel and headed west. In due course, still keeping very low, he headed south along the French coast and landed at a small strip in Portugal where they were met by a large van that would take the ingots to a small foundry to have its appearance changed ready for its

next destination. By coincidence, the Lear was then taken to the Middle East where it landed at an airfield owned by a young Royal. He had bought the Lear at a knockdown price, would have it repainted and serviced in the Gulf so no one would be any the wiser, and use it to impress his mates.

The BMW 4x4 headed through the night and stopped at a large building where they parked in the middle of a large car park. There were no lights. The back door opened, and the Agent said, 'You stay here, sir. I am going to get clearance. Under no circumstances get out of the vehicle before I return, no matter how long that takes. This vehicle has bullet proof glass, so you are quite safe. Do you understand, Sir?' The VP nodded. 'The Agency and Homeland Security have stressed how important you are, Sir, and so you will be quite safe,' he reiterated.

The VP preened. The *Agency* had said that. And *Homeland Security*. Wow.

'What about my daughter?'

'I believe, sir, that she is now safe and resting....'

'How.....?'

'Not now, sir; we have to get you safe as we have reason to believe you are the primary target due to your importance in the US of A,' and he closed the door.

'Me,' thought the VP, filled with a mixture of fear and adulation for himself, 'a primary target.....' He would be on the news, the chat shows and invited all over the place as a 'hero'.

Freakin' magic.....

'American' Johnny and 'Posh' George walked straight ahead of the stolen BMW so that they could not be seen, past the large Leisure Centre and to the waiting car round the other side. In an hour or so the VP would convince the guard to peek out and in another half-hour after that, they would venture out into dark, cold Northampton.

Chapter 10

Freddie

Benshima decided that it was time to go home and see her parents, which she did yearly. This year she was with H and told him he was expected to accompany her. H was not enthusiastic. He was not really a social person, and a week or so on a ranch that reared cattle and also had acres and acres of God knows what growing would hardly be fun..... but at times you just have to do what you have to do.

It was decided to have a real break. They would have two weeks in Barbados, then fly over to Colombia. H had stayed at the Sandy Lane Hotel before but wanted a more private and casual holiday, so he rang Freddie.

‘Freddie, it’s H.’

‘H, dear boy, how are you?’

‘Good, Freddie, and you?’

‘Times are a touch hard,’ said Freddie despondently, ‘but what’s new?’

Freddie, thought H, must be down to his last two hundred million or so. Freddie had been in the hotel industry, the caravan industry, the camping industry, the travel industry and the property industry. In all of them, he had somehow managed to buy very cheap and sell very dear. Freddie’s

business tactics were a touch 'unusual', and his tax avoidance 'creative', but that was Freddie. Freddie was worth a lot of money.

'Freddie, do you still own that estate in Barbados?'

'Yes, dear boy. Do you want to buy it? You know me, H, I'll sell anything for the right price.....'

H smiled. Freddie never changed. Trading was in his blood. Along with the odd needle.....

'Nah, I want a holiday with Benny.'

'Ah...the adorable Benny. Is she well?'

'Yes, Freddie, thank you. Quite well.'

'What are you looking for, H? What sort of dwelling would suit your requirements?'

The estate that Freddie had acquired about eighteen months earlier was quite magnificent. It had villas scattered over it that ranged from about one million pounds up to twelve million. Some were privately owned, and Freddie owned the rest, which were rented out. Freddie was currently making life difficult for the private owners so that in due course they would sell up – to Freddie, of course, and for a good discount – and he would own them all. When that was done, Freddie would move it on to a large multinational and pocket another few hundred million.

'I want a large villa, splendid views over the ocean, maid, cook.'

'How pretentious you are,' said a chiding Freddie, 'how far you've come.'

Freddie had known H a long time. H let Freddie do the spiel. Freddie could talk anybody into anything. Nearly everybody.

‘I’ve got a four-bed sea view.’

H said nothing.

‘Perhaps something a touch bigger?’

H said nothing. Freddie sighed.... ‘You take our long and happy relationship far too far.....Ok, I have an eight-bed, eight-bath, with magnificent views over the ocean and golf course. Is that better?’

‘Thank you,’ said H, ‘that’s much better. I want to live like you for a bit, Freddie.’

‘Dear boy, poverty would not suit you...’ Freddie had purloined the largest villa on the estate for himself. ‘Now that would usually be twenty thousand a week, but for you, my boy, I think a touch off, don’t you?’

H let Freddie carry on with the charade. Freddie did deals. Even when there was no deal to be done, Freddie had to do a deal. H could already smell the sea and feel the hot sand under his feet. Come on, Freddie, stop fucking about.....

‘.....So I’m thinking about twenty for the two weeks? Is that alright with you?’

‘That’s very kind of you, Freddie, but perhaps a touch less for an old friend? You will be driving *me* to poverty at those rates.’

‘Aaaahhh.....’ said Freddie very slowly, ‘isn’t it time the past went away, H? Isn’t it time we moved towards today, at today’s rates, with today’s conditions, under current

circumstances? I do have a business to run, H.'

'Freddie, you know I will fit in with anything that makes you feel comfortable.'

There was another long intake of breath. 'You have been a good friend for many years, H, and I appreciate that, but we all have to make a living. How about ten grand for the two weeks?'

'If that is what you want, Freddie, that's fine.'

A long silence..... 'Five grand, all in.'

'Thank you, Freddie,' said H sincerely.

'Thank you, H,' said Freddie with warmth, 'I appreciate that.'

After a few more pleasantries they hung up, but not before Freddie had reminded H he would like the cash, *please*, before he went. H liked Freddie. Freddie was what Freddie was, and you liked him, or you didn't.

And H did.

A few years earlier Freddie had rung H about a little problem he had that was making him 'very uncomfortable'. He was involved in a big negotiation involving millions and was looking at a huge profit if he could pull it off, but it was all going wrong. He had borrowed to the hilt to do the deal, which was essentially a domino deal. The end result needed everything to happen for it to be very profitable, but if it failed it would all collapse and would financially cripple Freddie.

The deal was dependent on the sale, by three warring brothers, of one thousand acres of farm land that planning permission could be obtained for. It was about to be signed when one of the brothers decided to pull out and said he wanted to advertise it nationally for a better price. Freddie knew a big national would outbid him, but even before then, the banks would have pulled in their loans.

Freddie talked to H about his problem.

H thought about this and decided on a course of action to ameliorate the situation. Two days later there was an unfortunate burglary late one night at the brother's house that went wrong late. The burglars, obviously disturbed, had smacked him over the head, and he had died later in hospital. The burglars were never apprehended (they had been whisked back to Dover where they caught a ferry home), and Freddie did the deal with the other brothers, who wandered off to live in luxury in the Isle of Man.

For that help, Freddie offered H a nice villa in Spain, but H took cash instead. H liked cash.

So H could have 'asked' for the villa in Barbados for nothing. But fate dictated otherwise.

Chapter 11

The Darkness

He was in a tiny, dark room.... waiting.

Cockroaches scuttled on the threadbare carpet beneath him, but it was too dark to see them, and they terrified him anyway, so they became brave and went over his tiny feet. He kicked out.....

Dreadful fear made his tiny body shake.

It was the waiting...

More than anything it was the waiting.....

He used to hide under the chair, but it made no difference.....

Waiting.....

He made himself into a little ball of humanity and squeezed himself as tight as he could into a corner of the room.

Waiting.....

A sound!

He started to shake uncontrollably, and quiet tears flooded down his face. Was it time? Would it soon be over? *Please let it soon be over.....*

The sound went away.....

But his fear didn't.

His nostrils filled with the overpowering smell of shit.

He couldn't stop shaking.

Another sound!

This was the sound he dreaded.

The footsteps got closer; the key turned in the door, and then it opened. Fleetinglly he saw the light of day, freedom, but then it was gone, and he started to whimper like a wounded animal.

The huge beast came over and dragged him roughly from his hiding place. He squealed as strong fingers bit into his tiny arm, and a hand went round his throat, shutting off his air supply. He looked up into the smiling face only inches from his.

'You know what to do,' it demanded.

He averted his head but felt the strong hands and his mouth opening ...wider....wider....he couldn't breathe.....can't breathe.....choking...

He awoke, sobbing, taking in huge lungfuls of air. His face contorted like Munch's Scream, and he shook as waves of terror hit him.

'No.....' he pleaded to the vile being violating his mind and body, 'please....no.'

The safe arms encircled him, and Benshima stroked him gently, holding his face to her bosom.

'It's alright,' she gently soothed. 'It's alright. I'm here, you're safe now.'

She slowly turned his tear-sodden face to hers and smiled.

'It's me, you're safe now. You're safe now.....'

Her eyes: he looked at her eyes, and it wasn't the beast.....they were safe, kind eyes.

He sobbed and sobbed then curled up into a foetal ball and clung to her as tight as he could. Benshima held him, stroked him, soothed him until the fear subsided and the tiny child went back to sleep.....

Chapter 12

Holiday

On the plane to Barbados H looked at Benny, who had curled up like a child and sleeping softly. He felt a mixture of emotion but most of all he felt protective. He adored this woman and wanted to keep her 'safe'. He wasn't quite sure what 'safe' actually meant, but he was certain beyond any doubt that that was what he wanted to do.

H was an avid reader, given time, which was rare these days, and he enjoyed what words conveyed; and when he looked at Benny, he felt a compulsion to write. About Benny.

About the sea and the beach and its effect on people, especially Benny. Benny was excited at going to the beach. Like a child.

Benshee goes down to the beach...Benshee goes down to the beach..

He gave it more thought and made himself a promise to try and articulate it on paper when he was there.

The plane did not have first class, and H's six feet two was cramped into the chair. He made a mental note to write to the MD of the airline and explain that they were using planes made for midgets; or blow up his offices; or kill him.....For the

next hour, H amused himself by plotting ever more elaborate schemes of death and destruction for the unknown, unseen MD of the airline.

The palatial villa overlooked, as Freddie had promised, the vivid green of the golf course onwards to the shimmering blue ocean. It was breathtaking, and Benny said, 'You must be well connected.'

'Is that code?'

They explored the villa, beautifully furnished to the highest standards and custom-designed with a local coral-stone finish and decorated in soft Caribbean hues. The magnificent hall had expensive marble flooring and towering windows. Looking from the hall, the eye went straight out and beyond to the sea. Everything in it was vast, with space and light creating an indoor-outdoor feeling. It was set within extensive grounds and lush gardens for complete privacy and security.

H started to relax.....

That evening he said, 'We need a car.'

'A convertible, please,' said Benny, 'so we can get some air and a better tan, and we can pose.....With a fridge and air conditioning; perhaps a shower, and a little balcony on the side with an electric sun shade to protect us.'

The next day, H found a hire firm in the local 'Yellow Pages' and hired a car.

'What have we got? Is a convertible we can pose in?'

‘Convertible. Yes, convertible. Everyone will notice us, and you can pose.’

A couple of hours later, the bell rang, and the car had arrived. As H signed the paperwork, Benny went out to find the yellow, beat-up, scratched Mini Moke that H had hired for a pittance, in all its splendour with its canvas roof in the little boot. She smiled. This is why she loved this man. What woman would not be bowled over by an old, battered, yellow Mini Moke?

H and Benny spent days relaxing. They swam in their own large pool with two mosaic half-submerged dolphins porpoising on either side as though about to leap out. Reading on the bedroom balcony, they looked down over the magnificently presented golf course, and H would scoff at the golfers. Not realising that H could play golf, Benny asked him when he had last played.

‘Never.’

‘Then how can you criticise them?’

‘It’s a matter of form. You don’t have to be able to do something to criticise it; you only have to be able to judge relatively.’

‘Perhaps an explanation of that gibberish?’

‘OK, let’s look at it another way. Have you ever seen Tiger Woods play in a golf tournament?’

‘Once, a bit, on the tele.’

‘And did he look like that?’ He pointed to a four-ball teeing off.

She looked for a moment as they each took their turn. 'You mean excluding the fact that he is black and they are white; he's about thirty with a rather mean, wantable physique and they're about sixty, rather portly, balding and have the sexual allure of a mollusc?'

'Excluding that.'

'Then, no, he didn't.'

'Why was he different?'

She gave it more thought. 'I suppose like any top sportsman or woman, what they do is, for want of a better term, 'easy'. Which is not to say it is easy, merely that they make it look easy. Graceful, contained, unhurried etcetera.....'

'And so the difference between them and him.....?'

More thought. 'They look like idiots...'

'Absolutely. And you don't know anything about golf either....QED!'

To celebrate this intellectual and philosophical accord, another bottle of champagne was liberated from one of the two cavernous fridges.

Later they went down to the beach in the beat-up little mini-moke which constantly steered to the left, and when H parked it the drive joints went clack! clack! clack! Leaving it parked under a tree for the shade, they headed for the soft sandy beach.

Hand in hand, they went into the ocean, and when she was up to her chest Benny dived under water. It was nearly a minute before she surfaced, nearly fifty yards away and then

swam far out to sea. H was a good, powerful swimmer and would have followed Benny, but he sensed she came alive in the sea, and so he just watched her swim with the ease and grace of a fish.

One day, H and Benny were lying on sun beds on the beach, just outside of the reach of the lapping waves. As they lay, arms extended, getting the most from the sun, in H's head the theme kept repeating.....

Benshee went down to the beach.....

Benshee went down to the beach...

Extends her arms to reach.....

Extends her arms to reach.....

To reach what?

What?

A child's imploring yell invaded his mind, and he immediately sat up, located the noise and ran to the little boy who had tripped over and landed on a small rock. H kneeled down, gently picked up the child and held him softly against him. 'It's ok, it will stop hurting in a moment. Where is your mother?' he asked soothingly.

The child stopped crying but just looked at him tearfully.

'Where is your mother?' asked H again, and smiled. He realised the child did not understand English and said, 'Mama?'

A little hand pointed down the beach, so H stood up and said to the child, 'I am putting you on my shoulders, and you look for your mommy, and you tell me when you see her. OK?'

The child nodded, not understanding a word, but totally accepting the word of the stranger before him. H hoisted him aloft, and they set off. The huge H and the tiny child sitting on his shoulders with his little hands held securely. After only a few minutes, the child cried 'Mama' and pointed.

H walked to the parents, explained, sort of, what had happened, and before they could offer any degree of thanks, he left. He returned to Benny, smiled, went back to lying prone and '*Benshee goes down to the beach.....*'

Benshima sat looking at James. James was something of an enigma. James was quite capable of killing, she thought, but did not know, and when she had seen him take on the three assailants that evening, he had been almost majestic in his complete and total violence.

It had not perturbed him. He had not seen a 'red mist' but had gone about their destruction with an almost clinical approach. And yet James goes and helps a tiny child and shows a protectiveness and tenderness that was never seen to his fellows.

Benny wondered why.....?

Chapter 13

James James

.....H was born into a working-class family. Mary James, his mother, helped part-time in a shop and Charles (Charlie) James, his father, at a factory where he was the local comedian. Always with a quip, he was good company at work, the pub and in the Angling Society.

After two years of marriage, Mary became pregnant, and Charles, finding the amount of sex he wanted drying up, quickly lost interest in her and started fucking one of the pub barmaids. When she went into the hospital on a particularly wet week in April 1969 to have their baby, he did not visit. When she arrived home with their newly born son, he welcomed her with 'Don't you *ever* let that ugly little bastard get near me.'

And so the newly born child was now in a small, dingy, cockroach-infested, one-up, one-down terrace house where there was no escape from the man who didn't want him there. Mary had decided his name would be William, and just as she was going, on her own, to the christening, her husband gave her an envelope for the vicar.

As the small service progressed, the vicar came to the point when he gave the child his new name.

‘James,’ he said as he held the child and offered him to Christ.

‘That’s not his name,’ she said quickly, ‘it’s William.’

The vicar looked confused, then, after thinking for a moment, handed the child back, took the envelope out of his pocket, handed it to her, took the child back and carried on with the christening..... She looked at the copy of the Birth Certificate, and it had the name ‘James’ already registered. Her heart sank. James James, it read. What a God-awful name. She was beaten. The stench of defeat would permeate the family for many years...

His father soon started tormenting tiny James: poking, pinching, shouting at it until it cried and then he screamed at it for crying. When James was eight months old, his father came home early from the factory and walked in unexpectedly. The sight before him revolted him.....it was vile, nauseating, degrading, abominable. He flew across the cramped lounge, ripped the child from his mother’s exposed breast and hurled it at the wall. Luckily, the tiny thing hit it rear end first, his nappies cushioning the blow, but he dropped head first to the floor and started to cry.

‘If I ever,’ he screamed at his wife, ‘catch you doing that again, you’re gone! Got it! Fucking gone! You fucking whore..... Now get my fucking tea!’

Terrified, she went to pick up the screaming James, but as she bent down, he took a fistful of her hair and dragged her to the kitchen.

‘Get my fucking tea!’ he screamed into her face; she felt his wet spit on her cheeks. Sobbing, she went to the cooker. He went back in and picked up the tiny child by the throat. *I ought to kill you now*, pounded in his brain.

He squeezed tighter....and tighter....until little James stopped crying and started to turn blue. How he wanted this *thing* to die.....*die, you ugly little bastard.....die.....*just a little more pressure....just a little.....*and then you will be fucking gone from my life...*

It took all his willpower to stop applying the increasing pressure. He let go of the child’s throat, and it dropped to the ground. He stood perfectly still for a moment, his heart pounding.

‘I’m going to the pub.....’

And he was gone. Mary looked at the child lying contorted on the carpet, its little throat gulping in as much air as it could. She took a step towards little James, then changed her mind, went back and started cleaning the cooker.

When James was two, he was taken to hospital with severe bruising after he had, according to the medical records, *accidentally crawled to the top of the stairs and fallen down*. In actual fact, he hadn’t fallen down the stairs. In actual fact, he hadn’t touched the stairs. In actual fact, he had been

thrown down with such force that he didn't hit anything until he reached the floor at the bottom....then he slid, and his face hit a chair.

It was a barren life, devoid of everything a tiny child needs..... Screamed at and beaten by his father, rejected by his mother, he went inwards. Although he had no idea that other children were not treated the same way, he intuitively went into his own world of fantasy where his few toys were his friendly companions with whom he talked.

He slept on the landing where his little bed was situated on the pathway to his parents' bedroom and where he was guaranteed a rap from a knuckled fist from his father as he passed onwards to his own room. Terrified, he would hide below the bedclothes to minimise the effect he was having on his father. He had no idea why he was continually hit, but knew he must have done something wrong.....very wrong. Late one night, when he was five, he was awoken when his father grabbed his hair and put a fist in front of his face.

'Don't make a sound..... Now open your mouth.....'

And James' living nightmare descended into a living hell.

For James, life was a series of violence, pain and sexual abuse and the start of school offered no release. There he was seen instinctively by the other children as weak and

withdrawn and was bullied accordingly. Any young aggressor would seek him out and add to the trauma from which there was no escape.

At age six, James was playing with his toys on the floor at home when his father tripped over one. He lashed out with his foot and caught James full in the face with his boot. At the hospital, they explained that James had *fallen and hit his mouth on the bolt on the back door*. Most of his front teeth were gone.....

‘He’s a bit of a one, eh?’ said one of the nurses, ‘always getting into some kind of mischief.....little rascal.....’

Every day there were the magic words. ‘And keep your fucking mouth shut or else.....’ and his jaw and teeth ached with the continual subconscious effort to obey the command. And he clenched his sore bum so hard that he didn’t shit for days on end.....

When he was seven, they moved to a larger house on a council estate which allowed James to have his own bedroom and a degree of sanctuary. Only a degree...

Life carried on in its inexorable, misery-filled, loveless way. As he grew, he became more introverted and immersed himself in books, finding any excuse not to go home, but ironically was beaten if he was late.

He was terrified of going home.

He was terrified of staying away.

He was terrified of the continual undercurrent of violence.

You upset your dad, and you paid.

Severely.....

The problem was that James still had no idea what the rules were for not upsetting him. If you made a noise, you got hit. If you didn't reply quickly enough, you got hit. If he had a bad day, you got hit. If the world was not as he wanted it..... you got hit.

You got.....hit!

James crept silently about like a mouse to not be noticed.

He gave up.....without giving up.

He was an underdeveloped, thin child, physically quite tall, but then at about twelve, for no apparent reason, he suddenly filled out. Unfortunately, it made him more visible and an easier target to hit. The beatings and the abuse continued, and James got nothing out of life and expected nothing. Why would he? He had never had anything.....

At thirteen he left to go to the baths, which were a train ride away. Halfway to the station, he realised he had forgotten his money, so he ran back home and burst through the door. Running into the lounge, he saw his dad with his dick in his mother's mouth. He stopped, frozen, not knowing where to look or what to do... His father leapt at him like an animal! He grabbed James' throat and then, with as much force as he could muster, he brought up his knee. Instinctively, through years of being hit, James arched his midriff backwards, but

the knee in the testicles still caught him badly. The unbearable pain exploded through him. He had suffered incredible pain over the years from this man, but this.....his body went limp, and he passed out.

It was nearly three hours later when he came to, and he was still lying in the same place.....but he was the only one in the house. Nausea immediately enveloped him, so he quickly took his mandatory handkerchief out of his back pocket and started to throw up into it. When his stomach had stopped heaving, he tied the soaking hankie into a bundle so as not to make a mess and crawled up the stairs to his bed.

He stayed there for two days; no one helped him or brought him food. When they went to work, he crawled down to the kitchen and scrounged what he could. His testicles had become immensely swollen, and intuitively he sat in a cold bath of water, which in due course reduced the swelling.

When James was in his mid-teens and soon to leave school for employment, he went to the local cinema and saw a film that had literally been released as he was being born. He had no idea what film he was going to see, just that it got him out of the house, and as he had no friends, the cinema had become a refuge. Initially, he was bored by the film, but as it unfolded, he was drawn to its every frame and line. What was unfolding before his eyes was almost unbelievable, miraculous even, but more than that – much more – it was epiphanic.

‘*Straw Dogs*’ told the story of a pacifistic mathematics professor who is forced into a violent confrontation when his wife is raped and his home threatened by a group of local thugs. A peaceful man who turns to violence when *no other option* is possible.....

The film transfixed James. He had no idea that *fighting back* was an option.

He had been led to believe that any resistance was futile, acceptance inescapable, defeat inevitable. At the end of the film, he walked out knowing that something had changed but not knowing what. After being in the open air for a few minutes, he suddenly burst into tears and then uncontrolled sobbing. He walked to a quiet place where his discomfort would be unseen, and for the next two hours he wailed and sobbed until he was spent, and then a cathartic peace enveloped him. He didn’t go home that night but went to the river and sat by its swirling currents as they meandered their way to the sea.

When he arrived home the next day, his mother said, ‘Where have you been?’

‘Out.’

‘Just wait till your dad gets home.....’

That threat had been used for many years and invoked absolute dread, but now it was less. Now it was real. Now it was manageable. Now it could be countered. When his father

came home, he immediately rushed to James, grabbed his throat and started to thump him.

James..... did nothing.

He put up no resistance and accepted the beating. But for James, it was a measurement of the present with the past, the new with the old, and they were different. James was different. This man, this monster, his father, the thing standing in front of him was no longer inviolate.....

Several weeks later, his father got up very early on a Sunday morning, packed his fishing gear and put it into the back of his little car. James heard him go. He had been lucky this time. Occasionally, his dad popped in to torment him before he went. He said it 'made his day'.

Charlie headed off into the blackness to a large lake nearly four miles away to fish for carp. He always went very early to set up his tackle, avail himself of his bottle of whisky, which he would mix with his flask of hot coffee and wait an hour or two for dawn. He thought dawn was the best time for carp.

He had been there about an hour, gently dozing in his little folding cloth seat, and didn't hear the soft sound behind him. An arm came around his neck to restrain him, and the chloroform-soaked cotton wool, stolen from the school lab, went over his nose and mouth, and in a few moments, he was unconscious. He slumped softly to the ground and stayed still. With the rope James had brought, he tied his father's hands

and feet and put sellotape over his mouth. He looked at the unconscious man on the floor in front of him and watched his face caught in the fading light of the moon.

It was not a handsome face, and yet he did well with the ladies.

It was not really a man's face, and yet he was liked by his men friends.

What was it about his face? James knew the answer.

It was not a face. It was a mask. It was not real. What you saw was not what you got.

James smiled, pleased with himself for this little bit of amateur analysis. Raising his foot, he smashed the heel of his shoe into the mask that was staring up at him... All he heard was a low grunt and small clicks as bones fractured.....but in James' mind, it echoed around the world....and the mask now had a real face.

The Rubicon had been crossed!

James left him and ran a hundred yards up the lake to where he knew a small rowing boat was tethered. He rowed it back to his slowly rousing father. Dragging his father into the water, he tethered him to the boat. Casting partially off, he waded back to the shore and spent a little time tidying up the spot, putting the chair in place, the flask by its side, the keepnet in the water and then a few moments removing his footprints. Getting back in the boat, James quietly rowed out to the middle of the lake and stopped and took measure.

He had about another forty-five minutes of darkness and wanted to use it to its full. His father was coming round and starting to see and hear.....and felt the pain exploding in his head.

Seeing James sitting in the gloom before him, he still struggled with understanding. Then he heard it. It was quiet, and it was whispered from someone he knew but a voice he didn't recognise.

'Hello.....' said the soft voice. 'How are you.....you ok?' Asked the smiling man-child sitting in front of him.

His father writhed to release his bonds, but it was no good. He was tied by his hands and feet and a rope around his chest, which was now in the hand of James.

'Do you hurt?' James smiled again and pushed him into the water. As he started to go down, James pulled on the rope and brought him back. His father could only breathe through his nose, and that was a struggle. He was petrified and shaking with fear. James smiled at him and let go of the rope again. Down he went, into the black, cold water, and after a few moments he pulled him up.

James grabbed the sellotape and ripped it off his face. He screamed with pain, and it echoed around the lake. James knew it was risky to make a noise, but it was unlikely he would be heard, and it was worth it if he was.

He wanted him to breathe.

He wanted him to be terrified.

He wanted him to scream.

He wanted him to die.....

‘You see,’ said James, ‘It’s not the drowning that’s terrifying; it’s the fear of drowning.....of dying..... And it’s not being hit that scares; it’s waiting for it to happen. You don’t know when it’s going to happen..... And you won’t know how long I am going to keep you alive before you drown..... Or perhaps I am not going to drown you.....? Who knows? We will have to wait and see.....just have to wait and see.....’

‘I am your father! I’ll have you, you stupid little fucker!’

It wasn’t really the right thing to say. If there was anything less likely to help his situation, that was it..... James pulled back his arm, and his fist smashed into his father’s mouth. Blood flew everywhere. His father gagged as teeth found their way into his throat.

I am your father...

What a contradiction in terms that was. James had once looked up the dictionary definition of ‘father’, and he had memorised every word. He softly repeated it.....

‘.....to act as a father to somebody, especially giving advice, comfort, and protection..... Did you hear that? Advice, comfort and protection; not hate, jealousy, beatings, pain, fear.....buggery.’

‘What are you fucking on about?’ asked his weeping, shaking father through a mouth that could hardly make words intelligible.

‘Nothing....you wouldn’t understand. But I was repeating the definition of ‘father’, and it’s not one you would recognise..... you fucking sadistic asshole!’

James looked at him and smiled then let him slide back under the water.

This time he left him longer. James was aware of an amazing new feeling flooding through his very being. He could not put a word to it, but later he knew what it was.

It was power.

It was having control over the life of another human being.

When he brought him back up, he coughed water and struggled to breathe. James let him have long enough to breathe properly. Perhaps not exactly *properly*.

‘What do you want?’ he said weakly. ‘Let me out, and I will give you anything you want....’

His authority was gone and had given way to pleading and grovelling. James shook his head slowly. ‘I don’t think you are in any position to give me anything..... I am going to take what I want, and I *don’t need your permission* for it....’

‘What.... do..... you want.....?’

James paused and thought deeply. ‘I want to go home and you not be there....I want to talk and sing and read without you finding something wrong with it....I want an end to continual sarcasm...I want to live..... And to do that, you have to die.’

He hit him in the mouth again, and a young duckling swimming nearby took flight when it heard the sickening soft splat.....James loosened his grip on the rope and let him slide back into the water, this time for longer.

When he came back up, he was struggling for life. James pulled on the rope to get his head and shoulders into the boat. When they were resting on the side, he said incongruously, 'Better?'

His father didn't acknowledge him, hardly conscious, death waiting to take him should he give up.

Who was this man?

Yesterday he was the devil incarnate: a sadistic, brutal paedophile. This morning.....? This morning he was a pathetic human being: half drowned, half dead with half a face.

Who was this man?

This man who had filled him with fear all his life? Who had terrorised, beaten and fucked him and who was omnipotent.

Who was he now?

What was he now?

James let out a big sigh and noticed how relaxed his muscles were. He smiled at the half-conscious man before him.....

'Goodnight,' he said softly and gently moved some of his father's bedraggled hair from off his wet face.

Picking up one of the oars, he swung it round behind him and, swinging it with all his might, smashed him in the face. There was an almighty crunch as his nose flattened; teeth fell from

his mouth and blood spurted into the air. Eyes ballooned in their sockets, and he fell immediately into unconsciousness.

James felt an immense rush of power, and in frenzy of unleashed rage and fury, he kept bringing the oar down on his father's head until it was unrecognisable, and James was spent. Finished, he wanted to scream, ape-like, animal-like, at the top of his voice but contained himself until calm enveloped him, which he savoured for a few moments.....

He let go of the rope and let his father submerge for a while. James left him under long enough to kill him, but there was no need; the oar had done that.....

He pulled him up, untied him and let the dead body that was once his tormentor slide back into the dark, murky deep. He sat and looked at the watery grave for several moments, then realised he had to be gone. As he picked up the oars and located them in the rowlocks, he noticed, as the gloom surrendered to the morning, a newspaper floating close to the boat. The large headline shouted out '*Big Brother is STILL watching you!*'

He looked quizzically for a moment then remembered the year was 1984 and they were quoting Orwell.

'Oh no he isn't,' he thought. 'Oh no he isn't.....'

With tiredness taking over his mind and body, he rowed the boat back to its mooring spot and ran back home; his wet clothes clinging and his shoes squelching.

It was two days before they dragged the lake, but found nothing. It was deep, weed-strewn and inhospitable. They assumed Charlie had drowned as his fishing tackle was there, and he was always a bit of a card when it came to the odd tittle, as witnessed by the empty whisky bottle. Although it could also be a coincidence that the barmaid from the local pub had handed in her notice quickly and left the area several weeks earlier. Even now he could be shagging her silly in a bedsit somewhere. Who knows?

He was a bit of a lad was Charlie. Fuck anything that moved.....

And bloody good company.....bloody good company.

His mother arranged, in a strange act of denial, to have a plaque put on the Remembrance Wall of the local crematorium that stated:

To a loving
husband and father
who will be missed by
family, friends and all who knew him

The day after, James tore it down. He headed to the local tip and had his own burial service for the plaque..... Digging a hole, he put in the plaque, urinated over it and covered it up with foul-smelling detritus.

For a while after that, James went off the rails and used aggression to solve every problem. Initially, it was wonderful.

The release of anger to invoke calm.

The threat of fear to get control.

The application of force to solve a problem.

But as the years of bottled rage expended, he realised that the credo was also self-defeating. A one-way trip to nowhere.

Being the continual aggressor was no different than being the victim.

Better, but no different.

Both were continual, blinkered states, and neither offered a balanced view or comfortable entree into anything.

There was somewhere in-between.

A general passivity behind which a ferocious aggression could be unleashed if necessary.

And.....annihilate anyone or anything that posed a threat...and by any means.

That was better.....

That was James.....

James James....

Chapter 14

Holiday

H and Benny were located on the west side of Barbados where the island was lush and tranquil. The private estate where they were staying was several miles from the ocean, but its mountainside location gave magnificent views of its blue-green hue, and when one of the frequent but short tropical storms arrived, they watched it play with the water, creating an effervescent white froth which died down as quickly as it had arrived.

When they were not on the beach, they would set off in the beat-up little mini moke, usually getting lost but not caring whether they did, as time was unimportant. After several days, they visited the wild east coast where the Atlantic winds lash the shores and create large, forceful waves for the surfers. It had violence, boundless energy, spirit and was completely untamed. Benny knew that what she saw in front of her was a natural representation of the man at her side.

They visited the caves with the stalagmites and stalactites, the distillery and assorted 'places of interest' which were really of little interest, but they ended up going anyhow, and it provided the locals with a living.

Benny arranged for them to go diving, and they went to Carlisle Bay where several wrecks were located. After a day there, they were persuaded by the local diving company to return that evening for a night dive. H and Benny had never dived at night, and Benny was dubious about their safety, but in the end, she was pleased she had succumbed. The night-time offered a totally new perspective to the underwater world, the coral taking on new colours and the eyes of the marine life lighting up in the beams of the lights incorporated in their headgear.

Two days later they went to another location just off the West Coast where, sitting bolt upright on the bottom of the sea in one hundred and thirty feet of water, stood the SS Stavronikita. The Greek freighter had run aground in the early seventies, and then later that decade it had been towed out and sunk and become the premier wreck to explore. Going down for thirty minutes, they found that after almost 20 years of submersion the wreck was a hive of activity and they found her hull adorned with soft and hard corals, sponges and the soft tree-like gorgonians. Atop her masts and upper cabins swarmed Sergeant Majors, Tangs, Blue Striped Drum Cromis and Red Hinds.

At the end of their adventure, they gently rose, waiting the allotted time at each level to adjust to the pressure change. After a break and a cold drink, they went swimming just off

the wreck where they watched Barracudas, Mackerels and Turtles, common visitors to the wreck area.

Lying on the beach, they were occasionally approached by the odd vendor of cooling silks, soothing balms, trinkets etcetera, and Benny had just politely declined one when she thought for a moment and said, 'James.....'

'Uh?'

'You know how I've led a 'wild child' sort of life, what with being the mistress of that Mafia Godfather, living with the Aga Khan, mistress to Saddam Hussein and kinky sex with Tony Blair and his cabinet in the Cabinet Office.....that sort of thing.'

'Yeah.....'

'Well.....I've never actually smoked cannabis.....'

'Poor little wild child. How less decadent you must have felt.'

He went back to reading his book, knowing full well what was coming next.

'James.....' she said in a soft, childlike 'can we have an ice cream' sort of way.

'No.'

'What do you mean, 'no'? You didn't know what I was going to ask. ...Well, ok, you did, but you're supposed to support me, help me develop....'

He turned over and stared at her lovely bosom. 'I think you are developed quite enough, my love.'

'Let's have some cannabis....please...please.'

It had been many years since H had tried cannabis, and it didn't do too much for him then, other than make him giggle, feel hungry and think that the music he was listening to at a friend's house was the best music he had ever heard – which, he found out the next day after he bought the cd, was not quite true.

'OK,' said H, 'I'll sort it.'

He sought out Snowman, who came round daily offering relief for burns with natural aloe vera which he squeezed directly from the plant.

Two days later, on the patio of the villa, H was interlacing the cannabis with some tobacco from cigarettes he had bought, putting it in roll-up paper and inserting the filters from the discarded cigarettes. He lit one and gave it to Benny and then another for himself. Benny took a puff and blew the smoke out immediately.

'No, Benny, that sort of ruins what you're trying to achieve. You have to take it into your lungs.....hold it there.....and then exhale.....like this.'

He took a deep drag, inhaled and choked. Coughing and spluttering, he grabbed the gin and tonic to cool his throat.

'My man,' said Benny, 'So butch.....'

H looked at her and sighed with resignation. After several attempts, they were toking away: toke, cool drink, toke, cool drink..... until the joints were finished.

'Is that it....?' asked a disappointed Benny. 'I don't feel much different.'

'Maybe it was crap, or maybe I got the mix between the baccy and the ganja wrong. I'll do another couple.'

Half way through the second and Benny's head was starting to spin.

'Let's go inside on the couch and then you can sleep if you want,' suggested H.

Her eyes were glazing, so he helped her indoors and laid her at one end of the large couch, and he sat facing her at the other. He continued smoking and was aware that he was starting to feel wrong. For a fleeting second, he felt panic sweep through him, but then it subsided. What the fuck was that? Suddenly Benny let out a scream, and her whole body went rigid. Her eyes moved up in their sockets, and a dreadful fear masked her face.

'Oh no,' she pleaded, 'no.....' and started to cry.

H moved quickly to her and cradled her in his arms. 'It's ok, it's ok,' he said soothingly, holding her close to him and rocking her gently.

He felt the panic sweep through him again and fought to keep control.

'Go away, go away...leave me alone,' Benny screamed, as she pleaded with whatever demon was invading her mind, '*please* go away.'

She broke into uncontrollable sobbing. H was struggling to concentrate. He could see Benny's face clearly, but if he looked past her, the room was not recognisable. It swam in front of him, and there were no defined colours.

Benny's body went rigid, and after almost a minute, she shook violently. After a few seconds, her body went limp, and she didn't move.

H was panic-stricken. What to do? Call a doctor? How the fuck do you call a doctor? He could hardly see the fucking phone, let alone call a doctor! And where the fuck was a doctor's number? Take her to the nearest town in the moke? Fucking hardly! He didn't know what to do..... He didn't know what the fuck to do!!!!

Forcing himself to calm down, he cradled her closer to him and spoke soothingly to her. Rocking her gently like a tiny child, he whispered gently in her ear.

'It's ok, my love, everything will be ok.....it's just temporary; it will go away.'

Benny started to stir, and she slowly opened her eyes. Taking a very deep breath, she said, 'Holy Mother. That was bad. I have never known fear like that in my life. I could actually see the fear approaching like a black cloud....'

She ran her fingers through her sweat-drenched hair and let out a long lungful of air. 'Christ....'

H was overcome with relief. 'You ok now?' She nodded. 'Do you want some water?'

She shook her head. H moved back to the other end of the couch. His head was still swimming, and he was still struggling to focus properly, but he could cope with that. Then, just as suddenly as it had left her, Benny convulsed again, and her body went rigid. Panic swept through H, and he moved to her again and took her in his arms.

‘It will be ok,’ he said reassuringly, ‘it will pass.’

‘Please tell it to go away,’ she pleaded, ‘go away....go away.....it’s coming.....it’s coming,’ and her terrified scream filled the room.

She went into her own world and sobbed and clung to H, who could do nothing but hold her tight and keep talking and let her know he was there. If she could hear him....?

Ten minutes later it left her again, and she came back to her own world. Her hair was soaking wet, her face haggard, her eyes tired. H felt incredible anguish, but he smiled at her and said, ‘Hello.....you having fun in there?’

Since the first attack, forty minutes had elapsed.

‘I’ll get you some water.’

H’s head was much clearer; he went to the kitchen and filled two glasses. As he turned off the tap, he heard the scream.....He ran, with the glasses slopping over the place, back to Benny, who had returned to her inner hell. He could do nothing but cradle her again and keep talking. Just wait for the effects to wear off....just wait....and while he was waiting, decide how to kill the bastard that had given him this shit! When he could, he got her to sip water. He assumed it would

help her, but in truth, he had absolutely no fucking idea what so ever what he was doing.....it could actually be making her worse!

Nearly two hours later, Benny appeared to have had the last of her psychotic trips. After the last one, she had fallen into a calm sleep from which she had not woken or appeared disturbed. He carried her to bed and lay by her, watching, wondering.....how the fuck he could have let this happen?

The next morning, Benny was sprightly, with no obvious after-effects from the terrifying psychosis that had invaded her mind. Benny was back and chirpy as though nothing had happened the previous day! He made her a latte and toast, then wandered off in the Moke and went to the beach. Snowman was administering the cool, wet soothing touch of an aloe vera plant to a tourist, and when he had finished, H went to him.

‘Remember me?’

‘Yo man.’

H held out his hand, and snowman winced when H closed it around his. As H applied more pressure, snowman’s face showed the pain, and his body started to shrink. H put his face next to snowman’s. ‘What the fuck was in that shit you sold me?’

‘Nothing, man, it was good shit. I told it was good shit, man.’

‘You nearly fucking killed my woman,’ snarled H, whose grip had not loosened. ‘You tell me why I shouldn’t hurt you so fucking bad...?’

‘It’s shit, man, but it’s Bajan shit. It’s not the shit you get at home, man.....this is real shit. You gotta take it easy with the shit, man....it’s not home shit, man.....please man.....’

H was angry and could quite easily have hurt this man badly, although he was quite aware that a crowded beach was not really the place. He was also aware that if what snowman was saying was correct, and it may not be, then it was H’s fault. He had blithely given a drug to Benny with no thought about its strength or effect. It was just going to be a silly spliff. H stared at the man who was still in pain and waiting.....

‘OK, man. I believe you. But if I find out that you are not telling me the fucking truth, I am coming back to finish the job. You understand that...?’

‘Just fucking Bajan shit, man....just Bajan shit....sorry about your woman, man.....sorry man.....sorry.....’

He let go of his hand.

When he got back to the villa, Benny said, ‘Could we try it again? It may be better this time....?’

H looked at her incredulously, went to the drawer where it was housed, went back to Benny, said, ‘No,’ then marched off and flushed the lot down the loo.....

Two weeks soon went, and, relaxed and bronzed, they boarded a small plane and headed for Bogotá, flying through Venezuelan airspace to circumvent the towering snow-capped Andes.

Benny pointed down. 'I will educate you as we all learn this automatically at school.....What you call the Andes is actually the Quechua Antis and is the longest mountain range in South America at about seven thousand kilometres. The widest point is about five hundred kilometres; the average height is about four thousand metres while the highest is six thousand six hundred and ninety-two metres.'

'That's it? That's all you know? I could get a measuring tape and work that out.'

She sighed as though explaining to a moron. 'They are comprised,' she continued, 'of two great ranges: the Cordillera Oriental and the Cordillera Occidental. They range through seven countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. notice the alphabetical order?'

H grunted.

'The initial formation began in the Jurassic period, with no help whatsoever from Steven Spielberg, but their present formation evolved in the Cretaceous period.'

She paused. 'How am I doing?'

'Perhaps just one more fascinating fact and then let's get a drink....or two?'

They were met by two men at the airport who doffed their caps to Benshima and nodded respectfully to H. H assumed they were farmhands or company employees, but they had an air about them that fitted more into H's clubs or, perhaps more accurately, into his security company. Why would he think that? A large Mercedes waited outside for them. As it pulled away, H noticed the car in front and the one behind did also.

'We have an escort?'

She just smiled and said, 'More than likely.'

'Why?'

She just shrugged. 'We're in Colombia.....'

The convoy drove for about an hour through the countryside on the road to Yopal until they came to a large electric gate which swung open for them, and they swept up a long road and stopped outside Benny's parents' hacienda. H suddenly realised that, for some reason, he had never asked Benny about her parents other than in a casual 'how are they?' when she got off the phone to them. He hadn't expected this.....

The hacienda was enormous, and it reminded H, although it was the antithesis of, a film star's home. A house that suggested wealth and prestige but not ostentation.

As they disembarked, a small lady ran towards them and flung her arms around Benny. After more hugs and kisses, she came round to H and tried to do the same, but H was too

big to embrace and too tall to kiss, so H instinctively picked her up and kissed her. Suddenly feeling foolish and embarrassed, he put her down quickly and mumbled, 'Sorry.' The mother's face flushed, and she said something in Spanish to Benshima, and they both giggled. H held out his arms as a gesture of apology and contrition, but Benny said, 'Don't apologise. Mama thought it was wonderful, and so do I.'

H went to the boot to get the luggage, but two other men had already beaten him and were taking it indoors. H looked quizzically at Benny, but she only smiled. Who were all these men that chauffeured and fetched and carried?

He walked to the door with Benny and her mother, where a small man waited to greet them. Dressed in what could be termed 'old' clothes, he could have been mistaken for the gardener, but from the deference shown to him by the men that he most certainly wasn't the gardener. The small man shook H's hand, smiled and said in slow, soft but almost perfect English:

'Welcome to our home, James. We are glad and proud that you have joined us at long last.'

It was not a criticism but a genuine statement. H felt a lump in his throat and fought furiously to keep control. Being welcome in someone's home by a father-like figure was not what he was used to. They were ushered into a lounge that could

have housed a football match and looked out over miles of crops. After more 'pleased to meet you' and a welcoming cup of coffee, they went upstairs to freshen up.

H found his bags in one room but not Benshima's. He wandered down the corridor and found Benny's room. He walked in and held out his hands in question. She smiled.

'Don't worry, my little sex object, this is for appearances only. We are in a deeply Catholic country, and the maids will expect it. Also, don't forget we are not married, but you can pop in later if you wish and give me a good fucking.'

H instinctively looked around to see if anyone could hear, and she giggled at his discomfort.

It was late in the day, and before they sat down for dinner, H pulled Benny to one side and urgently whispered, 'How do I address them?'

Benny smiled. 'Mom and dad.'

Thanks, thought H. Fucking thanks.

The large dining room greeted them, and it took a while for H to grasp that large and spacious was what you had in a hot country, if you could afford it. Perhaps in any country...? In Colombia, land outside the town was relatively cheap, and the climate meant that you built a spacious, airy home if you could. The family Reyes could.

After an hour of family chat and small talk, Senor Reyes said, 'You own clubs, James. What kind of clubs?'

Oh shit, thought H, this could be the end of a good evening or even visit. What the hell should he say? Children's nurseries? Line dancing? Bingo? What had Benny told them?

He looked at her momentarily, but her eyes gave him no clue. Taking an invisible deep breath, he said, 'They are essentially night clubs, sir, although two operate in the day as well. They cater for two types of people. One is relatively well off and wants a good time with dancing, food and expensive wines, and the other is for people who want a good night out dancing, a few drinks and some will be looking for companionship or sex. We don't actually offer sex, but the atmosphere and the music feed their fantasies, which make them feel good, and of course, they hope to meet a like-minded soul who will have sex with them later.'

There was silence. Fucked, thought H; completely and utterly fucked! Ah well, when's the next plane?

Benny started to applaud and giggle. 'I told you, Papa, not only is he an intelligent thug, but in a peculiar way an honest one.'

H squirmed, and his embarrassment showed. He was uncomfortable being presented as a thug by the woman he loved and had never hurt in his life. Why would she do that?

'James,' said Senor Reyes 'we value your honesty and have no wish to embarrass you. How you make your living is only of interest to us because our daughter has chosen you over

other men. We do not judge you. Benshima has done that, and from first accounts, I would say she had made an admirable choice.'

H was totally lost. He was not used to this social intercourse which they found so easy. So this is what a real family was like? If this is what people do, then.....

'How do you make your living, sir?'

Senor Reyes paused for a moment. 'My wife is better at explaining that than I. I am not much good with figures and things. I am more..... *strategic*.' He said it in a self-deprecating way, but.....

His charming wife, who, H later found out, had an accountancy degree, cast off her invisibility cloak.

'We are lucky, James. Our ancestors have been in the Republica de Colombia for centuries and were traders; indeed, we can trace our ancestry back to the arrival of Vasco Nunez de Balboa in the early 1500s. Unfortunately, their methods of trade would be frowned on today, but that was then, and this is now. Of course, it was not the Republica de Colombia then as that name only came into being in the early 1800s and was taken from the name Christopher Columbus, or as we would say in Spanish, Cristóbal Colón. Anyhow, over the years our forefathers have built up interests in many industries, and we now have the responsibility for those interests.'

'Interests?' asked H.

‘We produce coffee, tobacco and plantains mainly for export to North America; we also have oil and mineral interests.’

H was rocked. These people were wealthy, but more to the point, what was a plantain? He was about to ask when Benny said, ‘A plantain is a form of banana; in fact, a banana is actually a plantain, but some plantains are sweet like a banana and others are a more staple product.’

‘Thanks,’ said H, not quite knowing what else to say and not really feeling much wiser.

The dinner went on, and ritual small talk took over. Benny as a child, etc., etc. Let her be embarrassed for a change, thought H. At the end of the dinner, Senor Reyes took H by the arm and led him from the dining room, through the lounge and out to a large patio. H was aware that he was using the word ‘large’ to describe most things. They sat on two beaten-up old rocking chairs and stared out into the incredible starlit night. With little light in the countryside, the stars shone with a brightness that H had never witnessed before. A maid arrived with coffee and cigars.

‘Our coffee,’ said Senor Reyes, ‘and also our own cigars. As you can see, we are quite lucky.’

They are, thought H, but they are also approachable and down to earth, and that relieved H mightily. They sat for quite some time saying nothing, just sipping coffee. H had declined the cigar, but the fragrant aroma from Senor Reyes made him wonder whether he should. Nah.

‘Do you speak Spanish?’

‘No, sir, to my chagrin, I do not.’

‘Chagrin?’

‘Sorry. I suppose it can mean several things, but in this context, I think it would mean embarrassment.’

‘Embarrassment?’

‘Yes, sir. It is evident that I have been living with Benshima a considerable time and have made no effort to learn her mother tongue. It is also obvious that I have come out here to meet her parents and I know nothing about them or their country. For that tardiness.....lack of effort, I apologise. It is for that that I am embarrassed.’

‘We have our own lives to lead, and sometimes other things are below the radar.’

They both smiled.

‘Let me tell you a little about our country,’ he said, ‘to lessen your embarrassment. Our country is about four times larger than yours and twice the size of France. It’s more than one million square kilometres, and we border one sea, one ocean and five countries. In order, that’s the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean and Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela. Impressive? Just think, James, your tiny little Island used to own most of the world. What happened to all your power?’

It wasn’t really a question, but H had an answer.

‘We elected a parliament and gave the decision-making to incompetent idiots who do things by committee!’

‘You dislike them, James?’

‘Dislike is not quite right, sir. I despise them. I despise their morals, their greed, their incompetence and their arrogance. I despise them for bringing my country to the ‘lowest common denominator syndrome’. I despise the fact that everything that is made privately gets better, but anything the government is involved in such as education and the National Health Service gets worse.’

H realised he had shot off his mouth, but it was one of his pet subjects. God knows why, as he did not use the NHS or have children in school, but he still despised them. Ah well.... They talked some more, then Senor Reyes decided that it was time for his bed. H readily agreed and off they went. H was actually knackered, and he went to his room, got in bed and was asleep in three minutes, quite forgetting Benny and what he was supposed to do.....

The next day, after a light breakfast and a gentle chiding from Benny about her ‘rejection’, the women went off to Bogotá to shop, and Senor Reyes arranged to show H some of ‘the crops’. Outside, they were met by three men on quad bikes. Each carried a semi-automatic gun, and H looked enquiringly at Senor Reyes.

‘Don’t be alarmed. Our country has seen a degree of lawlessness over the last few years, and we do not take chances. It is remote that anything would happen, but there

may be an idiota who does not know who I am and will try and kidnap my wife or me for ransom. So don't worry; you are quite safe.'

They got on to the back of a quad bike, went down a narrow road for a mile until H saw a light aircraft sitting on an airstrip. Two men sitting by the plane immediately came to life and greeted Senor Reyes. They shook H's hand and nodded in respect. Any friend of Senor Reyes was obviously a friend of theirs. Flying over the countryside, he saw, for miles and miles, fields of coffee and plantains. Heading west towards the coast, he saw an enormous grey cement factory at the side of an estuary. Farther up the coast, they pointed out a refinery. H was mightily impressed. Had he known Benny's family was so wealthy, he wouldn't have had the guts to approach her. Shit.....

'Impressive,' said H.

'As I mentioned before, we are just guardians of the legacy.' One of the men imperceptibly caught Senor Reyes' eyes and nodded his head towards the north, but Senor Reyes just as imperceptibly shook his head.....

Three days later, at dinner, H received a call. He was going to ignore it, but he saw it was Toby and H knew it was urgent. It was seven o'clock there and midnight in London.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but this could be important.....'

Excusing himself, he went and sat on the porch. 'Evening, Toby.'

‘Bit of news for you H.....’

H listened, asking the odd question, then said, ‘Toby, get hold of needles and tell him I want our friends ready to talk to me in four days’ time. OK?’

‘OK, H, will do.’

‘And Toby..’

‘Yes, H?’

‘Well done.’

‘Thanks, H.’

Chapter 15

Welcome....

..... Outside the 'Dancing Shoes' club, the two doormen were winding down. It had been a quiet night. Lots of punters but no problems and easy money. It seemed unlikely that anything would happen, but H had knocked into them the absolute need for vigilance.

He had also done another couple of things. He had bought them all lightweight flak jackets that would stop a small-calibre bullet or knife and had shown them the security footage of the stabbing and death of Big Tony. They had gone through what happened several times and worked out a defence and attack procedure if it, or something like it, happened again. Then they practiced and practiced.

Joey saw them first.

Two men and two women walking down the street towards them. Two men and two women were an unlikely attack combination, but H had said to be vigilant. When they were close, the women wheeled off as the men headed towards the club. The security video had shown a couple that could possibly have been East European origin, and the woman

had the cheekbones of the Slav states. One of these men was certainly East European, and Joey said to his partner, 'This wind would blow your barnacles off.'

The two men walked up to the doormen, and Joey knew this was it. Men never go up to doormen. Good doormen are generally polite but are mean, evil bastards, and males know better than getting too close. It's only women that do that. Women, some women – good-looking ones or ones with big tits – can get away with it.

As one of them started to speak, Joey and his partner hit them in the face and once more as they were going down. It was quite unexpected..... as it was supposed to be.

H had been quite explicit.

'If it could possibly be them, hit them and hit them very fucking hard. If you can, get in another before they land. If not, get in another as they land. Under no circumstances talk to them or hesitate.'

'DO NOT FUCKING HESITATE!!

'Repeat after me.'

'DO NOT FUCKING HESITATE!! DO NOT FUCKING HESITATE!! DO NOT FUCKING HESITATE!! they chanted along with him.

'Fucking give 'em everything you've got,' he continued.

'What if it isn't them, H?' someone had asked.

H thought for a moment, picturing two innocents come in from the countryside, more used to fucking sheep than women, to get a good peep at some real women and then....whack!

'I've absolutely no idea,' he grinned, 'so just tell Toby.'

'Thanks, H,' said Toby, 'appreciate it.'

.....Joey got on his mobile to Toby.....

'OK,' said Joey, 'no problem.'

Joey went through the men's pockets and found two thin tubes. As he peered at the one, a release mechanism let go of the compressed air piston, and a needle-like blade slid across his face and then retracted.

'Fuckin' hell.'

If big Joey could have jumped a foot in the air, he would have done, but all he did was thank his lucky stars for the near miss. They put the other tube gently in a pocket, then dragged the men and sat them against the wall as though drunk. A few minutes later, a car stopped, the men were put inside, and it drove off.

Toby erased twenty minutes of the security tape and put it in the faulty machine they used for such occasions.

Chapter 16

English humour?

.....H joined the family again.

‘Trouble, James?’ asked Benny, a little concerned.

‘A smidge.’

‘Is there anything we can do to help?’ asked Senora Reyes.

Like a child, H’s imagination was prone to flights of fancy, and he almost giggled as he tried to answer. ‘*Can we help.....?*’ He found it difficult to see these pillars of society helping him beat the shit out of someone for information. His imagination went ever wilder.....

‘Give him more coffee!’

‘Stick a plantain up his arse!’

‘Rub him with gravel!’

It was too much, and his brain would not give up on the fantasy unfolding before him. He tried so hard not to laugh tears started welling in his eyes. Benny looked at him imploringly. H tried to speak, but he couldn’t. Waving a hand in the air in a gesture of apology, he stumbled off upstairs to the bathroom where he cackled insanely. His strength left him, and he leaned over the basin to catch his breath. After a few moments, he felt better and started to straighten himself up when he thought of it again and collapsed into another fit of laughing. He could hardly breathe with the laughing, and

his stomach hurt. Regaining his composure, he stood up and looked into the mirror, only to see Benny behind him. She said nothing, just stood there glowering.

‘Benny, let me explain.’

‘There is nothing,’ Benny said sternly, ‘you could say that would excuse this.’

Five minutes later, H and Benny were doubled up in the bathroom.

‘More caffeine! That’ll make him talk....’ shrieked Benny and tears rolled down her eyes.

After a few minutes, they went back down, and Benny went into an exhaustive explanation, in Spanish, of what had happened. H could see from the gestures that Benny was trying to show the humour behind a ridiculous scenario, and the *Familia* Reyes were struggling to see it. And then Senora Reyes’ eyes widened; she opened up her hands expressively, then chattered excitedly to Benny who nodded profusely. The Senora then launched into an animated conversation with her husband, who also started to animate.

It all became a touch climactic, then Benny said, ‘They get it....’

Over coffee that evening, Senor Reyes asked H how he got into ‘clubs’.

H gave them the usual story of how he had worked himself up in a small club, then had the opportunity to buy a little club cheaply, and it had started from there.

Sort of.....

.....*When H left school at fifteen with no qualifications, he got the only job he could, which was digging roads. It meant an early rise, travelling in a smoke-filled, beer-stinking van for an hour with men whose flatulence could stop a Triceratops at ten paces. But it was worth it. The job gave him many things he needed: he was free, in the open air, and the physical exercise was exactly what his body and mind needed. He launched himself into the physical activity as though his life depended on it, and his muscles became defined and hard while his skin bronzed in the hot sun. He had fifteen years of aggression to dispel.*

After nearly eighteen months on the roads, he got the opportunity to go to another project nearer home, and there he met Arthur. H took an immediate liking to Arthur. Arthur was one of nature's throwbacks, and in an earlier age would have been burned at the stake for being a servant of the devil. Arthur was about five foot two, hunched, pockmarked from measles as a child, bow-legged and with only two front teeth, he looked like a beaver. Arthur had several distinct attributes that were good or bad dependent on how you saw him.

Arthur was a world authority on butterflies, although he had no way of judging, but Arthur had studied butterflies and devoured books on them since he was a child, had scrimped and saved and went all over the world to study them, and there was nothing he did not know about them.

Arthur had a photographic memory.

Arthur played the horses and won.

Arthur had bad breath.

Arthur was happily married to a woman who adored him.

Arthur could not say a sentence without the word 'fucking' being in it.

Initially, Arthur was reluctant to get too close to H. H was big, and Arthur had been bullied a lot in his life by men who had taken the piss out of him, but in due course he accepted H, and they became good friends at work. They never socialised outside work, but they discussed politics, gambling, women – which Arthur was also an expert on but had only ever had one – and sex – which Arthur was also an expert on and from whom H learned things that he thought would be most uncomfortable, if not physically impossible. The odd thing was, Arthur never discussed butterflies. He knew everything about them, but he kept them to himself.

One day, the gang had been moved urgently across town to another site to help get it back up to schedule as 'penalties' were about to kick in if it ran over. They had been there a

week and were just having a break. It was H's turn to make the tea, and he was brewing the large container over a small gas ring run by a propane cylinder. It was an unwritten rule that tea had to be just so..... There was no point in working your arse off, look forward to a bacon buttie and then wash it down with a brew that tasted like shit, and so whoever made the tea made it ciorrectly...or else. H was a few paces away, and he heard unfamiliar voices. He turned around to see four men had arrived by his little bunch.

He turned back to the tea.....

The leader of the men, *Clown*, had spied Arthur and fancied a bit of fun.

'What the fuck's this then?' he said to his mates as he pointed at Arthur. 'It's fuckin' Quasimodo.'

Arthur had settled down to a cheese and pickle sandwich to complement his bacon buttie and was about to read a butterfly magazine. Clown swaggered closer, followed by three mates who wanted to watch the fun. They had seen him torment others, and it was real 'crack'.

'Oy, crater face,' he said as he stood over Arthur, 'I'm fucking talking to you. Fucking bells made you deaf?'

He turned to his mates for their adulation. 'And what's this? Fucking butterflies, you gay cunt.' He kicked the magazine out of Arthur's hands, and it fluttered into the air. It was now too much for Arthur. He had spent his life being hounded by idiots, but over the last few years, he had been with friends and mates who took him for what he was. He stood up.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘I haven’t done you any harm, so why don’t you leave me alone?’

Clown pushed him backwards, and Arthur fell on his back.

‘Useless fucking spastic,’ sneered clown.

H strolled over and stood in between Clown and Arthur. Clown looked at this teenager standing in front of him, His age and young face disguising his size and frame.

‘Move,’ said Clown with menace.

H didn’t move.

‘Piss off and go home to mommy.’

H didn’t piss off.

‘I’m fuckin’ warning you.’

H took no heed. Clown turned his head and looked back at his mates. His mates had seen this ploy before. It was a feint. Just give it a second..... They waited for him to throw the sucker punch as he turned back. Clown bunched his fist out of sight of H, then turned quickly. Half way round a granite like a fist exploded into his face. His scream shattered the air, and he folded instantly and dropped to the floor where he lay motionless and whimpering.

H turned to Clown’s mates. ‘You have a choice. You can either walk away, and we can be ok, or you can have this....’

He bent down, grabbed clown by his shirt, raised him up and, with incredible force, smashed him in the mouth again. Blood spurted everywhere, teeth fell out of his mouth, and he passed out with the pain. The men couldn’t believe their eyes. They started to shake as they realised what could happen to

them. They had watched clown torment people before, but this was different. No one else had ever fought back; they had never realised that clown instinctively picked on people who wouldn't fight back.

It terrified them.

One started nodding in agreement although he wasn't quite sure what he was agreeing to. He merely knew that he would agree to anything at this moment. He looked down at clown, whose face was swelling dramatically.

Oh fuck....fuck, fuck, fuck. Please, not me. *Please.....not me.* He wanted to run away, but his brain and his legs were no longer connected.

One of the men had become so traumatised by the violence in front of him that he actually held out his hand to shake H's. He was also nodding. Subconsciously, he had done what every animal does when in the presence of a more powerful male; he completely exposed his subservience to show he was no threat and should not be destroyed.

H looked at the man, and then he looked over at the magazine that clown had kicked away. He looked back at the man, who did not understand. Suddenly his mate scuttled away and retrieved the magazine, which he offered to H. H didn't take it. The man started to panic. He was doing something wrong, but he hadn't a clue what. His mate reached over, snatched the magazine and took it to Arthur.

'Sorry, mate,' he said, 'we were cunts. Sorry.'

‘Get rid of him,’ said H, but the men were reluctant to move. They had shifted allegiance totally and had no wish to show disloyalty by helping a vanquished foe. H changed tack. ‘I want you to take him to a doctor.’

That was acceptable, and they dragged him away, somehow holding him but not appearing to touch him.

Arthur looked at H and said, ‘Fuckin’ thanks, Jimmy,’ and went back to his cheese and pickle sandwich and butterfly magazine.

After a moment he said, ‘Oy, Jimmy, you fucking idle bastard, I thought you were making the fuckin’ tea.....?’

H couldn’t help but laugh...

Several days later, H was sacked for ‘fighting on the job’, and he didn’t quite know what to do next when he was sought out the day after by Arthur.

‘I fuckin’ owe you,’ said Arthur.

‘You owe me nothing, Arthur.’

‘I fucking do, and I’m going to start fuckin’ repaying fuckin’ now. Go to The Enclosure tomorrow and see Mr Harry Evans. Mr Evans needs a new fuckin’ assistant, and you can do it. You’re fuckin’ bright, and it may be your fuckin’ start away from the roads. OK?’

‘OK,’ said H, overcoming the urge to prefix it with ‘fuckin’.

‘And one more fuckin’ thing, how much money have you got fuckin’ saved?’

‘You must be joking? Saved on what I earn?’

Arthur took an envelope out of his pocket and gave it to H.

'Whatever it is,' said H, 'I don't want it.'

'Jimmy. Take it, and if you fuckin' ever, and I mean fuckin' ever, need help in the future, you come and talk to fuckin' Arthur, ok?'

H said nothing.

'Don't forget,' said Arthur, and walked away.

When he was out of sight, H looked in the envelope at the notes. He counted five hundred pounds. Five hundred fucking pounds! It was a fortune! An absolute fortune! H didn't quite know what to do with it, so he went to see a mate whose dad worked for the Pru. His dad said go to the Building Society and keep it safe, and that's what he did. He was rich!

He also decided he would, now he had the time, join a club. He wasn't sure what kind, but he wanted to learn how to fight 'properly'. It was alright just laying somebody out by getting the first punch in, but what would he do if they could handle themselves? What if they came back at him? Would his natural aggression be enough?

First to Mr Evans, who agreed to take on James, but James asked if it was ok to start later on in the year. Mr Evans wasn't entirely happy with that and said no, but to come back the next day after he had thought about it. The next day he said yes.

In the next town, H found a club that catered for all types of physical activity: gymnastics, boxing, judo, aikido and karate and James embraced them all with enthusiasm. He was a natural at most of the disciplines as he had an innate sense of awareness of his opponent's next move.

Having spent all his young life anticipating the next hit or kick, he had developed an unconscious reservoir of 'tells' to warn him to change his body angle slightly or lower his face slightly or pull his tummy in to minimise the damage and the pain that was about to be inflicted on his young body.

For six months James spent every waking moment at the club, where he found a way to channel his aggression correctly and also experience a sense of team camaraderie which he had never experienced before.

At that point, he decided it was time to earn a living and went to join Mr Evans.....

'The Enclosure' was a large bookie's shop, and James started at the bottom: sweeping up, making tea and running errands. Soon he was behind the counter, where he was popular with the punters, and then Mr Evans made him his assistant. Life was good: Jimmy had a good job, was picking up a steady couple of quid and was popular with the girls. One evening, after he had locked up 'The Enclosure', he walked around the corner, and there they were.....waiting. H had forgotten about Clown, but apparently, Clown had not forgotten H.

James wasn't overly concerned, but he knew he was not in a good situation. Where he stood was too open, and they could get round his back, which wouldn't be good. He needed a better place. If they wanted a fight, it would at least be on James' terms and not theirs. He knew where there was a wide alley that went nowhere. It was wide enough, between two buildings, and it would stop them going around his back. It also gave him room to escape if necessary. He started running.

Clown grinned at his mates. This was what he wanted to see. The fucking coward was running away, and they would have him. Clown had worked it all out. It had been festering in his mind for nearly a year, and he had played this scenario over and over in his mind. He had heard the screams, felt the hot blood, heard the bones snap. Oh yes. Oh fucking yes.....The fucking cunt would get it now! Once he and his mates had overpowered him, he would kick his teeth out! Just like that! No mercy. No holding back. Let him find out what it's like to have no teeth...

Clown's memory had played tricks on him over the intervening months. He knew that James' punch had been a lucky one, that James was smaller than he remembered and that he could take him....no problem.

James got to the entrance of the alley and appeared confused and lost. He ran down it fifty yards and came to the dead end. He turned and waited.....

They sauntered down, confident now not only of victory but of total annihilation. Clown could already smell James' blood in the air, and his prick was actually getting hard with the anticipation. James walked three yards forwards; he needed room to move. Quite confident, clown walked ahead of his men and stopped several feet in front of James. He smiled through a toothless mouth. 'Your turn now, cunt...'

He swaggered up to James and pushed him on the chest with one hand to force him back to the wall. James resisted, and clown automatically put two hands on his chest to push him harder. The second his other hand touched his chest, James put both his own hands over them, locked them to his chest and, with one swift movement, bent his chest forwards and dropped down. Both clown's hands were now going back against his arms, and his wrists broke instantly. When he heard the breaking sounds, James let him go, watched him fall and kicked him in the head.

Then James stood there.....waiting.

It was up to them. They could go now, or they could carry on. James worked on the assumption they would go. It wasn't their fight; why carry on? Unfortunately, Clown's mates were intellectual pygmies, and that thought process was a little beyond them. The first one lunged with a punch at James, who softly moved one foot back and to the side, then let the punch sail past him. As it went, he held the arm and helped it continue in the same direction until it hit the wall. The crunch

of the broken bones was loud, but the scream was louder. As he sagged to the floor, James pulled back hard on his arm until he heard the snap, then kicked him hard in the face.

He turned to face number three.

In the last ten seconds, number three had gone from intellectual pygmy to a veritable Einstein.....a hundred thousand years of self-preservation flooded into his brain, and he turned and ran. James turned back to his assailants. Number two was out for the count, but clown was still huddled, clasping his now useless hands to his chest and whimpering.

‘Have we met somewhere before.....?’ asked James.

More whimpering. James lashed out with his foot and caught clown in his midriff. His body arched upwards with the pain, and he yelped.

‘I asked you a fucking question, and I expect an answer.’

Clown said nothing but whimpered again. James kneeled, and the piston-like blow from his fist caught Clown on the side of the face.

‘I asked you a fucking question.....?’

‘You know we met before....’

The fist crashed into him again. He started crying.....

‘This isn’t a fucking guessing game!’

‘On the building site, on the building site!’

‘And what were you doing on the building site?’

‘Working...’

The hard fist caught him again, and he rolled up in a ball. He tried desperately to take big gulps of air into his lungs, but the pain and the sobbing were getting in the way.

‘So you’re a fuckin’ comedian as well as a clown, eh?’

James took in a big breath and then let it out again. *Relax your muscles....relax....* He bent over Clown.

‘Let’s understand each other. A while ago we had a disagreement which I won. In fact, I knocked your teeth out. Now that should have been the end of that. But you, you useless cunt, being a bad loser, decided to come back, with some mates I might add, to reopen that disagreement. That wasn’t a good idea. When we went our ways, I thought it had been settled. You thought otherwise. Obviously, this time, before we go our separate ways, I want to be sure you are not coming back again.....’

‘I won’t co....’

The fist smashed into his face, and James grabbed his throat and squeezed it very tightly. ‘Did I ask you a fuckin’ question? Did I....?’ he snarled. James let go of his throat, and Clown slowly shook his head. ‘.....so to make sure you don’t come back, we have to make you understand what awaits you if you do. That being the case, as I’ve already knocked your teeth out and broken your wrists, what else should I do to send you on your way?’

Clown looked at him in terror and shook his head violently. He went to speak but shut up just before the sounds came out.

‘I suppose you feel that enough is enough...’ Clown quickly nodded.

‘You coming back again...?’ Clown shook his head. James dragged him to the wall and sat him up.

‘Let me make you comfortable,’ and he straightened clown’s legs out and crossed them at the ankles. Then he raised his foot and stamped on the knee of the raised leg, and clown’s leg broke.

‘If you ever try anything again, I will kill you....do you understand?’

In his last few moments of consciousness, Clown nodded, then passed out. James looked at him, sighed, shook his head slowly and went home.

When Clown regained consciousness, he found his mate still unconscious beside him. He tried to get his mobile out of his pocket, but the pain and the swelling prevented him. Clown seethed as he was left with only one demeaning alternative. What could you do....?

‘Help,’ he screamed at the top of his voice, ‘help.....help.....help.....’

The little old lady with the obligatory terrier arrived and stood by him.

‘You all right, love?’

He resisted the urge to call her a stupid old cow and asked her to ring for an ambulance. She looked at him blankly. She didn’t have a phone, so how could she ring for an

ambulance...? She waited patiently for the next instruction she could not fulfil. Clown wanted desperately to kill her! Please God, let me heal now and kill this stupid old woman! He felt his rage spilling over as the pain in his arms and leg grew worse. Something inside him reined him back, as he knew the woman in front of him was his only hope.

‘Do you know where the petrol station down the road is?’

‘Yes.’

‘Would you go there.....please.....and tell them to ring for an ambulance?’

‘OK.’

She wandered off, but after a couple of minutes, she was back. ‘Shall I tell them your name?’

Rage enveloped him again. ‘It’s fu.....fu.....George.’

She nodded as though her mission had been accomplished and wandered off again. The terrier wagged its tail as she told him how she had saved a man and now she was taking him to the hospital. George watched her waddle off and knew he had no fucking chance.....

He was amazed when, a few minutes later as he was about to start shouting again, he heard the sirens approaching. The paramedics jumped out, saw what a state he was in, sedated him, called the police, then hurtled along the streets to the hospital with the siren wailing.

The next morning, the police arrived to ask him a few questions, but all he said was that he had fallen down the stairs.

‘You live three miles away, George; that’s a long staircase, don’t you think....?’

But George stuck to his nonsensical story, and the coppers gave up. They had better things to do than worry about who had rolled Johnny Dick Head over. And anyway, what the fuck did they care about this Neanderthal? They would have preferred it if he had been shot dead, as it was one less to bother about, but banged up in a hospital for God knows how long wasn’t a bad result. And he was in a lot of pain. As they got up to leave, one of them overbalanced and had to quickly stop himself falling on George by grabbing George’s broken arm.

‘Fucking hell,’ cried George as the pain hit him.

‘Sorry, mate,’ said the copper.

They removed themselves from the Ward, and as they walked away, one grinned. ‘Tee...hee.’

Clown was in the hospital for eight weeks with plaster and bandages everywhere. Dosed up with pain killers and with nowhere to go, Clown had a lot of time to think, although thinking had not actually been the *raison d’être* of his life to date.

For the first week or two, he went through every possible way of killing H and had managed to rough out a reasonable plan, but he knew it was flawed. He needed something better. Much better!

After nearly seven weeks, he developed a fever. Initially, it was assumed to be a reaction to his anti-inflammatory drug, but it got worse even after taking him off it, and he steadily deteriorated. On the third day, the doctor got another opinion, and they realised he had contracted *Staphylococcus aureus*, but it was the often fatal, antibiotic-resistant variety known to most people as MRSA, and it was flying through his system at a rate of knots! The doctors knew that antibiotics could kill MRSA; the problem was which one? It took time to try them, and time was what they didn't have enough of.

As the doctors fought to stave off the organism that was feeding on George, he was experiencing vivid hallucinations, incredible colours and distinct but weird sounds, and then it all became calm, and he floated.....

And in that void between living and dying he suddenly saw, with complete and utter clarity, what he had to do.....

Chapter 17

The first club

In five years H learned a lot. He learned because he enjoyed learning and because he enjoyed what he did. He enjoyed using his mind, he enjoyed managing and organising. And anyhow, he thought, it's easier organising other people to do the work than doing it yourself. Bets, odds, gamblers, suckers, how to lose money, how to make money – were all being stored in his brain, and an as yet unrecognised business model was developing in his head. H saw Mr Evans' lifestyle and knew he had to make money to get what it bought. Cars, homes, power, influence, prestige.....

H wanted it. But more than that, he wanted the freedom and independence that money gave you.

Along the way, H also learned why Mr Evans had helped Arthur. Arthur was a very successful punter: horses, dogs, football, cricket.....

When Mr Evans had bought the shop and not been going too long, Arthur had laid a series of bets with him, and Mr Evans hadn't hedged the bets and been taken to the cleaners. Mr Evans couldn't pay and was about to shut up shop when Arthur made him a deal: Forget the debt and make him a silent partner.

But no one must know.

And no-one did.

And Arthur was now a millionaire, had a half share in a very profitable group of bookie's shops, made money betting due to his incredible photographic memory for previous stats and form, and still worked on the roads. Fucking amazing! You just never knew....you just never fucking knew.

At weekends, James used to go to a run-down club to meet women and have a drink. It was a crap place, but it was all that there was. No ventilation, smoke everywhere, drinks too expensive, music out of date, customer service nil. How did they make money? One day, inevitably, the law of supply and demand forced the club to close, and a 'For Sale' sign went up outside. James knew he could do better. He had several thousand pounds, as he had become a saver and liked having money in the bank to be used as and when a little 'opportunity' came along, which usually meant something dodgy that he bought cheap and sold dear.

He contacted the selling agents and got a price, but it was way too much. The club was quite small, and James surmised the big boys would not be interested, and so only a private punter would give it a try. The price would be much better if he were the only bidder. James paid two very rough mates to sit outside the door of the club with half-full bottles of whisky

and scare the shit out of any interested parties. No one even went through the door. It took two months of patience, but in the end, the agents accepted his minimal offer.

James still didn't really have enough money to put in the things it needed and refurbish the place, and so he went to the bank and found the Manager a complete asshole.

'Have you had a business before?'

'No.'

'Sorry, can't help....'

And that was about it. Fuck off, we don't want you! James was stuck. He had resigned from The Enclosure to do his own thing, so no wages were coming in. Fucking great move, Jimmy boy! Right fucking on!

He decided to refurbish using his own labour, his mates, favours, nicked bits and anything else that could be done. He got the keys, opened the place up and let the stale and dank air out.

James knew exactly what he wanted to do and was deeply disappointed that he would be doing a sub-standard job just because of a lack of money. It made him even more aware that money was everything. Everything!

After a week of eighteen-hour days, he was lying on his back, water dripping down his neck, trying to plumb in an S-bend, when someone said, 'You wanted a quote?'

'Eh?'

‘You rang. You wanted a quote.’ He looked at a piece of paper. ‘New counters, seating, carpets, lights..... You wanted a quote.’

‘I *wish*, mate,’ said H, ‘but I didn’t ring, cos I don’t know who the fuck you are, and I don’t have any money.’

‘Says here you rang, mate,’ persisted the man. ‘You’re Jimmy, ain’t you?’

‘Yes, mate,’ said H, ‘but you’ve got the wrong place. Try next door or something.’

The man consulted his notes again. ‘You’ve got to agree the quote, and then we have to send the invoice to Arthur, care of Mr Harry Evans at The Enclosure.’

James understood. ‘Let me ring you tomorrow after I’ve sorted this out.’

That evening he went round to see Arthur and thanked him for his offer but refused it.

‘You don’t have to fuckin’ pay it back,’ said Arthur, ‘fuckin’ take it.’

James shook his head. ‘Thanks, Arthur, but it’s my problem, and I’ll sort it out.’

Arthur sighed. ‘Come with me, Jimmy.’ He took him outside to an outhouse, lifted a dirty old carpet and opened a safe concreted into the floor. Rummaging through some papers, he found a small file. Finding the sheet of paper, he showed it to H. A deposit account with over £500,000 in it. He found

something else. Another deposit account with over £300,000 in it. He went to another file and showed H the deeds to seven houses that he had bought over time. Fuck a duck!

In due course, H agreed to borrow the money, payable in full in three years with interest.

He was on his way.

James took to running the club like a duck to water, and it became instantly successful. The club gave him a business and a home as he converted part of the upstairs to a flat and moved in. It also provided him with an entrée into the criminal fraternity, which again he took to with relish. Starting to act as a middleman, he arranged deals, arranged jobs, put people together. Individuals who needed his expertise paid well for it. After two years, James saw an opportunity in the next town when a large furniture store shut down just off the High Street. He made tentative enquiries but was told that change of use would not be issued. Making one or two discreet enquiries through a friend of a friend, he met the local planning officer, who also told him that it would 'not be possible'. After further chats, it became 'unlikely' and then moved to 'possible'. When the Planning Permission was passed, there was local uproar, but it was too late. The Planning Officer shrugged and quoted obscure planning Acts, then went off to enjoy a bit of a rest in his new Timeshare in Lanzarote.

In his third year, a local businessman saw how well H was doing and decided he wanted a bit of the action, so he bought a large unused restaurant that was for sale to convert into an upmarket nightclub.

James watched this development with some interest, realising that the businessman had seen the potential that he had overlooked through sheer fucking laziness. If you want to make money, real money, then for fuck's sake keep your eyes open! And work hard! You lazy fucking cunt, Jimmy!

It took the businessman several months to renovate and refurbish, and with only a few days before it was due to open, it somehow caught fire. The building was not badly damaged, but the interior was a write-off.

The businessman was severely financially embarrassed as he had borrowed heavily against his own business, and although the insurance would eventually pay out, it would take a while to convince them that it wasn't him that responsible for the arson. And he hadn't got that much time to find the money to keep his main company afloat before the banks got jittery and pulled the plug. Through a nominee, James made an offer for the building. It wasn't a good offer, but it was good enough under the circumstances. Although he now had the building, he was still incensed that it had taken some idiot with a fucking printing company to show him the way.

Lazy bastard, Jimmy! Get off your arse!

He refurbished the club and moved it upmarket. Not only did the two in the town now make him a lot of money, they also taught him a lesson: you can't beat a monopoly. Especially when you can have the best of all markets.

Then he started a company offering a doorman service, which, in due course, started offering 'protection'.

'.....and so you see,' he continued to the listening Reyes family before him, 'I was quite lucky to have got a little help from the Bank when I needed it, and it started me off, and I've been quite lucky since,' and he finished his little story.

The Reyes family looked at him.....it was *almost* believable.

At the end of the meal, Benny asked H if he would like to go for a stroll, but he politely declined and said mysteriously, 'At dinner, I realised how I could do it, and so I'm going to do it, or I'll never do it.'

'It? What is it? Do it? What are you talking about?'

But he just kissed her cheek and went off to his room.

Chapter 18

The twins

In the Chateau in France, Ernest Hathaway waited for his visitors. One had already used the remote to enter through the large electric gates, and Hathaway watched his progress on the bank of security monitors. The other would only be a few minutes away.

The SLK 55 AMG burbled as it went up the drive to the house. A young man in his late twenties sat at the wheel, tanned and casually though expensively dressed. He parked the car by the large entrance and let himself in with a key. As he went in, he was greeted by Hathaway. 'Luke,' he said affectionately, 'you are looking extremely well.'

'Thank you, Ernest,' replied the young man, 'and you're not looking so bad yourself.'

Ernest paused for a moment as he heard the alarm telling him someone else had let themselves in. He went to a side room and looked at the monitors. It was him. Good.

The SLK 55 AMG burbled as it went up the drive to the house. A young man in his late twenties sat at the wheel, tanned and casually, though expensively dressed. He parked

the car by the large entrance and let himself in with a key. As he went in, he was greeted by Hathaway. 'Lliam,' he said affectionately, 'you are looking extremely well.'

'Thank you, Ernest, and you.'

The young men went to each other, shook hands and embraced. From where Ernest was looking, it was impossible to tell them apart. They were identical twins, and the only way Hathaway knew the difference was that they put a tiny lapel badge on their clothes when they went to see him.

Lliam on the left and his brother on the right.

Tonight was a celebration, and Ernest had arranged for a chef from one of the finer restaurants in Paris to prepare a meal for them. Initially, they went into a large baronial-style hall and sat in front of a large fireplace where they chatted for a while until the large Japanese gong summoned them for dinner. The twins looked at each other for a second but said nothing. 'It's Japanese,' said Ernest as though that answered all their questions.

They strolled into the dining room, and two liveried butlers served the meal while the chef looked on. Ernest took a small taste of the meal before him, let the texture and aroma permeate his senses and marvelled at the complexity of the dish. He raised his hands to the skies. 'Magnifique, Henry. Magnifique!'

The twins applauded discreetly. The chef smiled, bowed and left them. Ernest beckoned to a butler, who took one of the bottles of Champagne from an ice bucket. He poured the Louis Roederer Cristal Rose 1999 into their glasses, then retired to be summoned when needed. Ernest stood up and raised his glass. 'To you,' he said to them both, 'on your birthday.'

'Thank you, Ernest.'

'Thank you.'

Ernest felt a glow of pride in his 'boys'.

'Let's eat,' said Ernest, 'and then I have a little something for you.'

They talked for quite some time, and at one point, when the twins were engaged in a technical discussion of the merits of the Mazda rotary engine, Ernest's mind wandered to another time and another place.....

.....It was seven years ago, and he was in Vietnam arranging a shipment of arms to North Korea. His Russian go-between had invited him out one evening to the 'bear pit', but whilst Hathaway had few scruples about anything, he was not sure he wanted to see a bear ripped apart, and so he declined, but the Russian insisted, and as Hathaway needed his goodwill and his money, he reluctantly agreed.

They went outside the town to an isolated farm whose yards were packed with parked cars. Cars of all types, but most were expensive; many had blacked windows. This was

obviously a ticket-only do. They parked, and the Russian led him across a field to a wooded area. In a clearing, he saw an amphitheatre seating configuration, and in the middle a large circular cage with a small caged tunnel leading off it towards the back of a truck. Taking a seat on one of the benches, they waited.....

When all the seats were full, two large, snarling, spitting wolves were sent through the tunnel, moved on by electric prods, which had the desired effect but also made them extremely pissed off. They prowled around the cage, their enormous fangs bared and saliva dripping from their mouths. Suddenly, huge applause erupted, and two what looked like European 'boys', but were more than likely in their twenties, appeared through a small entrance in the crowd. They raised their arms triumphantly and stood by the cage door.

The boys were twins. What was this all about? Three men went around the crowd taking bets.

'What are we betting on?' asked Hathaway.

'How long before the wolves die,' the Russian replied.

Hathaway looked at the boys and then at the wolves. 'How long before the boys die,' he corrected.

The man smiled. 'No....'

'What weapons are they given?'

The man smiled again. 'No weapons.'

Hathaway was lost. What was going on? Here he was in Vietnam about to watch two young men eaten by wolves, and the idiot next to him was betting on how soon the wolves

would die? He shook his head in disbelief. Suddenly he felt tired and knew his days of coming to these far-off, uncivilised places had now finished. It was too much.....

A horn sounded. All the bets had been placed, and with one last triumphal fist pump, the men let themselves into the cage. Hathaway's mind was now struggling between total disbelief and incredulity.

Why had they let themselves in? *Let themselves in??????*

Were they drugged?

Why were they smiling?

What was going on?

The men had hardly got into the cage when one of the wolves launched itself through the air. Its huge jaws were open and head high. Just as it was about to envelop the man's head, he moved. The move was hardly noticeable; it wasn't a lurch to one side or the other but a subtle shift of weight in a semi-circular direction. A classic Eastern defence and attack move. The slight change moved his body from full-on to the wolf to sideways, and as the wolf's jaws moved past his face, he grabbed its grey-white mane with both hands and continued to help accelerate the wolf's velocity towards the cage bars. Its head hit the side of the cage with such force that it went in between the bars and stuck. The man braced his legs and, with all his might, pushed the wolf's body parallel with the bars, and a loud crack could be heard as its neck broke and

its body dropped down, and hung there, held in the bars by its trapped head. Its body twitched several times as it gave up to death, and then it was still.

The man raised his arm, and the crowd roared and took a quick look at their watches. Hathaway was transfixed. He had never seen anything like it. And he had seen many depraved things; far too many.....but this was different...

The other male wolf held back, its uncertainty clear. It was the smaller of the two, although not by much, and the alpha male had attacked first. The second wolf knew it was in danger and should attack, but the alpha male had unexpectedly succumbed to a two foot which had put confusion into its head. It knew from experience that its older brother could easily kill a two foot and it was unsure why he had been defeated. He knew a two foot could kill, but only when there was a stick in its hands that made a loud noise! They kept away from two foots with sticks.....

It stood there, its mouth open, its vicious fangs exposed as it weighed up the options: attack or crouch down and cower?

Win or lose?

Live or die?

Respect the power of the other and back off or fight, win and be Alpha Male! It took only a second to reach a conclusion. With the alpha male dead, there was a vacancy.....

As the wolf launched himself through the air at the two foot killer of his brother, the other 'boy' punched his rear thigh and his body turned in the air and hit the cage. For the split second that it took to get the wind back in its lungs and resume the attack, the man had smashed the wolf in the windpipe with his fist. The wolf howled in pain, then the howl became muted as its throat swelled, cutting off the air. As the wolf tried desperately to breathe, the other man stood over it and, with two hands raised above his head, he smashed them down into the base of its skull and broke its neck.....

The men looked at each other, put one arm with a clenched fist across their chest in a gladiatorial salute, then raised both arms into the air and let out a long high primaeval scream. The crowd went wild with cheering and clapping, stamping their feet and hammering on the boards. They had never seen it like this. It was usually longer and bloodier..... but always the same result. The winners in the crowd scrambled to the official timekeeper to show their tickets and get their money.

Once a week for a month for three years they had watched the boys do this, and it was magnificent. They had fought men, bears, wolves, a full-grown bull and once several women. The women, who belonged to a karate club, were convinced that six of them could take the twins down.

There were two rules...

One was that they could kill the men, but the men could not kill the women. The other rule was that if ever the women talked, they would be killed by their own people. The men won, and the women lived – just. Two could never conceive again, one lost an eye, another spent the rest of her life in a wheelchair, and one unfortunately threatened to tell and was killed – *rules are rules*.

The Twins were not interested who they fought, only that they fought. This time they had been lucky, and they knew it. Both wolves had jumped, which made them very vulnerable, and although it looked spectacular, it made their job a lot easier.

As the crowd started to leave, Hathaway managed to get to the twins. ‘Who are you? Where are you from?’

‘English.....’ Said one in a slightly upper-class English accent.

‘Who are you?’ asked Hathaway again.

The twins both shrugged. It was none of Hathaway’s business.

‘I’m not prying,’ said Hathaway, ‘so just tell me one thing....why do you do this? No one makes you....why do you do this?’

They grinned. ‘It’s fun, it pays very well.....it’s our holiday.’

Hathaway persuaded them to join him for dinner that evening, and after a general chat, he said, ‘If you think that is fun, and I think by that you mean exciting and adrenaline provoking, I

have a suggestion for you.....’

They said they would get back to him in due course, and several months later they did.

Hathaway made the arrangements.

They spent two months with Hamas, one month at the Syrian Intelligence Agency and two months in Iran with Hezbollah. Their natural aggression was now complemented with an understanding of bomb-making, poisoning, surveillance and modern weaponry. They were now trained assassins. Hathaway bought them two homes, one in England and one in Spain, and the twins would spend a month at each separately and then swap. To their neighbours, they were one person, which was exactly as Hathaway wanted it. Should there ever be a problem with a sighting, whichever twin was involved could be swapped for the other, and the alibi would be complete.

Hathaway rented them out to high-paying customers. Coincidentally, the trainers used them. The Syrians, Hamas, Hezbollah all had enemies in Europe, and one or two were neutralised. Hathaway also did the odd job for the IRA and one for ETA. They even did one job for North Korea. It was very lucrative, and it gave the Twins danger and high-adrenalin situations..... but they missed the physical violence.

‘..... and it ought to be called a wanker engine, not a Wankel.’

And that appeared to settle the technical merits of an alternative combustion engine. Hathaway went to a cupboard and took two small packages from it. He gave one to each man and said, 'Happy Birthday.' Opening the packages, the twins found the thirty-thousand-pound Patek Philippe Perpetual Calendar watches gleaming up at them.

'Thank you, Ernest,' they said in unison, 'thank you.'

Ernest was grateful for their appreciation. These boys who had started off as a business proposition, he now saw more as sons and they saw him as a father.

Chapter 19

Bogotá Butterflies

H and Benny went into Bogotá to find something that H was after. Driven in early, they had spent a while trying to find the right kind of place. In a side street just off the main drag, H found it.

‘Look,’ he said, pointing at the walls. ‘Bingo!’

He would liked to have said ‘fucking bingo!’ but he tried not to swear in front of Benny. On the walls were glass cases full of dead butterflies. He went to an assistant and said, ‘How much?’

The man looked at him blankly, and H said again, ‘How much?’

‘Perdone, señor?’

Benny came across and took over. ‘It’s not Harrods, James, and they don’t speak English. Now, which one did you want to buy?’

‘All of them.’

She started to say something in Spanish then abruptly stopped. ‘Pardon? What are you going to do with this lot? Where will we put them?’

H smiled. ‘They’re not for us; they’re for Arthur.....so get a price for the lot delivered to England care of Mr Harry Evans, The Enclosure.....’

She talked to the man in Spanish, who immediately called out to his boss. Benny explained it again, and he nodded continually and gesticulated to the walls, at which point it was Benny's turn to nod. She turned to H. 'All of them.....you're sure?'

H nodded to Benny. Benny nodded to the Boss, who smiled and nodded back. He spoke to her for a moment, then she said, 'Did you know that Colombia has.....' she said something in Spanish and he repeated it slightly differently, 'three and a half thousand diurnal and forty-five thousand nocturnal species of butterflies. Fascinating, eh.....? And I never knew...what a dull life I've led.'

Leaving the shop with nothing left to sell, she led James to the Monserrate, the mountain in the heart of Bogota city.

'Look,' she said, pointing, and James saw the church situated incongruously on its summit. 'If we go up, the views are spectacular.'

There were two ways up: cable car, and climb via a long and quite arduous stairway. Benny wanted the cable car and H wanted the stairway, as he decided he really needed some exercise.

At the top, a cool Benny waited for the hot, sweaty and panting James, who gasped between huge lungfuls of air, 'Easy.'

'When you have finished using up all the air the locals were hoping to breathe, look at the views. Aren't they magnificent?'

James agreed. The views of the city with the rich quarter in all its glory, and the down-at-heel parts that so desperately needed money, and maybe just a touch of hope.

As they looked at the views, Benny felt a bump on her side.

'*Pardone Senorita,*' said the smart, casually dressed man, who smiled, nodded and continued on his way.

'Look,' said Benny, 'aren't the Andes magnificent....?'

H looked at the snow-capped peaks and agreed. They were indeed magnificent. Going up to the sky.....

The casually dressed man had walked about fifty yards when the two men attached themselves to each side of him. Strong hands held his arms, and he felt the hard steel of the gun muzzle in his ribs. He tried to say something in protestation, but one of the men put a finger to his lips, and he immediately shut up. Taking him over to a small wall on the outer fringe of the sightseers, *Amond* held out his hand. The man made no attempt to put anything in it.

'What's your name?' asked *Amond*.

He said nothing. H would have known instinctively what was coming next, but the casually dressed man was used to talking his way out of anything but he just needed a bit of time to weigh things up.....*let them talk; give me some clues.....?* The fist caught him in the solar plexus and the air left his body, to be replaced by a dreadful pain. He tried to drop to the floor, but they held him straight to increase the

pain. Vomit went down his shirt, but they kept holding him. Amond looked to the sightseers to see if anyone was watching and saw a lady looking inquisitive.

'*Alcohol*,' volunteered Amond.

She smiled and shrugged. It was certainly a hot day. A day for too much cold beer.....

They gave him a few moments. 'What's your name?' asked Amond again.

'Philippe,' gasped their still breathless captive.

'Philippe,' said Amond, 'you have something that belongs to a friend of ours....you should give it to us before you *accidentally* go over this wall and bounce off the cliffs to your death.....'

Philippe took the purse out of a compartment within his loose shirt and gave it to Amond.

'You are a stupid man, Philippe,' said Amond, 'very stupid.'

He nodded to his partner, who held Philippe's hand, and with one slash of a knife he severed the finger tendons to leave a right hand that would never be of use again..... And to make sure he didn't transfer his pick pocketing dexterity to his other hand, he slashed the tendons in that as well. This time they let him drop, whimpering, to the ground and walked away.

Benshima felt a light tap on her shoulder. She looked round at the man but took a moment before she said anything. 'Good morning, Amond, how are you?'

‘Very good, Senorita Reyes, thank you. And I hope you are well?’

‘Yes, Amond.’

‘I think you may have dropped your purse, Senorita. It was on the ground by you.....’

She looked into his eyes..... ‘Thank you, Amond.....*you did well to spot it.*’

He nodded, then melted back into the crowd....

H looked some more, but after a while one view blended into the next, and he had had enough. H was more a doer than a looker. As they were leaving, he bought Benny a cheap but beautiful necklace from one of the *artesanias* that plied their trade there.

The next day, a large Mercedes, with escort, took them and Senor and Senora Reyes to the airport for the flight to England. At the departure gate, H shook Senor Reyes’ hand. ‘Thank you for your hospitality, sir. I have enjoyed and appreciated it very much.’

‘You are welcome, but please, there is no need to call me sir. My name is Jose. Please call me Jose.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said H, as the flight came over the intercom.....

Chapter 20

Rico

Later the next evening, H was back in England. He called Toby to get the location of his guests and told him to arrange for a meeting at ten the next morning. Benny was tired and had a bit of a cold, so went to bed early, leaving H free to chase Rico. He pressed the button on the front of the computer; it hummed into life, and the two monitors flickered. He went into his usual site, but no Rico; then went on to Party Poker, but still no Rico. Another icon on the screen took him to a more obscure one that he knew Rico used, and there he was playing Heads Up for \$2500 and just about to win.

H typed into the observer chat, 'Cerberus is looking for Rico.'
'You have found him,' he saw on the screen. 'You want to lose some more money?'

'Try me.....'

'\$5000 heads up..... Next table.'

'OK.'

They found a table and logged on.

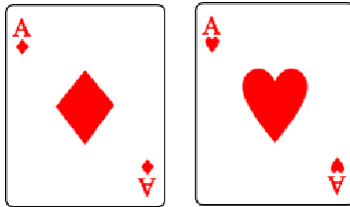
Rico V Cerberus.

\$5,000.

One thousand chips each.

Winner takes all.

The cards were dealt.



H had two Aces: Diamonds and Hearts.

First hand and two Aces!

Fucking magic!

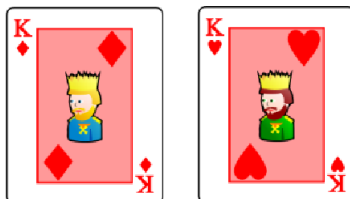
Right, let's do this properly. The odds of Rico having anything were remote. In heads-up, a pair is quite often a winning hand; indeed, even a high card regularly wins. So how then to get maximum value?

Rico was small blind, and so a lot depended on what Rico did. The clock ticked and was down to four seconds when Rico went all in!

It took H by surprise! You don't often sit there with two aces and the other guy goes all in!

Christmas!

H called the all-in, and the hole cards came up on the screen.

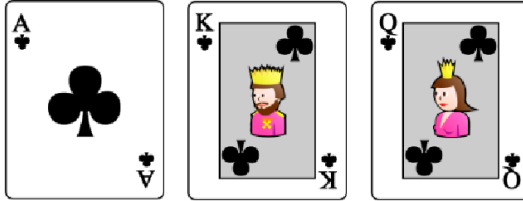


Rico had Kd, Kh.

H smiled.

Rico wasn't bluffing, just pretending he was to get a call. Well fuck Rico!

The flop came A, K, Q.



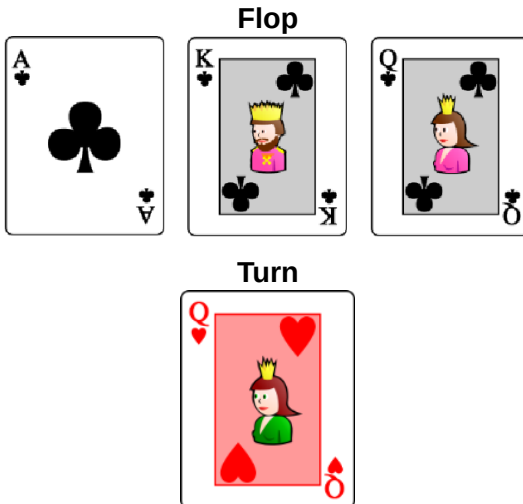
H had three Aces and Rico three Kings.

Fuck Rico!

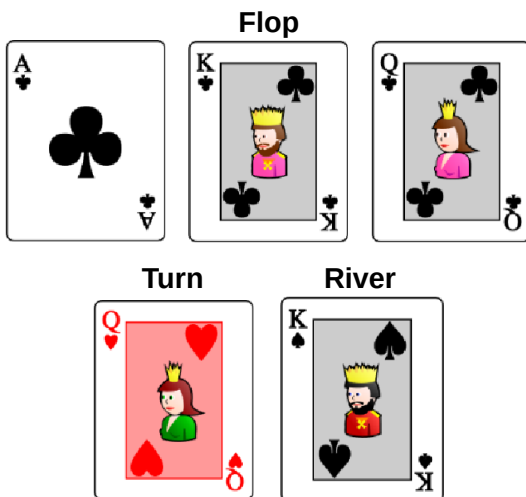
H marvelled at the cards. All that paint. All those fucking pictures!

There were less in the National Gallery!

The turn came.



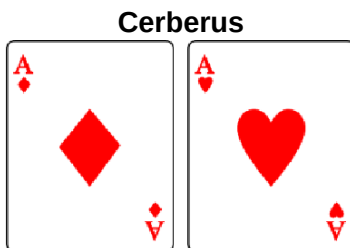
A queen..... H had done it. Aces full of Queens. Rico had Kings full of Queens, so fuck you! H was typing a crude word into the chat line when the river came. He only looked at it as an aside as it made no difference.



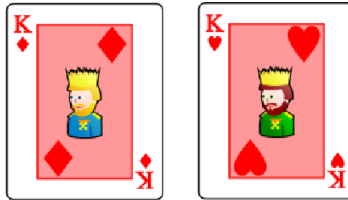
The river card was a King...

He waited for the chips to come to him, but they went to Rico. Confusion enveloped H. They're *my* fucking chips.....?

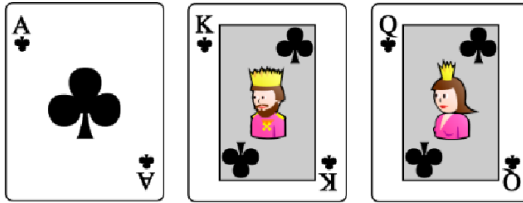
For a moment it didn't register, but then H realised his Full House had lost to four Kings. Quads!



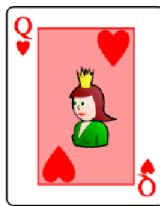
Rico



Flop



Turn



River



Fucking quads? How can it be fucking quads? H was stunned....he had won.....and then he had lost!

The computer bonged, and the chat line showed:

*Rico: Thanks for the money you f***** g ay loser*

The next moment the table was empty, and Rico had gone. H was quite lost. He had no idea what had just happened.....? You just can't play heads-up and a full house is crushed by quads! It just can't happen.

Mathematically the odds were enormous. Just getting quads was about four thousand to one, plus getting a full house as well, plus getting them on the same hand, plus getting them on the first hand. And not only that, the bastard – the lousy, thieving, fucking, arseholing bastard – had won yet again on the river.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck....

His fist went smashing towards the monitor..... and stopped fractionally short.

He looked, dumbfounded, at the empty table, and another note popped up in the chat box:

***Observer – Rico:** Perhaps £1 beginner's games would suit you better? Ga-y Loser!*

Chapter 21

Angelika

Angelika Mauss loved sex.

It was three in the afternoon, and she was sitting up in bed. The soft blue silk sheets caressed her naked body, while a man kneeled over her who had seven inches of cock in her mouth. She held his hips tightly and moved them backwards and forwards as quick as she could. She would have been even happier if there had been one in her pussy and one up her arse as well but alas....not today. She thought about that as she was having her face fucked, and it made her even more wanton. She pushed his hips away.

‘Harder,’ she demanded, ‘harder!’

She took a deep breath, and he thrust it back in, pushing it as far down as it would go. As an accomplished exponent of fellatio, she did not gag when it started to slide down her throat....just felt the incredible sensation of being filled up, and let him pump.....

The phone by the bed rang and startled her. She thought for a moment.... Take phone call? Take out cock? It was hardly a coin toss. More a dick toss. She tried to get it even farther in. The phone continued ringing... Why hadn't she put the answer phone on? Because this had been...impromptu.

He had arrived to do an alteration to the kitchen cabinets, and Angelika had a bit of a thing about quid pro quo.....if you're going to screw the cabinets, it's only fair you screw the person who's paying.

A man had once been called to unblock an 'S Bend' and ended up in Angelika's. It was only fair.....

The phone continued insistently, and she inwardly groaned. Pushing his body away so that his cock came out, she took a deep breath and leaned over to pick up the phone. 'Yes?'

'My angel.'

She froze.... Oh Christ! 'Heinrich, my love, where are you?'

'I'm in a taxi. I managed to get an earlier flight; isn't that wonderful?'

'Wonderful,' she said, 'how long will you be, my love?'

'I'm about fifteen minutes away.'

'OK, I'll go and put a pot of coffee on ready for you....'

'See you soon.'

'My husband is in a taxi on his way here,' she said, putting down the phone.

'Oh shit.'

He started to move, but she hung on. 'Finish!' she commanded.

'What?'

'Finish!'

'Your husband will be here in minutes!'

The danger had excited her even more. There was a lot at stake but.....

‘Finish it now,’ she demanded and pulled him back in her mouth. Self-preservation overcame any reticence on his part. If that’s what it took to get out of there, then..... He pumped like crazy, thought of the most obscene things possible, and came in record time. She moved it from her throat to her lips, squeezed it to get every last drop and then her demeanour changed.

‘You have to go! Now!’ she screamed, ‘my husband will be here very soon.’

Oh fucking wonderful, thought the carpenter, fucking wonderful. Never again! Never again. His heart wouldn’t stand it.

‘Quick!’ she screamed at him, her face changing from wanton slut to anxious housewife.

Panic was setting in; he tried hard to put on his clothes, but it was all going wrong. His pants went on back to front followed by ‘Fuck!’ and they stayed that way. Balancing on one leg to put his trousers on, he overbalanced and smacked his head on the bottom of the bed. ‘Fuck!’

With the situation overwhelming him he just grabbed his sweater, ran downstairs, put on his shoes, picked up his toolbox and ran down the path to the road where his van was waiting to take him away. The gate latch snagged his shirt, he stumbled, and his tool box went flying before him, and as it hit the road it burst open.

Fuck, fuck,fuck,fuck, fuck FUCK!

He went to the box, righted it and started picking up his tools and fixings. Flustered, he dropped them again.....

.....Jorgen Mannesmann sat patiently in the Carrera as the Kitchen Fitter picked his tools up from the road.

He smiled as he thought of Simone. Simone..... a French name for one of the children of the heir to a German dynasty. Not exactly popular with the family but.....he did have a French wife. It was Simone's christening tomorrow, and he was looking forward to that.

It would be nice to be home....

Jorgen noticed that the logo on the van was one of his father's companies and the website pointed to the Group. He was very proud of what his family had accomplished, and he was glad that they were proud of him.

As the son of the owner of one of Germany's largest industrial Groups, he was immensely wealthy and had everything he wanted in life that money could buy. He was also intellectually gifted. Whilst at Oxford he was President of the Union Debating Society, fluent in seven languages and an accomplished classical pianist.

Jorgen was a happily married family man with a wife he loved and three children he adored; a man at one with his life.

Seeing the traffic was building behind him, he gave the horn a couple of gentle beeps and watched as the man looked up and acknowledged him.

The sounding horn startled the fitter, and he realised that his crouching body was in the middle of the road, stopping the traffic. Looking behind him, he saw the expensive car at the front of the procession and put up a hand in apology. He saw a hand acknowledge him. It was not an angry hand.

He quickly picked up the rest of the tools, as many of the fixings as he could, and jumped in the van.

Jorgen put the Carrera into first and the big V went gently forward. The sharp fixings left on the road glinted in the sunlight for just a second before the Carrera passed over them.....

Ten minutes later, Heinrich opened the door, put down his travelling valise and went into the kitchen to be greeted by a cup of coffee and a sexy, half-naked wife. What more could a man want? His marriage was truly blessed. He sat at the table and she sat on his lap. After kissing her lips, he held her right breast and sucked her erect nipple.....

Taking his lips away he tweaked her hard nipple. 'You are happy to see me....' Then he moved back down and put it back in his mouth.

It was good to be home.

When he had finished playing with her tits and they were sipping coffee, he asked, 'By the way, did the kitchen fitter come?'

'Yes,' she said. And behind the cup she sensuously licked her lips....

Chapter 22

Needles

At ten the next day, H went to see needles at a smallholding on the outskirts of the city. The yard was untidy, and the farmhouse needed a good pointing and lick of paint. It stood in about fifteen acres, and sheep wandered around the grazing area. He walked around the house to several small outbuildings at the back. These looked even tattier, and demolition rather than revamp would be in order. He opened the top half of a stable door to be confronted by a heavier door with an intercom.

He pressed it and said, 'H.' The door clicked, he went in to a small entrance room where there were two easy chairs, a small table and magazines. He went through and opened another door to a much larger room. Brilliant white and looking like a surgeon's operating room – which it was. H saw two men unconscious on trolleys, their hands and feet strapped securely. Needles came over to him; they shook hands warmly and went back to the waiting room and shut the door.

Needles was just a year or two younger than H, and they had been friends for about ten years. Needles, whose actual name was Sebastian, was a brilliant surgeon whose only

setback was the lack of a licence to practice his trade due to a small misunderstanding a few years ago. Since then, he had been the preferred doctor or surgeon for every top criminal and well-off mobster in Britain and for one or two abroad. And what needles couldn't do, he could arrange and would be on hand to supervise so that his clients felt safe. His speciality was, as expected, gunshot wounds, knife wounds, plastic surgery, abortions and the usual things that go with life for people who cannot go to an NHS hospital.

He also, on rare occasions and for selected clients, would help with remedial medicine. This was essentially on people who couldn't remember things or for some reason had lost their power of speech and couldn't talk. *Remedial*, needles thought, sounded quite proper.

Needles was tanned from a recent holiday in Courchevel in the French Alps, which he did once a month for a week in the season. Needles could afford the time off and the skiing as he was the highest-paid 'doctor' in Britain.

H and Sebastian had a quick chat about life, what he wanted from his captives and then went in. The men on the trolleys were in one half of the room, and H and needles were in the other. Needles dimmed the lights in their half and switched off the lights in the other. It was gloomy rather than dark, which would suit needles from the point of view of recognition

afterwards. Needles went over to the men and gave them an injection. The light anaesthetic wore off rapidly, and they stirred.

He moved to one side and H spoke from the shadows. 'As you can see and feel, you are bound to the trolleys. You have not been blindfolded or gagged. You can see very little, but you will be able to see and hear each other. My questions are simple, and if you answer them willingly and truthfully, you will be taken from here and dropped off unharmed. If you refuse, you will be subjected to pain that you never knew existed and from which there is no escape. You can scream as much as you like, but no one will hear you. If you do not talk and we reach a point where we feel you need a better demonstration of our intent, one of your arms will be amputated. After another thirty minutes, one of your legs will be amputated, and we will carry on from there. If you die before you talk, we will kill you. It's that simple.'

One of the men burst into tears and started to shake; the other pulled and tugged at his straps, but to no avail. Needles moved towards the first man. 'As you may know,' his dark shape said, 'a man's body has several parts that are conducive for creating extreme pain: the eyes, testicles, inner ear, mouth and inside the anus. As we want you to see and hear I propose we do it in this order: testicles, anus, eyes, mouth and inner ear. Is that ok with you?' he asked gently as though to a patient.

They went wild. One started to stink as he lost control and shit himself. The other one sobbed with rivers of tears flooding down his face and his body convulsed. Needles let them inwardly die for a few moments until he felt the time was right, then he moved to one with a large gleaming scalpel in his hand. He lifted the man's surgical gown to reveal his testicles and cupped them in his surgical gloves. Preparing the scalpel for the first incision, the man screamed hysterically, begging him not to do it. H slowly reached in his pocket and pressed the send button on his mobile. The phone on the desk went off, and needles paused, irritated, but he put the scalpel down and went over to answer it. Speaking for a moment in Russian he beckoned H and they went out of the room. In the adjoining room, needles and H smiled at each other, then sat and watched the television monitors and the images of the two men. It took a few minutes for the men to regain any semblance of sanity.

'They haven't worked out yet why they are getting hurt before we asked them any questions,' said H.

The men were now talking to each other urgently and going from English to something like Estonian. 'What do they want?'

'What the fuck do you think they want?'

'We're going to die,' wailed the one.

'If we're that lucky.'

'Let's tell them.'

'Tell them what? We don't know what the fuck they want.'

‘Tell them anything! Anything they want to know we can tell them.’ Hysteria was starting to flood through him again and he started sobbing. ‘They’ll kill us anyway.’

‘They said they wouldn’t.’

‘He talked Russian.’

‘What?’

‘On the phone he talked Russian. Are they mafia?’

‘What difference does it make? We could be in Russia now for all we know.’

‘Do you really think we’re in Russia?’

‘I don’t want to die.’

‘You should have thought of that before we agreed to do this. Fucking Androv, the bastard, getting us into this. *Fucking easy*, he said. I don’t fucking think so.’

‘What are we going to do?’

‘Tell them.’

‘They’ll kill us.’

‘If we tell them, we have a chance. If we don’t, we’re going to suffer so badly, and I can’t take it.’ He started to sob again and felt the warm liquid run between his legs as he wet himself.

They gave them a few more minutes, then went back in. Needles picked up the scalpel again and moved towards the man as though nothing had intervened.

He screamed, ‘What do you want to know?’

H asked questions for about an hour and got everything he could, but in truth it was not too much. It gave H a fair amount of background and it became clearer, but he did not know who was doing it. These were just gofers doing an errand for someone else in Britain on behalf of someone else in Eastern Europe. Needles gave them a jab that knocked them out, and then H rang Andy Pandy. After a few exchanged pleasantries, he said, '....both legs, clean breaks, and by the way, these boys are quite pretty.....east European, nice chiselled features....'

Andy Pandy would already be salivating at the thought. They wouldn't be pretty when Andy Pandy and the boys had finished with them, and they would have two of the sorest arses in Britain.....

It was not ideal for H, but at least it sent a message. He didn't know to whom, but it told them he would not roll over.

Chapter 23

The Ferrari

A few days later it was time to go to Hathaway's Chateau to celebrate their good fortune. A ritual that had developed over time, and Hathaway invited a few extra guests to attend that would add to the get-together.

H was going to drive to the chateau, as it gave him a chance to give the Ferrari a decent run rather than be shut away the majority of the year, which it usually was. H had driven Ferraris ever since he could afford them and had a 599 on order, but that would be another eighteen months before it arrived. In the garage alongside the Merc sat a gleaming red 360 Modena 2 door Convertible. Only two years old, it had done less than four thousand miles, and its 3.6L V8 engine hardly used.

H loved driving Ferraris. He particularly liked the 360 with its 395 horsepower and pop-up headlights, in smooth-styled clusters, which made it look sleeker and even classier. He had also opted for semi-automatic transmission, which still took the 360 to sixty miles an hour in about four seconds with a top speed a shade under a hundred and ninety miles an hour – or so the brochure said.

He would drive with Benny through Germany to Geneva where she would catch a plane to Rome to stay with a girlfriend for a few days, while H drove on through France to the Chateau.

The long run would give the Ferrari a good blow-out; otherwise it was a waste of the driving lessons he had paid for at Maranello. They caught a ferry across the North Sea to Amsterdam, then drove and stayed overnight in Essen in Germany.

Five kilometres from the Autobahn he stopped at a die tankstelle and filled the twenty-five-gallon tank. With the Ferrari doing about fifteen miles to the gallon, he could go three hundred odd miles without a stop, which at the most would be three hours, dependent on traffic, but with a good wind H was hoping for nearer just over two!

He pulled on to the Number 7 Autobahn which travelled straight through Germany from North to South and being relatively clear, he took the 360 up to 120 mph, kept it there for about ten minutes and then up to 140. Benny was a touch nervous but said nothing.

After an hour, his rear-view mirror lit up with blazing headlights. H looked momentarily and saw a Porsche Carrera GT coming up to him like a bat out of hell. Oh fuck..... If there was one car you didn't really want up your arse it was this one. Typical, thought H; here I am in one of the fastest

Ferraris in the world and blowing me out of the way is a six-litre fucking monster that ought to be at Le Mans, not up my arse. Bastard!

He looked at the sparse road ahead. Ah well..... and floored the accelerator. The semi-automatic box shifted down, and the prancing horse four hundred horsepower forty valve, quad cam engine responded instantly. The Ferrari flew forward to one sixty, on upwards to one seventy, one eighty..... one eighty five. Benny was getting more nervous and gripped the seat tightly. They were going past cars as though standing still and the thought that one may just decide to pull out.....? Holy Mother this was too fast....too fast. She wanted desperately to tell James to slow down, but was terrified it would cause a lapse of concentration and they could both be killed.....

H glanced at the speedometer. One eighty six one eighty six..... ..one eighty six.....where the fuck was the one eighty nine it said in the brochure? With another flash of its lights as a reminder of its superiority, the silver Carrera edged closer; H pulled over, it overtook and went on up to its top speed of two hundred and five.

H was elated but deflated. He had found out the Ferrari's top speed much quicker than he had anticipated, but had got trounced doing so..... Easing off the throttle he brought the 360 down to a more manageable one forty and let the Porsche go into the distance. The Ferrari and the speed

made H feel alive. It was wonderful! He looked at Benshima and saw she was white, so he brought the car down to a gentle hundred for a while.

On quiet stretches, he went down to sixty or so and then floored it. Benny was squeezed back into the seat, and she teasingly berated him for being childish. He smiled, and so did she. She adored this man, and she loved him being happy.

But she desperately wanted him to live.....

The driver of the Carrera smiled and held up a comradely hand as he went past the Ferrari.

He knew the 5.7-litre V10 could go past the Ferrari.

He had a 360 Modena sitting in the garage at home.....amongst his other cars.

Chapter 24

The Cabal

To one side the sun glistened on the ocean. To the other, the scattered and untidy materials of the building site and beyond that the beautiful rugged mountains.

The little group sat around the table on the top floor of their nearly finished hotel, where they were digesting the news about their message being delivered unsuccessfully.

They were insulted and angry when it was apparent that they appeared to have had one back. They were not used to being on the receiving end, and this was now personal.

Their scheme was not working, and it needed to be changed. What to do? They discussed other options for some time, but came back to the original plan.

It was those clubs they wanted.....and even if it wasn't actually those they needed.....they would certainly make sure they got them now! Unfortunately, they could not bomb H out of existence as they wanted the clubs standing, and so the obvious answer was to ignore the soldiers and hit the general. A nod of heads went around the table.

They should have done that to start with.....instead of fucking about!

Chapter 25

Nearly.....

After one hundred and fifty miles, the traffic backed up, and they came to a halt. They sat there for an hour until the traffic started to trickle forward, and then after a further hour, they saw the skid marks veering off to the left on the other side of the autobahn. Two hundred yards further and they saw the silver Carrera, now less than a quarter of its original length, the passenger compartment now occupied by the big V10.

As they trickled by, they came across a *Polizist* standing by the side of the carriageway. Benshima pressed the window button and spoke to him in German, asking him what happened? He explained that the Carrera had somehow flipped and been launched over the central barrier and to the other side of the autobahn; it had flown through the air for fifty metres and then skidded head-on into a large Mercedes truck. Benny thanked him, translated for H, and they trickled again...

An ambulance drove off into the distance, and its siren told its story by its silence.....why bother when there's no longer an emergency? Dead people don't need immediate care and attention.

H was horrified, not for the occupant of the Porsche but that it could have been him and Benny. H wasn't bothered about going fast and killing himself, but he suddenly realised that he could not endanger Benny. He had been a selfish pillock and was disgusted with himself for having put in danger the woman he loved..... *Jimmy boy, you are one fucking stupid cunt!* Disgusted with himself, he settled down to cruising at just under eighty, which for the Ferrari was ticking over. After a while, H heard a soft voice say, 'Thank you.'

Arriving at Geneva International Airport, H found the large multi-storey car park. Switching off the ignition and he was about to get Benny's small Ferrari valise, when she said 'James....'

'Yes?'

'How long are we going to be apart?'

'I don't know....about a week.'

'I thought so,' and leaned over the centre console, undid his zip and moved her head down.....

A little while later H, quite relaxed, although his pants were a touch damp, headed towards the middle of France and Hathaway's Chateau. As he motored through France, he wondered why the Carrera had crashed.....?

Chapter 26

At the Chateau

Hathaway had invited H, Big John, who had headed the Lear job, Scots Eddie, who handled the majority of drugs going through Scotland, and Barmy Arnie.

Barmy Arnie specialised in ruining neighbourhoods by buying a house and putting yobs in, forcing the neighbours out because of their behaviour and buying them for a song until he acquired whole estates that way. Then, prostitutes, rent boys and druggies moved in, and Barmy Arnie made more money. He maximised his take for as long as he could until the police or the Council became too aggressive, when he would throw the lot out, repaint the houses, pretty up the gardens and sell them for a great profit. The trouble with Barmy Arnie was that he was quite mental. Completely volatile, he could go off at a moment's notice, and you didn't know where and you didn't know when.

H had no idea why he was there, and he was a touch uneasy that he was, but it was Hathaway's place, so he could invite who he liked.

It wasn't every day they were guests at a chateau; indeed, several of them couldn't even spell the word, but what the fuck..... They had a light lunch around the pool at the back

of the Chateau, and with its beautiful backdrop of palms and exotic plants H was more than a little envious of this haven. Business was discussed, but only light-heartedly, and it was mainly macho banter that was batted back and forth across the pool. Old jokes like 'I said to my wife, "Would you like a good fucking?"' She said, "Yes..... Are you moving out?"' Which were disguised as ordinary events but still made the assorted half-drunken throng giggle hysterically.

Late afternoon came, with one or two of them looking a little pink from the summer sun and possibly the summer grape when Big John said, 'How about a poolie, H?'

'Fuck off,' said H, 'I've given that up.'

'Come on, ya cunt, give us a splash,' egged on Barmy Arnie.

'Nah....'

'Getting old, H? Lost your bollocks?' he persisted.

H sighed. They weren't going to give up, and he rather fancied having a go.

He looked at Ernest. 'OK with you?'

Ernest sighed in a mixture of exasperation, resignation and expectation, then nodded.

H looked up at the chateau. Above the one end of the pool, a patio led out from a lounge. Above that, a balcony, less prominent, with double doors leading to a bedroom. Several years ago, H had, for a bet, taken a run from the bedroom, through the doors and dived over the balcony wall, needing enough height and length to clear the patio below and then

another few feet to reach the pool without smashing into the marble tiles around it. It actually wasn't as difficult as it looked as the distance was less than it appeared, but if you had any hesitation at all, you were fucked. One bit of doubt or one stumble and smack!

'How much?' said H and they all bet.

They knew they would more than likely lose their money, but there was always the chance H would fuck it up and kill himself or spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair, and it was worth a few quid just to see that.....

Going upstairs to the bedroom, he opened the windows and checked over the balcony. Nothing had changed. The wood panelling floor had rugs for colour and warmth, and H moved them to one side. Checking his trainers on the floor for grip, and then out on the balcony again to get the perspectives right.

The secret was the first balcony. The balustrade on the balcony was too high to hurdle, and you couldn't vault it as you lost speed, so you had to jump over it head first and keep going. Definitely keep going. You ran up to it then planted both feet down together and pushed off. As long as you kept the speed and cleared the balustrade, it was easy. He walked once more to the edge and looked over. They waited below for the splash or the splat. They would prefer the splat.

'Get your money ready, losers,' shouted H.

He went back in the room, put his back against the wall and pushed off with one foot. Accelerating as quickly as he could he cleared the balcony easily, and as he was going down, his body turned in a half circle, and he entered the pool feet first. A loud whack and an enormous splash and then 'Give me your fucking money!' rent the air.

They paid up grudgingly...

The next afternoon, Ernest had arranged for them to go to a vineyard in the Rhone River Valley for a general look around and a wine tasting at the end. Interesting though it was, it was lost on Big John and Barmy Arnie who certainly drank wine, but usually by the bottle rather than the glass. Scots Eddie surprised H with his knowledge, and they chatted amiably about the different wines and vintages. Veering off at a tangent, Scots Eddie said, 'Did you hear about Bigasso?'

'No, why?' asked H.

'Well,' recounted Eddie, 'from what I gather, old Bigasso is sitting at home one night watching tele, which must be a first, cause he's usually eating or paying some little girly to suck him off. Anyhow, the doorbell goes, and he waddles his fat arse over, and there are two fucking thieves with a painting. Well, as you know, Bigasso is one of the world's best when it comes to moving paintings, but they have to be top end. Let's face it, half the fucking collectors in the world have something that came through Bigasso. Anyhow, there they are with this fucking painting which they've nicked from some fucking posh

house somewhere, and they want to move it on. Bigasso gives it a once over and decides, beautiful though it is, it's not for him. This one is *'in the style of' Rubens*, and Bigasso can't move it. If one or two of his clients thought they had bought *'in the style of'*, old Big would be *in the style of* a fucking corpse. Anyhow, he gives 'em a drink, thanks them for their time and sends them on their way, but not before, and this is the good bit, he tells them they've got no chance of moving it, and it would be safer for them if they chucked it in a lake. So they finish their drinks and fuck off into the night from whence they came, and Bigasso goes back to the tele.

After an hour and a good bottle of wine, he flicks over to the news and hears that a painting's been stolen.

'Originally thought to have been painted by one of Rubens's apprentices, it had recently been extensively analysed, and found that it had indeed been done by the Master himself, and its worth was incalculable.....'

So Big rings the mobile of the purveyors of this nicked masterpiece. 'Johnny, I've changed my mind about the painting, and I may be able to give you a few quid to move it..... you're fucking joking a lake? A fucking lake? I know I said.....I know.....you chucked it in a fucking lake? I know I said it was worth nothing but.....a fucking lake.....oh for fuck's sake.....'

That evening, with the stars twinkling brightly in the clear dark sky, they sat down to dinner with Big John and Barmy Arnie still a bit the worse for wear from the wine guzzling session. Hathaway laid on Vichyssoise as a starter, Guinea fowl and tapenade en papillote with a splendid display of local, delicious vegetables as the main course, followed by a delicate clafoutis aux abricot dessert.

H and Ernest chatted, and Ernest mentioned that his daughter Patricia was getting married in a few weeks in Spain. He had arranged for a large church wedding and booked a hotel for the reception with beautiful gardens and a lake.

‘James..... I would like to invite you but.....’

‘It’s ok, Ernest; it’s quite ok. We shouldn’t mix business with family arrangements, and I thank you for mentioning it.’

More wine flowed, and at the end of the meal, after much hilarity and even more wine, Barmy said, ‘Ernest. Hear you’ve got a jet now.....’

Hathaway and H said nothing, and Big John hadn’t heard as he was still pigging down food he had taken off other unfinished plates. Scots Eddie hadn’t got a clue what they were talking about, so ignored it. H and Hathaway knew immediately that Big John had said something earlier while half drunk, and Barmy Arnie had put two and two together, which wasn’t that difficult considering the media coverage it got.

‘Come on...’ Barmy Arnie insisted, ‘it was fucking good. Come on....tell me.’

‘Think you’ve got it wrong somewhere,’ said H pleasantly.

‘Who the fuck was talking to you.....’ snarled Barmy Arnie, ‘who the fuck was talking to you....?’

Hathaway smiled. ‘Come on, let’s go into the card room and play poker, and we’ll sort it out.’

Barmy Arnie was just about to say something, but Hathaway and H had already got out of their chairs. Barmy rushed after them. He wanted a fucking cut of this cake! It was big enough, so another slice wouldn’t hurt them.

Hathaway shuffled the cards. He looked at H. ‘What was that name that you use on the net? You told me once, but I can’t remember.’

‘Cerberus.’

‘Ah yes, Cerberus. And from what I remember he was..... a dog in the underworld?’

‘About fucking right....a mongrel,’ chipped in Barmy, and made a barking noise.

‘He was,’ said H ‘the three-headed watchdog who guards the entrance to the lower world, the Hades.’

‘You poncy twat,’ said Barmy, ‘who the fuck do you think you are?’

Ernest looked at H; he knew in a minute there would be trouble, and he didn’t want it. For whatever reason, Barmy Arnie suddenly wanted a to-do with H, and Ernest could do

without it. Why had he asked Barmy? He was a maniac! Business, thought Ernest, money. What else would possess anyone to socialise with Barmy?

Ernest quickly dealt the cards, and they started to play. Each had five hundred pounds, and it was No Limit Hold 'Em with last man standing. On the first hand, Ernest, Big John and Scots Eddie folded, and H, who was the small blind, called Barmy, who was on his left. Barmy went all in. H thought for a moment and folded. When H was the small blind again, Barmy went all in. H folded. This happened twice more with Barmy goading H into betting.

'Not so fucking big now, are you? Fucking Cerebos. Fuckin' salt lick,' and he cackled at the joke.

H said nothing and waited. Several hands later Barmy went all in again, and Ernest, Scots Eddie and Big John folded. Ernest actually had two nines, but there was no way he was going to call Barmy in this mood. H called and immediately turned over two Queens. Barmy sat there, and H said, 'Turn 'em over...'

Red spread across Barmy's face, and anger engulfed him. He only had 9h, 3s. He had taken sweets out of the jar for too long, and now he was caught, and it was time to pay. He threw the cards on the floor.

'OK, fucking big man,' he said, 'you and me. Out there,' he pointed out into the night, 'you and fucking me.'

H thought for a moment. It would be nice to kill this bastard here and now and fuck going outside.....however.....

‘I’ll tell you what,’ said H, ‘there’s no point in us killing each other, so I’ll make you a bet. If you win, I give you the Ferrari. If I win, you give me ten times what you’ve just lost. How’s that?’

‘What the fuck are you pulling?’ asked Barmy suspiciously, but he had already worked out he could be up a hundred thou or so and only down five grand.

‘Nothing. But if we fight, we are more than likely equal, which means we both get hurt, and the idea is that one of us wins....’

Barmy puffed up at the compliment. The others listened more intently. What was H pulling? He would fucking destroy Barmy in a fight. Done deal!

‘.....so I suggest rather than kill each other, we settle this another way if you’re *man enough* for the bet.’

Barmy bridled. Man enough? Fucking man enough? What did that cunt just say? ‘Just fuckin’ watch me.’

‘OK, all you have to do is jump from the bedroom window into the pool. *Like I do.....*’

H took a long look at Ernest, who held his gaze and then looked down and sipped his wine.

‘Fuckin’ easy! You get the fuckin’ keys to that motor ready.’

They all trooped off up to the bedroom.

‘I’ll give you a few pointers as it’s only fair,’ said H, ‘as I’ve done this before and you haven’t.’

‘I don’t need your fucking pointers. Just get your fucking keys....you cunt.’

‘OK, but listen anyhow. You stand by the wall,’ and he went over to the wall, ‘and you push off with one foot to get moving. Also, you get that rug up,’ and he walked over and pulled the rug to one side. Big John had opened the doors, and now it was up to Barmy.

‘Do you want to have a look down first in case you want to change your mind? You may prefer to back out now rather than when you’re going over....?’

Barmy seethed at the insult. Now the cunt was calling him a fucking coward!

‘Fuck you! And you, you cunt, jump in feet first like a girlie. I’ll show you how to do it properly.....cunt.’

Barmy crouched down as though he was an Olympic sprinter and raced at the balcony. Barmy may have been a Neanderthal, but he was fit and agile, and he sailed over the balcony. H knew he would make the jump and knew he would clear everything and reach the pool, and wondered whether he had got it wrong.

Had he got it wrong?

He had manoeuvred Barmy into something, but had he misread Hathaway’s face? Had he read Hathaway all wrong? This would be a fucking expensive mistake if he had.....

Big John and Scots Eddie waited for the splash, but all they heard was a dull thud.....and then.....nothing. They raced downstairs to the pool and left H and Ernest standing in the bedroom.

‘You remembered,’ said Ernest.

H nodded. 'Last Saturday night of every month, you clean out the pool, empty it and refill it the next morning. Yes, I remembered.'

'Ah well,' said Ernest, and let out a long sigh '.....more wine?'

Later H had a word with Big John about his Big Mouth!

Chapter 27

Secure Security

Back in England, H had several days free, so he immersed himself in the clubs and his security company. He was a good manager and delegator and had structured it so that the operations did not need him on a day-to-day basis. The security company hired out doormen to other clubs and also to minor celebs who wanted to appear major when the tabloids were around. He also did the occasional major celeb, but not as often as he would have liked. Perhaps he should put more effort into that? It paid well, and the publicity was wonderful for the business.

He once hired some of the men out to an oil company to provide compound security in Nigeria, but one had been badly injured, and he pulled the others out.

H liked money, but he looked after his people, and for that, they gave unstinting loyalty.

A small fleet of executive and stretch limos also stood waiting. He initially rented them to all comers but found that a party that could afford the rental had no money left when they puked all over the leather or dropped a fag on it, so he became selective. He demanded a £5,000 deposit, and those

that paid were welcome! They still puked over the leather and dropped fags, but they paid for the damage and inconvenience.

Soon, his piece de resistance was arriving. He had on order a bulletproof limo from CAV in the States, which was intended for the market inhabited by the wealthy and famous. It was a Level IV standard vehicle on the American National Institute of Justice Ballistic Resistance measurements, which meant that not only did it resist small-calibre handguns but also high-velocity rifles and armour piercing as well. On top of that, it was bomb resistant! It should have had blacked-out windows, but English law had been updated and said 30% of light must now pass through the windows and that fucked everything up, and so H had to go to another option: Strucglas.

Strucglas was a polymer whose molecules structured themselves parallel to each other which created millions of channels all pointing in the same direction. Because par-channeling light came in straight lines, a passing observer could not see in, although the passenger could see straight, and only straight, out. It had cost an extra \$20,000, but if he was going to do it, he was going to do it right! This addition to the fleet meant H had to take out extra, and very expensive, insurance cover and he prayed they didn't send him a standard car by mistake!

He was discussing this with the manager of the security company when the lady who compiled the financial accounts came to them. She was visibly shaking and struggled to talk...

‘You ok, Sheila? Can we help you?’

‘I’ve lost your money,’ she said, stammering, ‘I’m sorry, but I’ve lost your money.’

‘What do you mean,’ asked Brian, ‘you’ve lost our money?’

‘It’s gone out of the bank.....it’s gone.’

‘What’s gone? How much is gone? Tell us what you’re talking about....’

She led them into her office and showed them a bank statement. ‘There,’ she said, ‘look.....’

She had underlined a figure of £12,000 taken from the account in the name of Regent Capital Securities Ltd.

‘It should have been a thousand, and it’s twelve thousand.’

She burst into tears. ‘I’m so sorry... I’m so sorry.’

H looked at Brian enquiringly, but Brian shrugged and shook his head.

‘Sit down, Sheila, and tell us all about it.....’

Sheila explained how they needed three new copying machines, one for them and two for the clubs, as the others were old, and she had rung a company in the local paper. The man had been very helpful, and the leasing quote was right, and not only that, he had given them a brand new laptop as part of the deal as she was ordering three machines. She signed the lease, which was for a £1000 per quarter for three years, i.e. £12,000 in total. However, the first instalment from

the bank had been £12,000! And there were another eleven quarters of £1,000 to go! Brian soothed Sheila, then went to another room with H. H stared at him.

‘Two questions,’ said H, ‘first, how does that woman manage to spend thousands of my money without you knowing? Second, how are you going to get it back?’

‘H, I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be sorry, just sort it out, because I had high regard for you as a manager, and this is not good. This is crap management and not what I expect from you or anyone else that manages for me. It looks good, doesn’t it, that I,’ he pointed to himself, ‘fucking me, have just been scammed. What do you think of that, eh?’

He glared at Brian, and Brian inwardly winced. Brian was a hard man, but H, when annoyed, scared the shit out of him.

‘Now you fucking sort this out, and when you have, come back to me, and we’ll talk again.’

He went back into Sheila’s office. ‘It’s ok, love, we all make mistakes. Don’t worry. Brian’s going to sort it all out,’ and with one withering look at Brian, he was gone.

Brian was livid. It was true it was ultimately his fault, and he took responsibility, but for Christ’s sake... The stupid cow! He went back to Sheila and told her what to do. When the copy of the lease came back from the leasing company, it was obvious it had been changed, albeit with a good copy of Sheila’s signature where the change had taken place.

The salesman's name was Peter Nephew, and he owned a small company called Regent Capital Securities Ltd. Brian made some more enquiries and then sat down with his second-in-command and tried to work out a plan...

The next day, they had worked it out, but he knew he had to ring H to get his approval. The thought terrified him. Not that H would ever hurt a member of his staff, but he was incredibly logical, and if there were a flaw, he would get no mercy. His hands were visibly shaking as he rang H, and in a voice as calm as he could make it, he told him what he wanted to do.

'Let me get this straight,' said H. 'You want to 'invest' one hundred and twenty-five grand to get my money back? Are you fucking mad? Have you ever heard of risk and reward ratios? Why don't I just take it out of your salary?'

Brian shrunk inside. Just what he needed. Just what he fucking needed. Ah, fuck it. It was, to use one of H's little sayings, '*all in or all out*'.

At the other end of the phone, H had considered the proposal and quite liked it. There was very little risk if they kept on top of it, but let Brian fight his corner. Let's see if he's got the bottle to argue.....?

Brian took a deep breath. 'H, I may have confused you a little, so let me start again.....'

H smiled. That's my boy; get in there and fight your corner.

Brian called the company, and as luck would have it, he caught Nephew in.

‘Mr Nephew?’

‘Yes.’

‘This is Brian Bailey from Secure Security. You very kindly helped us out with some copiers, and I wonder whether you could help again?’

‘Of course.....anything.’

Brian could hear him salivating. This man was not just a crook, but an idiot. He ripped off a security company for Christ’s sake. Was he mad? Not only that, it belonged to H. H, for Christ’s sake! That wasn’t mad; that was completely fucking unhinged.....it was a fucking death wish!

‘We have several premises and are also setting up a company to handle all the IT arrangements, and so we need computers, servers, printers and everything like that. By the way, can you get desks and other peripherals as well?’

Nephew’s heart fluttered, and he heard sleigh bells in the distance. ‘Anything you want. Anything you want....’

‘That’s excellent; I’ll send someone round tomorrow with a list.’

The next day, a list dropped through his letterbox, and when he read it, he knew it was Christmas. Fucking Christmas! There was at least a hundred and fifty thousand pounds’ worth of kit on the list. And that was to him. Two hundred and fifty to them. Unbelievable. Thank fuck they hadn’t noticed that slight discrepancy with the first lease. Even if they did, he could say it was a mistake, blame the leasing company and

make a load more on this lot. Magic. He had no ability to buy that amount of stuff off his usual suppliers, as his credit wasn't that good, but if he spread it around, he would be fine. It wasn't as though they'd even asked for a quote. Dozy pillocks!

The next day, Brian rang again. 'Peter, we seem to have a cock-up on our first lease, and they have taken the lot off us up front and are still going to take the rest as they should. Could you refund the cock-up, and then we need to sort out payment for the rest. Now, for the new stuff, we don't want a lease, as we have the funds available, so if it's ok with you we'd like to pay cash?'

'Er, pardon?'

'Is it ok with you if we pay cash?'

'Do you mean cash...cash? Or cheque.... cash?'

'We can do whatever suits you. How about half and half?'

'Er....great.'

Nephew could taste the money. He could see the new car, and he had always wanted a swimming pool at home. He would make a bomb out of these idiots and see if he could fuck off the tax man.

'I'll send someone round tomorrow to collect the lease cheque, and we'll give you the address to deliver all the equipment. Oh, and by the way, it's quite urgent, and we need it in seven days. We'll pay more if you can.....'

What fucking pricks, thought Nephew, and rubbed his hands with glee as he put the phone down.

The next day, Nephew gave them the £12,000 cheque refund for the lease 'mistake' and got the official order for the equipment with the delivery address. He rang around all over the place and arranged to get it all delivered within seven days. He rang Brian, who arranged to give him the cheque and the cash on the day it was delivered.

On the allotted day, Brian and one of his men went to Nephew's office. Both carried identical briefcases. After a cup of coffee and small talk, Brian rang the company that was taking delivery and confirmed it was all there. He took a cheque out of his briefcase in the name of FOFFC UK for the agreed £125,000 plus vat and signed it. He nodded to his man, who opened the other briefcase and showed Nephew the money.

'You should count it,' said Brian, 'it's a lot of money.'

Nephew did. He had never seen so much cash, and it took a few minutes.

'Thank you for your help,' said Brian, and went to go, but then a brick came through the office window. Nephew went to the window, looked out and saw some youths running away.

'Got to go, we'll leave you to sort out the mess,' said Brian. He saw them to the building entrance and watched them walk to their car, but then Nephew suddenly panicked. He had been bothered about the coincidence of the two briefcases that were exactly the same and then the brick. He needed to check the money! Quick! If he went back to his office to open

his own case, they would have gone, and so he chased after them. He caught them at the car. 'Sorry to bother you, but I may have filled a Form in wrong that I gave you.'

'It's ok,' said Brian, 'another day.'

He went to get in the car, but Nephew moved in front of him.

'It would be much better if we did it now.....'

'I haven't got time now....'

'It'll only take a minute.' Nephew didn't move.

Brian shrugged, put the case on the bonnet and fiddled with the tumblers. After a few moments, he said, 'Having a bit of a problem; these security cases can be a bit of a bastard at times, so we'll have to do it another day.'

Nephew was starting to get agitated. 'No..no...no... we'll do it now.'

Brian gave the case to the man with him and said, 'Can you do it?'

He tried, but to no avail. 'Sorry.....'

'That's it then,' said Brian. 'Fucked. Never mind, we'll come back in a few days, and you can sort it out then.'

'It has to be done now,' said Nephew in a panic and snatched the briefcase, which, to his amazement, opened, and its contents went everywhere. There was a pen or two, the odd document, car maps and odds and sods. The men looked at Nephew, who was confused. If that was the right suitcase then the one in the office was full of money! Unattended! He immediately turned and ran to the office. He

found it where he had left it and went to have another look at the money but decided to get rid of the glass first, so he put the case in a filing cabinet and locked it securely. Half an hour later, with one or two cuts on his fingers and all the glass off the carpet, he went back to the cabinet and the money. He tried to open the case, but it wouldn't budge. He looked and saw the tumblers. He must have moved them. Shit! Another fucking security case. Arseholes!

In a panic, he rang Brian. 'The briefcase won't open! It must be locked somehow, and I can't open it.'

'Don't worry,' said Brian, 'pop round and we'll open it for you.' The man in the car parked outside Nephew's office confirmed he was on his way.

Nephew was ushered into Brian's office. He gave the security briefcase to Brian, who put the right numbers on the tumblers, and it clicked open. In it, Nephew could see all the money. He was visibly relieved; for one moment he thought it was a scam.....

'Good.'

Brian nodded at one of the men. 'In the safe, please.'

The big man picked up the briefcase and took it out of the room.

'Hey, that's my money,' Nephew shouted as the briefcase disappeared. He tried to get up but was held down by two pairs of big hands on his shoulders.

‘That’s actually our money,’ said Brian, ‘which we rather forgetfully left at your office, and you kindly brought back to us.’

‘No, it fucking isn’t,’ he was now getting angry, ‘it’s for the fucking equipment I sold you.’

Brian looked at the other men. ‘Equipment? Have you bought any equipment? I certainly haven’t bought any equipment.’

‘I’ve got the order! I’ve got the cheque!’

He thought for a moment. ‘In fact,’ and he fished in his jacket pocket, ‘I have them here,’ and brandished them triumphantly. Brian took the Order. ‘The company name looks a bit familiar.....FOFFC UK. Ah yes, I see it now. From my experience of doing crosswords, isn’t that an anagram of “Fuck off”?’

Nephew was a bit lost, a bit panicky, a bit angry and a bit scared. They all competed for a slice of him. What the fuck was this all about?

‘The cheque.....’ he said, holding the cheque towards them.

Brian held out his hand to look at it, but Nephew kept it from him. ‘No fucking way.’

‘That wouldn’t be drawn on the same account as the Order, would it, Peter?’ asked Brian quietly.

Nephew knew it was, and he didn’t want to look, but he had to. The company name on the cheque was FOFFC UK. Oh shit! Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!

‘The equipment.....? Where’s my equipment?’

‘Equipment? We don’t know anything about equipment other than the stuff you sold us, and for which you very kindly reimbursed us for the mistake on the Lease, which we appreciate.’

For a moment it looked like Nephew was going to jump at Brian, but suddenly his whole body posture changed. There was a big exhale of breath, his body slumped and visibly got smaller. He was quiet for a little while. ‘What do you want?’

‘Well, Peter,’ said Brian ‘you’ve been a bit of a naughty boy, haven’t you?’

Nephew started to answer, but one of the men indicated that he should shut up. ‘You have scammed our accounts lady; you have put me in my boss’s bad books; and, much, much worse than that, you haven’t done your homework. And that’s very naughty. You see, Peter, we are not little old ladies.....’ He spread his arms. ‘Do we look like little old ladies to you.....?’

A part of Nephew took over automatically and became animated and blurted out, ‘I know people who will.....’

The slap across his face was so hard and loud that it nearly made Brian jump.

‘I told you to shut up,’ said Brian, ‘and I meant it. If you talk once more, you won’t walk again..... As I was saying, we are not little old ladies. We know about your scams at the schools and small businesses, but they are they, and we are we.....’

Brian suddenly thought that what should have sounded profound and full of dark meaning had lost its way somewhat, and even he didn't understand it. Oh well...nobody's going to point it out.

'.....so this is the deal, and to be democratic, we are even giving you a choice.

Plan A is you pay us compensation for the trouble you have caused us. We estimate that at ten thousand, but it may be more based on where we go from here.

Plan B is that you refuse. We take the money anyhow and break your arms.

Plan C is that you refuse but piss us off, so we take the money anyhow and then you spend the rest of eternity propping up a motorway bridge somewhere.'

'You can't,' blurted out Nephew, but he was stopped by another vicious slap.

Nephew started to cry quietly. Brian raised his arms in resignation and sighed. 'Peter, we're wasting time. Do you want the options again?'

He shook his head.

'So what's it to be, Peter? The twenty thousand? The money and legs or the money and death?'

'I'll pay the money,' said a shrunken Nephew.

'Good,' said Brian 'a good choice.'

'Three of my men will now take you to your bank, and you will get the money. If you give us any problems whatsoever, be sure we will hurt you so badly you will spend the rest of your

life in hospitals and mental institutions. Do you understand?' Nephew nodded imperceptibly. The slap got his attention again. Brian leaned over and was face to face with Nephew.

He screamed at him, 'DO YOU UNDERSTAND?'

'Yes,' he whispered.

'Get him out.....'

When they had gone, a man stared at Brian.

'What.....?' asked Brian.

He kept staring.

'What.....?'

'Hospitals and Mental Institutions?' he said incredulously.

Brian giggled like a child. 'I got a bit carried away. I got a bit carried away with the whole thing really. What the fuck do I know about breaking legs and motorway bridges? I started to sound like something out of the Godfather..... I think I went a bit into Corleone mode.....'

'A bit.....?'

In H's apartment, he was sitting opposite Brian.

'So let me get this straight. You got back the ten grand.... you got another twenty thou as a contribution off our friend Peter for our 'inconvenience' and we made about fifteen per cent on the equipment that we passed on to Malcolm the mover; that is..... twenty-two and a half.....have I got that right?'

Brian nodded.

‘So we are up,’ he did a quick mental calculation, ‘about forty-five thou, less the amount we lost by leasing as against doing a deal with cash, which we’ll call three thou, and so that’s forty-two……?’

Brian nodded again.

‘Ok,’ said H, ‘here’s the deal. You’ve been a cunt and taken your eye off the ball. I don’t like that, and I won’t tolerate it. You’re paid quite well, in fact, very well, to make sure we do things right, and we earn money, and you helped us lose it. That was not our agreement. So, from today, no one in that company spends a fucking penny without a signature from you. Got it?’

Brian nodded.

‘No one in that company orders a fucking thing without a signature from you. Got it?’

Brian nodded.

‘And you don’t act like a cunt again. Got it?’

Brian nodded. H stood up and gave Brian an envelope.

‘That confirms our conversation,’ said H, and showed Brian to the door.

Riding the tube back, Brian opened the envelope with more than a touch of trepidation.

The letter, which had been neatly typed, said:

Brian.

Confirming conversation.

Don’t fuck up again!

Little bonus for efficiently solving problem.

H

Inside, he also found five thou in fifties.

Brian smiled.

This was why you worked for H.....

Chapter 28

Boxing night

One evening H took Benny to the Hammersmith Palais where it was 'white collar' boxing night. It was nothing like real boxing but fantastic entertainment nonetheless. The contestants were mainly City boys: traders, M & A, bankers, underwriters, solicitors..... There to show the world, or at least their wives, girlfriends or mates (perhaps even enemies), what mettle they actually had below their suits, pinstripe or Armani.

Dining tables, seating eight per table, surrounded the ring; the men wore bow ties and the women evening gowns. It was a night when you could be sartorially glamorous but socially unrestrained. The food was excellent, and champagne flowed freely.

The first contestants were a lawyer from an M & A department of HSBC and an accountant with Touche. The accountant looked like you would expect an accountant to look: he was weedy, had little in the way of what the medical profession would call muscle and got in the ring with glasses on to large guffaws and cheering and stamping from the crowd. He raised his right arm in recognition and triumph. The crowd cheered and jeered in equal measure.

'Shit,' said H, 'he's dead! You could take him, Benny.'

He was followed in the ring by the lawyer, who was about five foot five, heavy and muscular. His shaven head made you think he would be more at home in a *total fighting* cage with Don Frye or Murilo Rua than this charade, but what the hell.....it would be a bloody, if short, contest. Both boxers wore head guards, and the accountant's head, now minus glasses, seemed to be lost in his. His little eyes peered out like a mouse stuck in a hole with a cat waiting outside...

The referee brought them to the centre and explained the rules which would usually be instantly forgotten, then they went back to their corners, and the bell rang to start. The bull of a lawyer hurtled over to the little accountant's corner and swung a punch so hard that had it landed they would have picked his head up off the fifth row of tables, but inexplicably the weedy accountant ducked, moved slightly to his left side and buried a right hand into the bull's stomach.

The bull doubled up as the wind left him and went down. He kneeled there gasping. The crowd screamed encouragement....

'Bite his bollocks.'

'Kick him in the head.'

'Give him another now, weedy....'

The ref went between them and started to count. The bull took long raking breaths, then on eight he stood and raised his gloves. The ref moved them into the middle, and they started again. As someone once said, 'it was like déjà vu all over again.'

The bull swung, weed ducked, shifted his weight and smacked bull in the stomach. Down he went again. This time it took a little longer. The body was still willing, but his mind was trying to work out what the fuck was happening. This should have been a walkover. He'd put a grand on this for fuck's sake! He was up on the count of nine, staggered for a moment or two, and then the bell went.

The crowd cheered, stamped, hooted, hollered, ate and got ever more drunk. This was how a night should be! Bull talked to his seconds in the corner, whose strategy, thought over at great length as the first round progressed, was 'Kill the little fucker!'

They pushed him out again. The second round started as the first, with bull learning nothing. If it was 'kill the little fucker' they wanted, then 'kill the little fucker' they would get! Over he hurtled with his right arm outstretched to catch weed with a haymaker. An almighty swing, a slight move, and a thump to the stomach from which there was no return. It was over.....weed had beaten bull, to everyone's amazement other than weed, who had been a county lightweight champion in his youth; and also his mates who had seen him do it before and had bet heavily on him.

Go, weed.....!

Bouts came and went, and the evening was a great success. Nearing the end, Benny slid her hand under the table and rested it on H's crotch. With great dexterity, she slid down the

zip and put her hand in and held his cock, which was getting harder by the second. For a few minutes, she rubbed it up and down, and H was beginning to get a bit nervous. Everyone was a bit merry, but were they aware what she was doing? Did they fucking care.....?

As they got in the taxi to go home, Benny whispered in an urgent, basic, animal way, 'Me tonight....me tonight.....me,' then stared at him.....

H moved towards the partition, fished in his pocket, took out a fifty-pound note and said to the cabby, 'Turn the mirror the other way, close the partition and don't think about anything other than the road ahead. OK?'

The cabby took the note, nodded profusely, closed the partition and hunched over the wheel, staring ahead rigidly.

H sat down, and Benny immediately kneeled between his legs and undid his zip. H was hard in seconds; Benny put half his cock in her mouth then moved it all in. As H watched her, he found himself thinking, for a second, 'All in', and almost giggled, but this was not a time for giggling. Benny's head moved up and down, and she made little moaning sounds. Her eyes were shut, and she was extant in her own world. After a few minutes of sucking, she took it out and started licking the end while masturbating him with her hand. H's orgasm was getting close, and he felt himself moving off the seat as his frame became straightened in anticipation.

‘Now,’ he whispered urgently, and she buried it in her mouth and throat completely as he came and didn’t move until the end. Then she took it out and sucked every last drop and licked the end until H was completely sated. When she had finished, she sat back on the seat, straightened her clothes and looked at him.....unblinking.

H knew.....

When they got home, H closed the door without putting on the lights and took hold of the front of Benny’s blouse and pushed her against the wall.

‘You,’ he said commandingly, ‘go to bed and wait for me there.’

She nodded compliantly. He let her go, and she went to the dark, waiting bedroom. He waited a few moments and then followed her in. Although the light was dim, he could see her beautiful body naked on the bed.

‘Now...now.....now...’ she huskily demanded. Her long legs were open, her knees raised, casting a shadow that made the jet-black hair on her vulva even darker above her wet, inviting vagina.

‘No,’ said H, ‘not now..... Put your legs down, shut your eyes, keep them shut and hold the top of the bed.’

His voice was authoritative, commanding and expected to be obeyed; it held a hint of danger. He stripped off his clothes and left them on the floor.

‘Please.....’ she pleaded.

‘Wait.....’

He watched her for a few moments, watching her movements.

‘Do not move!’ and tied her hands to the top of the bed with a soft silk cord and slipped the mask over her eyes.

‘Now you will do as you are told. I want you to think of nothing...I just want you to feel.....do you understand?’

She nodded.

‘I said...do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ she whispered softly.

He knelt by her side, making sure he touched her with nothing other than his hands and then, very, very lightly, he brushed his fingers over her. Her aroused body felt everything..... and she moaned with pleasure. There was no pattern to his movements. He would softly caress down one side and then move to the inside of one leg and then to her arm, her cheek, her nipple. Each touch different. Each movement random. The touches were so light you would normally hardly feel them, but in Benny’s heightened state, she felt everything. She moaned with every touch, and her body moved with pleasure.

Unexpectedly, H dug in with his nails and pulled them down the inside of her thigh!

She screamed!

Benshima felt the pain, and instantly an electric shock travelled through every part of her body, knocking the breath out of her and making her gasp for air.

Her arousal increased....

He waited a few moments and then drew his nails down her left side.

She screamed again.....

After a few more moments, he touched her very gently, and she screamed in pain again.

The anticipation....

The anticipation.....

The anticipation of pain was as painful as the pain itself.

He continued gently touching her and caressing her, and when her body had decided he was no longer going to hurt her and she relaxed, he pulled his nails down her again. She gasped, she arched her back, but the soft rope restrained her movements, and she screamed again.

For half an hour James continued to caress and hurt her body.

For half an hour she endured the agony and the ecstasy.

For half an hour she moaned and screamed.

For half an hour she was in a world of no escape.

For half an hour, she was in a world she did not want to escape from.....

He stood up and walked quietly around the bed, then back again. Kneeling over Benny had given him cramp, but he could not, and would not, let that stop him. He moved up and down on the balls of his feet and rubbed his legs. The cramp soon went. Getting back on the bed he knelt over her, both

legs each side of her. When he was certain his legs were not touching her, he put the ends of his two middle fingers on her hard, aroused nipples. Applying a little pressure, he slowly started to move in a circular motion, keeping her hard nipples under his fingers as he did so. After only a minute or so, Benshima began to moan, and he felt her pelvis move up and down. Her moans became louder, and she moved faster. She took a few quick, urgent breaths and her moan filled the room as her pelvis thrust violently upwards under him.

Benshima felt his fingers on her nipples, the soft circular motion creating waves within her breasts and the feeling started almost immediately. It started with a tingling sensation behind her breasts, then it travelled down to the pit of her stomach where it formed and gathered like a hurricane waiting off the coast to explode.

She desperately wanted to rub and press her stomach, but the restraint stopped her.

The feeling gathered momentum, like a whirlpool going round and round within her stomach; faster and faster until it exploded, and the pit of her stomach raged as though a bush fire were consuming it.....

He let her relax and get her breath, and then he started again. It always amazed him that she could climax so quickly through her breasts, but she could.....and she did.

After fifteen minutes of orgasm after orgasm, she said weakly, 'No more...no more,' but he knew she wasn't finished. It was not her decision what was done tonight; her protestations

were part of the theatre.

Two orgasms later, James said, 'I am undoing your hands, but you leave the blindfold on. Do you understand....?'

'.....yes.'

He undid her, then gently held her neck. 'Do you know what I am going to do now?'

'Yes,' she whispered.

'And you know what to do?'

'Yes.' She raised her one arm above her head, resting it lightly on the headboard behind her. H put his hands around her throat and felt for the muscle on each side of her neck. He brought his hands slightly towards him, moving the muscle to expose her carotid artery and then gently squeezed. Benny was waiting in anticipation, and when it came, it was wonderful.

She became light-headed as though she was going to faint; for a second a feeling of weightlessness and then.....in less than five seconds her hand dropped and her head lolled to one side. James let go immediately and watched..... She was motionless for several seconds, then her chest expanded, and she took in several quick breaths. The feeling of euphoria swept through her as though she had taken a drug. Letting out one long breath she said huskily, 'Wonderful.....oh my God, how wonderful..... again.....again.'

He did it again. And one more time. He watched her every move, her every sign, so that he could monitor her well-being, but he knew, as long as he was careful, she could come to no harm. It looked bad, but it happened every day in judo when applying a stranglehold. But this wasn't judo. This wasn't an opponent.

This was Benshima.....the most precious thing in his world. They had been 'in' bed nearly an hour and a half, and H could see that Benny was drained. Gently pulling her up to a kneeling position, he kneeled by her on her right side. Taking off her mask, he kissed her and gently prised apart her legs. Supporting her securely around her back with his left arm, he inserted two of his fingers inside her vagina and moved them up and down the right inside wall so that he could excite the area where her orgasm 'nerve' waited.....

The effect on Benny was almost instantaneous. Her mouth opened wide for breath, her body convulsed, she shouted 'Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck...' and then a torrent of fluid spurted from her urethra. The liquid covered James' hand and ran down his arm to the bed below.

Benshima felt the fingers go inside her, and she reacted instantly.

She lived for this feeling. She had never experienced it before she met James and had no idea orgasms could be so.....wet.

A feeling of incredible pleasure started in her vagina and ran through the whole of her body. She could feel James' fingers continue their rhythmic stimulation, feeling so deep within her she knew he could reach her very soul. She felt her vagina contract and tighten.....

Her heart pounded, pumping blood to her erogenous zones, starving her brain of the blood it needed and sending her into a state of euphoric dizziness; the world outside her body ceased to exist....

She felt faint and clung to James, feeling his strong shoulders. She knew she was close.....so close.....

Her body started to convulse, her hips thrust forward, and she clung ever tighter to James for support. It was like a time bomb with a three-second fuse...she knew it was going to explode, she wanted it to explode, she needed it to explode and when it did the incredible orgasmic shock wave within her vagina burst out and filled every part of her body as though she had become an internal pyrotechnic extravaganza. Colours filled her senses; stars danced behind her closed eyes.

She felt a warm feeling, deep within her vagina, signalling the release of the fluid that would spurt out of her like a fountain.....and send her to the end of the world.

He gave her a few moments for her orgasm to subside, and then he started stimulating her again. After only a few moments, her body arched, contorted, then a mind-blowing

orgasm, followed by warm fluid, gushed out of her. It spurted everywhere. James' arm was wet, and he could feel the bed was soaking where he was kneeling. She took in large amounts of air and slowly came back. Her body was limp, and she was drained.

He held her tightly, supporting her weak and spent body. After two or three minutes, H commanded, 'Do it again.....'

'No...' she pleaded half-heartedly, 'no..... no more.....'

He reinserted his fingers. Benshima weakly tried to take them out.

'Not again...not again.....' but her body had already started to respond as H moved his fingers in and out, and in seconds she was pumping out more fluid; screaming, gasping for air and clinging on to H.

Her head dropped down, her body limp with exhaustion. The luxuriant black hair, sweat-soaked, went over her face and clung to her like tendrils. James held her to him and slid her legs off the side of the bed. The sheets were soaking where she had come, so he gently lifted her, walked around the bed and laid her where it was dry. He covered her, kissed her forehead and left her to sleep. As he started to leave the room, he heard her mumble, '*.....but I'm a Catholic girl.....*'

He smiled, as he had heard it before. She had once said she didn't know a Catholic girl could, or even should, have so much pleasure....

It was three in the morning, and H was tired but not sleepy. He needed to unwind, so he roused his computer out of its standby sleep to find Rico. Rico was nowhere to be found, so he went into a £1 game which would be home to maniacs, druggies, drunks, all of whom couldn't play poker to save their lives, but for a quid who gave a fuck! He spent the next half an hour going all in on every hand, and every time he got knocked out, he did the same in another game.

Fucking magic!

Cerberus would now go on Shark Scope as a fish!

Chapter 29

A good view of London

The next morning he was woken by Benny, all bright and cheerful, who said, 'English breakfast, rise and shine.'

'You're bright and cheerful.'

'I wonder why? Now let me think? It couldn't be the amazing sex I had last night, could it? Possibly..... Or perhaps even a snippet of news I have for you? Possibly..... Now get up and let's eat.....'

She waltzed out of the room.

'What news?' he shouted after her, '.....is it good? Is Tony Blair dead?..... Is Gordon Brown dead?..... Are we saved a fate worse than death?'

'Get dressed,' she shouted back.

It was eleven in the morning. H wandered into the en-suite, turned on the power shower and stood under its high-pressure vibrating jets of water. After a few minutes, refreshed, he put on slacks and a short-sleeved shirt, wandered into the lounge and stood looking through the large windows out over the river. He took in the view, then moved to the windows on the side of the room to look at the City.

'Ready yet?' he called through to the kitchen.

'One minute.'

Man, it was good to be alive..... It was Saturday morning-ish, and nowhere to go. Next week the new armour-plated car would be delivered, and a whole new market would open up. In fact, only the other day he had been asked by a Russian if he had one available for a month at a stretch. Well, yes.....as it happens, I do.

He yawned, prised his arms apart, and they were at full stretch when the glass shattered, and the first bullet hit his head, followed immediately by another that thudded into his chest! The force took him back a step, and he collapsed and lay still. Bright, warm life blood started oozing from both entry wounds....

Benny ran from the kitchen when she heard the shattering glass to find James in a pool of blood by the broken window. She knelt down by him, wanting to hold his head, but it was covered in blood, and she didn't know what to do..... She started to tremble, and a wild panic gripped her. The next bullet hurtled through the jagged window and ripped through Benshima. Her body jerked with the impact, and she dropped on James. Another bullet hit her fallen body, and she jerked again, the force pushing her off James, and she lay, crumpled, on the carpet like a discarded rag doll.

A neighbour who had been drinking gin and tonic on her balcony heard the glass break and then the screams, and phoned the police. Next, she rang the concierge, who let himself in to see the carnage inside. He looked at H, who was

obviously dead, but Benny was breathing very slightly. Not realising she had phoned for the police, he dialled 999 and asked for the police and an ambulance.

When the police had taken his statement, and the medics had gone, he went back downstairs to his station, went to a drawer and took out a piece of paper with a number on it. He phoned the number, which went to an automatic exchange, which then rerouted to another number, which rerouted it again to another exchange and to another number. A person with a foreign accent answered.

‘I have news for you.....’ said the concierge.

Chapter 30

Senor Reyes

When Senor and Senora Reyes heard the news, they were devastated. Their only child. Gunned down in London. London! Holy Mother! Bogota they could have understood. But an expensive apartment in London? How could that be? Why would that be? Senor Reyes comforted his stricken wife, then, when she had composed herself sufficiently, they sat down to decide what to do. They did not know whether their daughter was alive or dead, so Senor Reyes rang a Senior Partner of Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, the eminent City law firm, and spoke at length to Sir Anthony Gibbs-White.

He had known the company for many years in the days when they were just plain Freshfields, and they had always done an excellent job, albeit at a price, but Senor Reyes was happy to pay for the best advice money could buy. Gibbs-White called in a lawyer and issued his instructions, leaving it to the lawyer to sort out the detail and the best way forward. However, he did stress on more than one occasion that the client was very, very important.

The most important thing now was information. The news channels were carrying a story of a man and a woman being shot in their *expensive apartment*, but they knew little else.

The news teams had quizzed the concierge, who knew nothing, and the neighbour was not available. Only the police and medics knew anything.

The man was dead and the woman critical.....

The well-connected lawyer rang a Deputy Commissioner in New Scotland Yard and received up-to-date information. He ascertained that, contrary to reports, the man, James James, was not dead but was unlikely to survive and was currently on a life support machine in St George's Hospital in the south of London. Senorita Reyes was in the same hospital, in a critical condition, but not on life support. Mr James had been shot in the head and chest. Senorita Reyes had been hit twice in the chest, and miraculously both had missed her heart, but one had punctured a lung. However, the high impact rifle had done a lot of internal damage and left two gaping wounds in her back as they had passed through her.

The lawyer rang the London Clinic and spoke to a Consultant, who agreed to act as an intermediary between the hospital, Freshfields, and the Reyes family. He was told to establish when Senorita Reyes could be moved to the London Clinic to get twenty-four-hour specialised care and also the exact situation with regards to Mr James.....

Chapter 31

Anmcioha

In the quiet hospital room, H lay quite still. The monitors hummed and beeped, showing a man still alive, but to what extent....?

H could have told them.....

H could have told them his foot itched like crazy.

But he didn't know what an itch was.....?

Or a foot.....?

Chapter 32

A good job done

The sniper was satisfied with his work. He knew he had got the man in the head and chest, which would kill him, and it was unlikely the woman would survive two in the chest. He gently dismantled the L96 sniper rifle with its new Falcon Optics Merlin 10x42T Scope and put them lovingly in the large, innocuous dark green sports bag. It had been a good day in many ways, but the main thing was the weather. Bright, calm, not much wind....ideal for killing a man at six hundred yards. He had waited four days in his hotel room for not only the right opportunity but also the right weather, and he was pleased it had taken a lot less time than usual.

Time to go home.

He was tired. He wanted a holiday....a rest. He hadn't wanted this job, but if you start turning jobs down no jobs. In front of the mirror, he put in coloured contact lenses to change his eyes and checked that the dye in his hair still looked natural. Putting on his coat, he picked up the bag and went downstairs to pay; then off on holiday, and when he returned, resume his life of killing people.

He was highly experienced, and one of the best with a sniper rifle, but his killing was not usually undertaken in cities with skyscrapers. All cities are not the same and had he been an

American killer from New York or Chicago, he would have taken into account the effects of wind turbulence, even on a calm day, created by large structures. Indeed, a professional American killer would have declined to kill from a distance in a skyscraper city, but had he been forced to, he would have walked to the bottom of the building and found out which way the wind was circling the building and then allowed for it. He (or she – there are highly paid women assassins, but very few) would also know that some buildings created a massive airlift up the outside walls as it tried to escape. They would know this through experience and intuition. And while it wasn't known to H's killer, the condition was well known in the construction industry as fluid dynamics. And had the assassin had the benefit of a super computer with FEM3MP computational modelling on it, he would have known the bullets would be moved marginally off trajectory as they left the calm of the space between the buildings and entered the turbulence of the vortex created by the structure.

But he didn't work in the construction industry, didn't have a supercomputer and didn't know much about fluid dynamics.....

Chapter 33

Ringling friends

In Colombia, Senor Reyes and his wife decided not to go to London just yet. Benshima was in capable hands, her life was not at risk, and there was much they could do in Colombia using the machinery of power and influence they had there. Senor Reyes rang many people who were more than happy to help him in his hour of need. He rang people all over the world to pick their brains, their knowledge and their contacts. After nearly four hours on the phone, he came out of his large office with a degree of satisfaction and went into his wife.

‘I have it,’ he said, ‘we can now make sense of this. There is much to do....’

They sat down and talked into the early hours.

Three days later, Senor Reyes and his wife were taken in convoy to the airport in Bogotá where their own G550 Gulfstream was waiting. Within a short while, all the necessary formalities were completed, and the plane’s 15,000 lbs of thrust was soon pushing the 40-tonne jet down the two-mile runway to send them on their way. With its Rolls-Royce engines, it would take nearly seven hours flying at about 0.85 Mach, about six hundred and fifty miles per hour, at around 50,000 feet to get to London. Senor Reyes began

immediately to make phone calls on the satellite phone. The laptop computer he had brought with him connected via Broad Band Multi-Link from the aircraft to the ground. The Gulfstream was, from Senor Reyes' point of view, an extravagant, though much-used business tool. It was really too big for his needs, but a business associate two years earlier had fallen on hard times, and at only ten million US\$ it was knock down price he could not refuse...

At Heathrow, they were met by a representative of the Colombian Embassy, who took them into London in the Ambassador's car. On behalf of the Ambassador, the Aide expressed his sorrow at what had happened. Senor Reyes thanked him and told him the family appreciated such courtesies and to give his regards to The Ambassador. The Aide informed Senor Reyes that the Embassy was at his disposal if he needed it. Senor Reyes thanked him again. The car with darkened windows and diplomatic plates dropped them off at the Ritz, and when they were unpacked, Senor Reyes rang Toby.....

Toby had arranged for the Reyes to be transported around by H's security company. They took them first to see Benshima at the hospital and were met there by Michael Payne, the Consultant.

'How is my daughter?'

'She is still in a critical condition, but not life-threatening.'

'How can you have one without the other?'

‘It’s a matter of time and degree,’ answered the consultant. ‘The injury of itself was not life-threatening, but the effect on the body could be if invaded by outside agencies or if the body was naturally susceptible to conditions that in normal life it was not exposed to.’

He paused for a moment and looked at Senor Reyes, who gave him no indication whatsoever of what he was thinking, so he carried on. ‘.....An example of this would be a weak heart. A bullet in the leg would not be life-threatening, but the extra stress on the heart could be... or someone could do a bungee jump and....’ He shrugged his shoulders.

Senor Reyes thought for a moment, but then his wife said, ‘Take me to my daughter, please.’

He led them to a private room where they found Benshima with an oxygen mask covering her face and an intravenous drip attached to both arms. The Consultant looked at the array of monitors with their graphs, numbers and beeping sounds and turned to Senora Reyes.

‘She is quite stable. Pulse and blood pressure good. One of the biggest problems with gunshot wounds that do not hit a major point of the body is the trauma the body experiences by the impact and penetration. It’s quite bizarre, but in many instances, the person can be treated as an outpatient as the bullet has merely gone through flesh and there is no major wound and no trauma. However, in Benshima’s case the bullets have gone in her chest; both have hit ribs and been deflected somewhat, which has changed not only the angle of

the bullet but its clean forward motion. That means it has imparted a degree of spin, but at a sideways angle, making it a bit like' – he was going to say 'a mini chainsaw', but stopped himself in time – 'a tumbling dice, and so the damage is irregular and not clean. Another problem can be the contamination that a bullet can bring to the body, and so antibiotics are necessary, again giving the body another issue to deal with.'

Senora Reyes went to a seat by the bed and held Benshima's hand, kissed her softly on the cheek and quietly sobbed. Senor Reyes had never cried in his life, but he felt warm tears gather in his eyes and make their way slowly down his cheeks.

After two hours, Senor Reyes left his wife and daughter and went to another part of the hospital with the consultant to see James. In a small, highly specialised room, H was strapped on a small portable operating table rather than a bed so that, should he have to be moved at a second's notice, there would be no need to lift him physically.

'In a small way, Mr James has got over the first hurdle; the first twenty-four hours are the most critical, and it's now been three days. You will know he does not respond at all, and because of that we are not aware of the extent of the damage to his brain. Either the gunman was not too good, or he moved a fraction or something, but the bullet entered more to the left of his head than the middle. It entered the periphery of

the right temporal lobe and left through the occipital region. In the middle, he would have died instantly. There is also the point that as the gunman appears to have been quite some distance away when he fired, it means he had to use a bullet designed for accuracy, which reduces possible damage. Had the killer been standing by him and used a hollow-point bullet, Mr James' head would have been torn apart.....'

For a moment he forgot himself and warmed to his theme as though imparting knowledge to medical students.

'.....I once saw a case where extensive backspatter consisting of brain tissue, bone fragments and blood had been expelled from a huge entrance wound and had travelled up to a distance of 4.6 metres!'

He almost sounded proud. If the consultant's analogies were designed to calm Senor Reyes, they were not working, and indeed unnecessary. Senor Reyes had lived through a violent time in Colombia's history and had seen much, far too much, death.

'What happens now?' asked Senor Reyes.

'We wait.....' he paused unconsciously for effect. 'His physical state is not too bad as he is very strong and naturally athletic, so it is up to the brain and the body to tell us where we are. Currently, Mr James is in a coma. He will be like that for ...who knows, but it could be a month. If he has given us no diagnostic information by then, it is possible that he will

stay that way and acquire a vegetative state. If that is the case, the hospital will more than likely ask his next of kin for permission to shut off the equipment.'

'Can we move him to the London Clinic?' asked Senor Reyes, who wanted the best treatment for James that money could buy.

'Not really. Not yet. We can do no more for Mr James than is being done now. The only thing that can help Mr James now is Mr James.'

'Thank you, Mr Payne,' said Senor Reyes and turned away.

Payne realised he had just been dismissed. Payne was irked and affronted by the dismissal. As a Senior Consultant, he was not used to being dismissed. Fawned over...yes. Dismissed....no! He looked at the small, peasant-looking man who had turned his back to him and his petulance overcame his rationality. 'Excuse me....' he said a touch aggressively.

Senor Reyes turned round. 'Yes, Mr Payne?'

'You do realise that I am one of the most senior Consultants in Britain?' he said sarcastically.

'I thought that was why we were paying you so much money.'

'I am not used to being.....dismissed.....like a hired help.'

'Mr Payne,' said Senor Reyes softly, 'the difference between you and the man who tends my garden is merely the rate of pay.....'

Senor Reyes turned back towards James. Payne stood there for a moment, inwardly raged, then stormed out.

When Payne had left the room, Senor Reyes moved to James, took his hand and said softly in Spanish, *'Fight, my friend. Fight with all your strength and tell your friend Cerberus that you are not ready to enter Hades yet.....'*

Chapter 34

Starting again

After 'giving' Secure Security company twenty thousand of his company's money, which meant using all the overdraft facility, Nephew had gone home in a dreadful state to explain to his wife and work out how to survive. He looked a mess, and when he got in, he asked for a cup of tea, which his wife made him, and he sat at the kitchen table and explained it all to her. The scam, the beating, the overdraft.....everything. She was a wonderfully compassionate and caring woman who stood by him, and he thanked God he had her.

'You lying bastard,' she screamed, 'you expect me to believe that? You've conned and lied all your life, and unfortunately, I've gone along with it, but now you're conning me? Me! How dare you!'

His mouth dropped open. 'It's true,' he spluttered, 'it's all true.' 'Crap,' she spit at him, 'you wouldn't know the truth if it hit you in the mouth. Where is it? Where is the money? Coke, horses, dogs, prossies? Or is all this a scam for my benefit and you're going to sod off somewhere with another floozy you're shagging?'

'It's not like that,' said Nephew, and a tiredness swept over him.

'I bet it is,' said his wife, turned abruptly around and marched upstairs. A few minutes later she came down, suitcase in hand, and went to the front door.

'You will never hear from me again, but you will hear from my solicitor!' and with a loud bang of the slamming door, she was gone.

He had had enough; he went to the wine cabinet, opened a bottle of wine and over the next few minutes drunk the lot. He opened another bottle, downed that, then dropped on the couch and went to sleep. The next morning, with a pounding hangover, he made himself an English breakfast with several mugs of strong, sweet coffee and a few drams of whisky as a taster and to give hair to the dog.

Used to making things work for him, he racked his brains to work out how to get out of the mess. He could more than likely get a bigger temporary overdraft, and it may be that the suppliers would give him time to pay. And there were always scams to be done, suckers to take. It would only take one or two big ones. One or two gullible dummies and he would be away again.

Refreshed and thinking straight again, or in his case crooked, he got in his car and went to work. When he arrived, the office door was slightly ajar, and he pushed it gingerly.

Inside there was.....nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing!

No desks, no chairs, no filing cabinets, no computers, no copier, no printers, no phones, no coffee machine, no pictures, no carpets. No fucking carpets.....? Who the fuck would want the carpets?

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing!

He sank to his knees in despair and just stayed there. Then he lay on his back and just stared at the ceiling..... He stayed there half an hour, just staring at the ceiling, then dragged himself wearily back to his car and set off for home. That was it; it was all over, there was nothing left.... all that could go wrong, had gone wrong.....

His mobile rang, and he fished it out of his pocket.

‘Hello?.....Oh hi, John..... no, sorry, mate, can’t do golf, I’ve got one or two problems at the moment.....another time.....well, if we talk in about.....’

The loud siren interrupted his telephone call, and he saw the police car move in front of him and beckon him to stop. Nephew couldn’t believe it. How could anything get worse? After taking his details and outlining the penalties for using a mobile phone in a car, the copper said, ‘Is that alcohol on your breath, sir? Do you mind if we take a breath test.....’

Chapter 35

The Embassy

Senor Reyes left his wife at the hospital with Benshima while Secure Security took him to The Colombian Embassy. They drove through Knightsbridge to Hans Crescent and through the gates. An aide met their car, and Senor Reyes was taken immediately to the Ambassador's large office. The Ambassador rose as they entered and smiled warmly. 'Jose,' he said, moving to him, arms outstretched, 'my old friend. I am truly sorry we meet under these circumstances.'

They embraced as brothers.

'Come,' said the Ambassador, pointing to a nest of easy chairs surrounding a lacquered table where hot Colombian coffee was waiting. They moved over and sat down.

'It would seem,' said the Ambassador, 'that the world has a need for violence, not just Colombia.'

Senor Reyes let out a long sigh. 'Sadly, that is true, so true.'

'How is Benshima?' enquired the Ambassador gently.

Senor Reyes shook his head, and his face creased with an inner anguish. 'Very poorly. Very poorly indeed. The *bastardo* that shot her did a good job, but she is alive and with the Holy Mother's help she will live and be strong again.'

'I am pleased, Jose. I have not seen Benshima for many years, but I remember her as a child, and she was special even then.'

Senor Reyes smiled. *Special*. What a wonderful way to sum up a human being. *Special.....*

The Ambassador gave Jose a cigar and pulled his chair closer to his old friend. 'In what way can we help you.....?'

Chapter 36

The Cabal

The men leaned on the wall and looked over the ocean from what was soon to be the roof terrace on their three-hundred-room hotel. The structure was finished, the electrics done, and the furnishers were scurrying around like worker ants.

They were all pleased. They had come a long way....from petty theft, prostitution with a few girls, to extortion, large groups of girls, selling women and children across continents and now this. A hotel that would be worth millions that had cost them relatively very little.

The men were ecstatic as their long-term plans unfolded before them, and soon they would have an entirely legitimate source of funds plus an appreciating long-term capital asset.

In a short time, they would be up and ready for the start of the tourist season. Representatives of several European travel agents and visited, and they had struck a deal with three of them for a third of the rooms each, which would be paid for up-front subject to an inspection before the official opening. As soon as they had the deposits on the rooms, they would start building again on another beach front plot of land they had persuaded someone to sell. *Or at least the screams and pleading of his wife had persuaded him to sell.....*

On top of that, they would also have legitimate businesses through which to launder their illegal money and ways of offering 'favours' to the local, or indeed any, bureaucracy.

Amazingly, they had the sense to hire a top hotel manager to arrange for everything to be ready when the hotel was completed. He was arranging the supplies of food, linen, etc. and already training local staff to wait on tables and clean rooms.

The manager had been a touch dubious about joining this lot as they were hardly sophisticated, but he found in them an innate sense of how to make money and had shown very early on that they were more than capable of sorting out business issues. Indeed, in a peculiar way, it was easier to talk to these villains than some of the arseholes that ran the large hotel chains. They could hardly make a decision without eight committees first, whereas these boys worked out what they wanted, and if you could give it to them, they left you to it.

Amazingly they didn't interfere, and he found the pace of construction and fitting was miles quicker than usual, although he wasn't quite sure why.

Another benefit was that they paid well. They gave him a salary commensurate with the industry norm and another twenty-five percent in cash. Another added bonus for a

married man away from home was the plentiful supply of women. Any shape, any colour, any age. This was a different world..... but one he could quite happily belong in.

And their expedition into England was moving towards the end game. The owner of the clubs was dead and his woman pretty close, which was a shame as both would have been better. One of them said 'If you're going to send a message, don't stop writing before you've finished the sentence.'

They had laughed at that.

'Sentence'. Sentence.....death sentence. Writing someone a death sentence. Very good....

However, as businessmen, they would ask for a discount from their intermediary as they had requested that both die if they were together.

They would wait a few days until after the funeral, then they had arranged for a compatriot to visit and explain the situation. It would be evident that resistance was futile as the extermination of the owner had shown, and so they would soon be the new owners of several clubs at no cost, although the arrangements for the kill had been expensive.

Never mind; speculate to accumulate!

.....They drank wine, toasting themselves and their success, then went down in the lift to the basement and the large black 4 x 4s to go to a farmhouse to fuck and hurt

several little girls they had bought for a pittance from a village in Africa.

Chapter 37

The Consultant

Michael Payne sat in the garden of his large mews home, sipping martinis with his wife.

‘I couldn’t believe it,’ he said, repeating himself, ‘this bloody dago gnome has the effrontery to equate me with a gardener. A fucking gardener!’

‘Calm down, darling.....I am sure he was upset. His daughter is very ill, and no doubt he didn’t realise what he said.’

‘A fucking gardener.....’

‘Your language, darling.....’

His mobile phone rang, and he took it off the table. ‘Payne.’

In his grand, yet appropriately austere office Sir Anthony Gibbs-White waited a moment until he no longer saw the back of the ashen-faced lawyer who was closing the door behind him.

‘Michael,’ he said into the phone, ‘Anthony Gibbs-White here.....good, yes, ...how are you?..... Michael, there appears to have been a misunderstanding between you and Senor Reyes. I’m sure it’s nothing, so perhaps you could explain.’

Gibbs-White had been a superb barrister, and he felt the sincere ‘*you can tell me...*’ coming back.

Payne was still fuming at the slight. 'It was disgraceful. He treated me as though I was some kind of underling! He compared me to a fucking gardener! A fucking gardener!'

'In what way did he do that, Michael?'

Payne thought for a second. 'He said the only difference between his gardener and myself was the rate of pay. The rate of fucking pay! I am a senior fucking consultant for Christ's sake!'

He had worked himself up into a minor frenzy again. Gibbs-White sighed inwardly and wondered how some of these so-called Consultants ever made a penny with their total lack of social skills. Oh dear...

'And what did he do to start this off, Michael?'

'He said, "*Thank you, Mr Payne.*"'

"*Thank you, Mr Payne.....*"?'

'Yes....'

'That's it?'

There was a pause.

'.....Yes'

'So you took umbrage at a man who thanked you for your help?'

Another pause. 'Yes, but that's not what he meant....'

'What did he mean?'

'He meant....er.....fuck off!'

'Or maybe he meant *thank you*?', suggested Gibbs-White.

'I'm sure he didn't.'

‘Although that’s what he said..... Perhaps I can précis this, Michael. We send you one of our most important and long-standing clients. He is distraught as his daughter and her partner have been shot, and both are critical. He thanks you for your help, and you insult him.....’

‘Well, it’s not....’

‘Have I summed that up reasonably?’

‘Well, sort of, but.....’

But me no buts, thought Gibbs-White, *but me no buts*. He had had enough. ‘Michael, I believe you do a lot of work for us as an expert witness and obviously for any of our partners that need your medical expertise.’

‘Yes, indeed, much appreciated.’

‘I think it’s about.... what....four, five hundred thousand a year?’

‘Perhaps a touch more...’

‘Well, that stops today, Michael. We no longer have need of your services....’

Payne was lost, totally lost. His mind screamed in every direction to get information to help him understand. You disagree with some little fucker, and you lose half a million a year? He must have misheard.....he must have.

‘Anthony, I don’t understand. What has my little spat with some little man got to do with anything?’

Gibbs-White gave up. What a pompous prick!

‘I think that it may help you considerably if you work that out for yourself. Anyhow, must go, Michael. I will send the letter cancelling our contract by return. Goodbye.’

Payne sat there, stunned. He didn’t move. It was as though a bomb had landed on his house and everything was gone.

He saw the profit and loss quite clearly in his head.

Half a million plus — gone.

Work from Freshfields — gone.

Referrals — gone.

Contacts — gone.

Prestige — gone.

Reputation — gone.

His elegant wife looked up from her Homes and Gardens magazine. ‘There’s a lovely cruise in here, darling, around the Caribbean. Should I book.....?’

Chapter 38

Toby explains

Senor Reyes met Toby and Brian in the Savoy Grill for lunch to discuss the situation. They knew very little about this soft-spoken little man as H had told them very little, but anyone who arrived in his own Gulfstream and had two minders sitting at the next table had to be taken seriously.

They told him about the death of Big Tony, the other attempt on the doorman. Then the 'coincidence' of H's shooting, and so they assumed that it was either a revenge killing for something H had done, but they had no idea what, or it was the start of a takeover, but they had no idea why or by whom. Certainly, they were in a 'funny' business, but they had spoken to contacts and could not work out who would have done it. It was certainly nobody local.

While H could be quite ruthless, he was not seen as a target, and the business was not big enough for most people.

They were just clubs and a security business.

They were not involved in crime, didn't do counterfeiting, or drugs, or girls, so what was the point? You could hardly muscle in and take over a multi-million-pound *racket* when one didn't exist.

They just couldn't see it.....who the hell would want a few clubs and would want them badly enough to kill for it?

Chapter 39

Halstomicnili

Behind his eyelids, in a dark world that had no exit and no entry, H wondered about.....nothing in particular.

There was frenzied activity but no clear outcome...

Tiny specks of light flashed continually across his eyes, but he took no notice.

They were just the end product of the repair team that was rushing hither and thither trying to make sense of what had happened.....

Chapter 40

Poor H

Hathaway heard of the death of H and was sorry. In the business they were in, you never knew who you had upset, perhaps even someone you had never met, or even knew about. Nowadays it was a funny world.

Someone with power or money rings someone who rings someone, and a few days later you are dead.

It was that simple.

There was no way to hide from a threat you didn't know existed. How do you escape the invisible wind? How do you push it away? It couldn't be done. Once the button has been pushed all that was left was the trigger to be pulled.

Nowadays, he knew, the bullet was almost passé as technology had opened up unforeseen doors for the modern killer. Whether it be the state that dropped an anonymous guided missile from fifty thousand feet or the use of tiny amounts of nuclear waste added to products to kill over time. Hathaway knew of one government that had changed a phone in someone's house, and every time they used it, the x-ray emissions fried a little more of their brain until they became senile at thirty-five. There was also the World Wide

Web whose tentacles stretched everywhere, far beyond what the laymen thought and in many instances far beyond what the so-called experts thought.

Hathaway was philosophical about the deliverance of death as he saw it differently than the layman whose only knowledge of death and what delivered death was what they saw on the TV news.

What was a weapon?

The layman says a gun, or tank, a knife..... The deliverer of death says.....anything! All you had to do was see it as a weapon. It was merely a philosophical and intellectual about-turn. Or, put another way, if a pencil is used to stab you in the heart, is it still a pencil? To the State Department empowered to kill enemies, or to the hired killer, it therefore followed that everything could be used to further one's aims. You merely had to see its potential as a weapon rather than what it was.....

Hathaway's mind had wandered. All these thoughts of killing and destruction were not good for a man. He should think of better things.

Soon the wedding. He was looking forward to that. The family gathered, gaiety, happiness, a new start in life; with luck, he and the wife may even be civil to each other, and if she got completely pissed he might even get a fuck...off his own fucking wife! The wife that cost him a load of money every month in Gucci, Dior, Dolce e Gabbana etcetera. Hathaway

felt his ire rising by the second and willed himself to calm down. It didn't matter really. He either put up with it – the spending, the lack of sex, which wasn't really a lack, it was non-existent, as she lived in Spain and he anywhere else – or he divorced her or had her killed.

It wasn't worth the effort.

Divorce would be a bit too.....financially exposing, what with all the lawyers snooping around; and killing could be a bit obvious. Just a touch of motive there, your Honour. What was ten thou a month for a few goodies if it kept the status quo? And anyway, his luck may change, and she may just get run over by a fucking London bus! In Spain!

It was a shame about H. They had made a couple of quid together over the years, and he would miss him.

What did H say Benny had called him?

An intelligent thug....that was it. An intelligent thug.

And I suppose that was what he was.

Was.....

Hathaway let out a deep breath.

Was.

How descriptive. How final....

Please God, thought Hathaway, that the description, the finality, eluded him until a ripe old age. Say about ninety, and he had a massive heart attack just as he was coming in some sweet young thing's mouth.

He smiled to himself at the thought.

Chapter 41

Back to Colombia

Senor Reyes made arrangements for Benshima to be transferred to the London Clinic and paid for two rooms, one for his wife to use to be by Benny's side. He then arranged with Toby that one of H's men should be outside H's room at all times. There was no shortage of volunteers. H was their boss, and they disliked intensely what had happened. What they wanted more than anything was to get back at someone for it. Someone. Anyone.

Senor Reyes was torn. In England, he lacked the organisation and mechanisms by which he functioned efficiently, and although his English was good, it was tiring to talk in a foreign language continually. On the other hand, his daughter was here, and she needed him. He thought for a moment and knew that was not so. It was what a father said in such circumstances, but she did not need him now. She needed to know she could count on him, but that was another matter. What to do?

'I have to go back,' he said to his wife.

She nodded her understanding. He rang the pilot of the Gulfstream, and the waiting car of Secure Security took him to the airport.

After a few minutes in the air, he rang several people so that they could meet him on his arrival.....

.....*They gathered around a large boardroom table* made of highly polished Colombian Sajo hardwood. It seated twenty, but there were only Senor Reyes and three others. They talked generally for a while about the situation so that they understood it. In Colombia they could protect their own, but what could they do if Benshima lived in England? And with a crook?

They could not protect her in England from accidents or the force of nature or indeed from snipers, but they could, and would, make their displeasure known.

‘Do we know who is behind it?’ one asked.

Senor Reyes half nodded, indicating a degree of uncertainty.

‘Possibly, but until something else develops, we cannot be sure. I think Senor James’ operation will receive a caller in a few days, and that will tell us much...’

Chapter 42

The Cabal

On the roof terrace, a council of war had been called. Contrary to what they had been led to believe, the owner of the nightclubs was not dead although their source assured them that he would die or be crippled for the rest of his life. Likewise, his woman would live and should make a full recovery.

What to do now?

How did that affect the message?

Did it make them bungling hit men or merely show they were quite happy to leave someone as a vegetable to get what they wanted?

Did it change the situation?

It was agreed that the outcome was not as it should have been, and two good kills would have been preferable. That showed power and authority. You could not argue with death. But it was what it was, and they now had to press home their advantage. They decided to continue as planned, and an envoy living in Britain would go and explain the situation to the owner's manager. If he declined to cooperate, then he would also be killed. Their only other problem, as they saw it, and one that they had not paid enough attention to in their plans, was the possibility that a local firm would go in and do

the same thing. Hopefully the killing, or attempted killing, of the owner would tell everyone that this was serious and to keep out.

While the leader of the group remained totally committed to the plan, there were one or two, those that looked beyond the *now*, that saw the possibility of massive problems ahead. They had gone into this assuming the same strategy that worked in their locale would work in England – several thousand miles away.

They had ignored the local competition. They had not really established how powerful the club owner was. What if they did get the clubs? What then? They would have a new base, but they could get wiped out in minutes if someone powerful wanted to get heavy.

They kept these things to themselves. You didn't question Ramón. Ramón didn't like being questioned. The last person that questioned Ramon's judgment didn't finish the sentence before he got a bullet in the head.

With luck, everything would be alright.

Hopefully.

They didn't have the resources to fight a war in England.

Chapter 43

The go-between

The secretary took the call and, after listening for a moment, said, 'Just one second, please, I will transfer you.'

The look in her eyes told Toby everything. It was the moment Toby had been anticipating and dreading. Although putting on a brave face for the staff, he was scared. Running clubs was ok, with the odd bit of commotion, but this.....this was fucking deadly.

'How can I help you?' asked Toby.

'Are you the boss?'

'No, I'm not the boss. Mr James is unfortunately ill at the moment, but perhaps I can help you in his absence?'

'I represent a group of people who are interested in the activities of Mr James. I would like to meet you to discuss what we propose.'

'I think not,' said Toby, 'we are quite happy working for Mr James.'

'I commend your loyalty,' said the voice, 'but things change. Mr James' circumstances have changed, and I am sure Mr James would wish you and your employees to prosper with the club in his absence.'

The threat was veiled but obvious. Cooperate or die.

‘Could you give me a moment, please? I have to confer with someone. This is not an easy decision.’

He put the phone on hold and lit a cigarette. After enough time, he said, ‘OK, we can talk. But we make no promises, and you have to promise there will be no.....activity....while we are talking.’

The voice smiled to himself. They had told him that the English were spineless in these circumstances, and they were right. They were very brave when dealing from strength but cowards otherwise.

‘Where do we meet?’ asked Toby.

‘I will come to you,’ said the voice.

He had no anxiety about going to them. The boss was dead to all intents and purposes, and they had told him that these people would not act without him. He was the leader. They were leaderless! They arranged to meet the following evening.....

It was dark the next evening when he arrived, and he was shown into a small office where Toby sat. He stood up and shook the man’s hand.

‘Can I get you a coffee?’ asked Toby. ‘Milk, sugar?’

He nodded, and Toby left the small, airless, enclosed room to get it...

Chapter 44

Halstomicnili

H's electroencephalogram displaying his electrical brain activity was going crazy, but, thank God, the transcranial Doppler equipment which showed real-time measurement in blood flow activity was fine.

Certainly, his blood flow velocity was up slightly, but his brain activity was causing that – not a cerebral embolism that had blocked the main artery!

The Ward Sister nodded to the nurse, and they turned and quietly left.

Oh, fucking great, thought H. Here I am lying here and just because I can't move you ignore me!

What do I have to do to get some attention here?

Shout?

Scream?

He calmed down a bit...

OK.

I can't get them to help me like this, so I need a cunning plan.....

Unfortunately for H, he thought none of this.

Unfortunately, for his waiting wife, it would have been much, much better if he had.....

Chapter 45

The in between

His head was heavy and his eyes a little sore.

‘Your coffee, senor.’

He was confused. The room that he thought was small was much larger. It was dimly lit, and the table he was sitting at was also much larger. He sat on one side, and three men sat on the other.

‘Your coffee, senor,’ said one of the men in an accent that he took to be South American, ‘please drink your coffee. You will feel better.’

His hand went slowly towards it, but when he picked it up, his hand was shaking. ‘Where am I?’

‘Where do you think you are?’

Confused, he shook his head.

‘What is your name?’

He said nothing.

‘Come, come,’ said the man, ‘please be polite. We only asked for your name.....?’

After a little hesitation, he said, ‘Ramón.’

‘Ramon, to answer your question, and to be honest with you, you are in a place where, if we wished, you would never be found.’ He nodded in the direction of a door. ‘Outside that

door there are two armed guards. At the end of the corridor, there are two others. There is no escape.....'

'Why am I here?' he asked, his voice was quavering.

'Why do you think you are here?'

Ramon said nothing.

'Come, Ramon, talk to us. We will get nowhere if we don't talk. If you don't talk to us, we could be insulted. We have taken the trouble to bring you here. We have given you coffee. You are sitting on a comfortable seat. Why do you insult us, Ramon?'

'I don't wish to insult you. I am not insulting you.....I am not.'

'Perhaps I misunderstood your silence as an insult, Ramon. Perhaps I was a little too hasty to judge. That would be very bad, don't you think, Ramon, being too hasty?'

Ramon was lost.....

'Because, Ramon, *I am* your Judge. It has been entrusted to me to decide what happens to you. I am your Judge, your Jury and possibly.....your Executioner. And so hastiness is not what is required, eh Ramon?'

A silence encompassed the room for a minute or so while his interrogator thought about something.

'Ramon, I'll tell you what. You are obviously an intelligent man who is involved in something that is beyond your understanding, so I'll make you an offer. We would like to know some things that you can tell us. If you talk to us in a civilised way, as we are now, you have my word that we will take you home and drop you off. Completely unharmed.....

Now, I am sure you are thinking, *how can I trust this man?* And of course, there is no way I can convince you. However, what I *can* convince you of is this.... if you do not tell us what we want to know.....you will die! Now I may not be able to convince you of the former, but I can of the latter. You will die... And, because you have not reciprocated our hospitality, you will die in much pain.'

'I have a wife,' he said, 'and two children.'

'In what way does that make a difference, Ramon? Are you saying that when you die, you want us to kill them too.....? Is that what you are asking?'

'No....no.....' he stammered 'I am a father, a husband.....why kill me?'

The man smiled, and paused for several moments. 'Because, Ramon.....it's what we do. It's our job. And I have the power to do so.....'

Ramon started to shake. No one said anything. A silence enveloped them...

Ramon thought the room had suddenly gone much darker. Tears started to roll down his cheeks. 'Please..... please....don't hurt me. I am just a messenger....just a messenger.'

'Who are you delivering the message for, Ramon? And it would be helpful if you don't lie. We will check everything you tell us, so if you lie....' and he opened his arms and shrugged.

'I can't tell you.....'

There was silence for a few moments. 'Ramon...' the man said quietly, 'Ramon...why do you do this? Why do you put your life at risk for something that you have little to do with? Why, Ramon, would you do this?'

Ramon could have told them it was because he was more scared of his father beating the crap out of him than he was of them, but he said nothing.

'Are you afraid of them, Ramon?' asked the man, who was an expert in interrogation and understood the human mind only too well. 'You are more afraid of your own people than you are of us? Ramon.....what kind of people are these that scare you so? And these are your *friends*, Ramon?'

The man watched Ramón's eyes, and he did not see what he expected to see.... He had not heard what he expected to hear.... He leaned back and closed his eyes for a few moments. No reaction to *friends*....? No reaction.....? You are obviously new to this game, so you are not a *hired hand*.....? You are not doing this for *money*, but they are not your *friends*?

He replayed the conversation.....the responses. Ah.....perhaps? He opened his eyes and moved forward in his chair to be closer to Ramon. 'Believe me, Ramon, your *father* is not as dangerous as us....'

He watched Ramón's eyes, which dilated instantly. Knowing he had guessed correctly, he said 'You think we didn't know, Ramon?'

Misunderstanding, Ramon gasped 'How did you know my father's name was Ramón?'

The man did not pause. He was used to people surprising him with what they thought he knew. 'Ramon, Ramon,' he said as though to a child 'we know a lot about what is going on, but we need to fill in certain gaps.... and we would like you to help us. Will you do that, Ramon? Help us.....?'

Ramon was quiet for a little while. 'I can't.....'

The man sighed. 'Is your opinion of our power so low? Even though we hold you in this.....*torture chamber*.....' he paused for effect '..... Where no one can find you?'

The softly accented words screamed into Ramón's brain and magnified. *Torture chamber*! They leapt out at him and screamed to him....pain, suffering, death. His shaking became more pronounced.

'How can I persuade you to help me, Ramon.....Perhaps a small demonstration?'

He looked at the men on his left, who went round to Ramon.

'No...' pleaded Ramon, 'no.....please don't hurt me.'

One pinned him from the rear and held his arms tight by his side. The other just stood there.

'Ramon, I want to give you a very small demonstration and then perhaps we can talk sensibly.'

'I see you have a nice watch? What make is it?'

'Eh....?' mumbled Ramon.

'What make.....is.....your.....watch?'

Perplexed, he said, 'Rolex.'

The man looked enquiringly at him. 'Rolex?' He stared at the watch. 'It doesn't look like a Rolex. I thought they were only gold?'

'It's stainless steel.'

The man looked slightly disgusted that he was in the presence of a stainless steel Rolex. 'Well, Ramon, what we're going to do to demonstrate that cooperation is the best policy is break your *stainless steel* Rolex.'

Ramon relaxed a little. What the fuck did he care about a fucking watch? The man nodded to his standing compatriot, who moved to a small cabinet by the wall, took something out and came back. They then forced Ramon's wrist onto the table. Ramon struggled, but they were far too powerful.

'You don't have to hurt me; I can take the watch off.'

'Thank you, but it's ok.'

He nodded to his associate, who brought the hammer down as hard as he could on Ramón's watch. The incredible pain ripped through Ramon as the broken glass and metal were being driven ever deeper into his wrist. His breath left him; he took in an enormous lungful of air as he screamed in absolute mind-blowing agony.....then passed out. The man rang for a medic, who came to patch him up, and they let him get on with it while they went for a coffee. 'Beep me if he wakes.'

When they returned, his arm was bandaged, but he was still unconscious, so they put smelling salts under his nose. His head jerked from side to side as the strong salts assailed his senses, and he came round. The pain from his wrist was less as the painkillers were strong, but it was still bad; very bad. He started to cry and moan.

‘No more, please....no more.’

‘Now Ramon,’ said the man, ‘you will see that we are sensible here. All we did was break your watch. We are giving you an opportunity to help us with the minimum of pain and, as I said before, you have my word you will be dropped off at home. So.....?’

‘Could I have a drink, please? And a cigarette?’ he asked through his sobs, and they knew he was ready to talk.....

And Ramon, in the dark, quiet, deathly room deep below the Colombian Embassy where death had been a visitor before, did talk. And talked and talked. Ramon, it would appear, was not just an emissary; he was the son of the leader of the Cabal, who had emigrated to England several years earlier to get a good education and to promote the business when the time was right. Their time was now right. However, the son was not of the father. The son was hardly a decent human being and knocked the shit out of his wife, but he was not his father. His father would have spit on their faces and gone to his grave in agony before saying anything. The son had verbal diarrhoea and couldn’t even stop himself urinating on their carpet.

When it was over and the emissary's story had been thoroughly checked, the man, true to his word, arranged for him to be dropped off at home. They had promised Ramon that much, and it would happen.

Ramon had known much more than they had expected.

Much, much more.

Ramon senior, it would seem, could not resist telling his son what a powerful man daddy was.....

Chapter 46

The priest

The hooded priest looked up at the hospital from the back seat of the taxi, then felt in his robes for his purse. The amount the driver demanded seemed a lot, but it had been a long time since he had used a taxi for something like this, and in London, so he just handed it over without demur.

He climbed the steps, went in and walked slowly to the reception desk. His heart was pounding, and he willed himself to keep control. Keeping his voice soft and calm, he said, 'Where do I find the room of Mister James? James James?'

The busy receptionist, dumped by her boyfriend the night before who hated the world and all men in it, and that included priests, pointed to the lift and said curtly, 'Six!'

The priest walked to the elevator, went inside and pressed the button for 6. The Nigel Kennedy version of the Four Seasons wafted through the speakers as it made its slow way upwards. The door slid open, and he disembarked. The object beneath his garment felt heavy, and he moved it around a touch so that it was balanced. Seeing the desk with the nurse behind it, he went over. 'Good morning. I am here to see Mr James.'

The nurse looked at him. 'Do you have an appointment?'

The priest smiled reassuringly. 'I have been asked to attend James by Senor Reyes. Senor and Senora Reyes and their daughter, while understanding Mr James is not overly religious, wish that every effort, including pastoral, be made to assure the well-being of Mr James.'

The nurse nodded. She could see them wanting to do that. She pointed to a door outside which a man sat reading. 'Over there....'

His heart pounded again. So near..... He walked over, and the man stood up and looked at him enquiringly, then looked across at the desk. The nurse nodded her assent, so he opened the door for the priest.

'Thank you, my son.'

He sat down again to continue reading the latest edition of Gun Mart.

The priest entered H's room and stood still for a moment....just looking. Beforehand he wasn't sure how he would have felt, but now he was here, he was gratified that his body's memory had not reacted. All the discipline, the training, the control of the mind and body, were as they should be.

Thank The Lord...

He looked at all the medical paraphernalia attached to H; the monitors going beep beep, the little electronic graphs going up and down, and knew H was struggling to live. He allowed

his memory to take him back and was again relieved that he felt nothing untoward. Perhaps just a slight frisson....?

In a different world, in a different time, in a different place, this would have a different ending..... He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, then repeated the process several times. Calmer, he pulled a chair closer to the bed and sat down. He looked over his shoulder to make sure, but there was no-one else in the room.

How could there be?

Except perhaps one other?

The Priest listened intently for any approaching footsteps. The last thing he wanted was to be disturbed.

His hand went into the loose-fitting garments and found the object he had brought with him. It had taken a lot of persuading for his Superiors to allow him to use it, but he was convinced it was absolutely right for this occasion. In reality, it would take only a moment, but he knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that the effects would be everlasting. He also knew that James James would meet the one true God and when he looked upon his Maker, he would fall and repent his sins for he had many. And the one true God would decide what would become of James James.....

He looked around again to make sure, then, moving to within a few inches of H's defenceless body, he removed the object that would make everything right in the eyes of the One True God.....

It took several minutes – longer, for some reason, than he had envisaged – but it was done. He put it back within his black robes and made it secure. Taking an envelope from his pocket, he placed it on the bedside table. He took several deep breaths then went to the door and opened it. The Secure Security man got up and took a quick peek inside, but H was as he was before, and nothing had changed.

‘Thank you.....’ he struggled for the word, and in the end said, ‘dad.’

‘I think you were trying to remember the word “father”,’ said the priest kindly.

‘Sorry, Father.’

‘It’s alright, my son, we all make mistakes. As long as we don’t make any we have to pay for....?’

He nodded and smiled as he walked past reception, then the lift whisked him down to the world outside, and he was gone.

Moments later the Secure Security limo arrived outside the main doors, and Senor Reyes alighted and went to reception.

‘Good morning,’ he said politely, ‘I am just going to see my daughter and Mr James.’

‘Of course, Mr Reyes, go on up.’

He turned and was moving away when she said, ‘I think you’ve just missed the priest....’

Senor Reyes looked perplexed. ‘Priest....?’

‘The one you asked to help Mr James.’

Senor Reyes ran for the lift and shouted as he went, 'Get a doctor. Immediately! And ring the police!'

When he arrived at James' room, he found the Secure Security man sitting outside.

'A priest?' he demanded. 'Has a priest been in here?'

'Yeah,' said the man apprehensively, 'But I was told it was ok to let him in.' He started to fluster. 'I checked.....they said it was ok.....they did.'

As Senor Reyes entered the room, a doctor arrived.....

'What's wrong?'

'We've had an intruder in the room. He may have tried to kill James.....'

The doctor went to James and watched. Face....relaxed. Posture....relaxed.

Breathing relaxed. He felt his pulse.....normal. He looked over to the monitoring equipment and checked every detail.....everything normal.

'There's nothing untoward that's obvious,' said the doctor. 'A poison would have had quick and dramatic effects by now, as would anyone tampering with the oxygen.'

He put a stethoscope to James' heart. 'It's fine.' He thought for a moment. 'We'll do some blood tests to make sure that he has been given nothing that is slow-acting..... just in case. And we'll also hook him up to the emergency alarm system straight to the desk should there be any relapse.'

Both Senor Reyes and the Doctor had missed the envelope on the bedside table, which would have told them exactly what fate was going to befall James...

Chapter 47

The Cabal

The leader of the cabal was having doubts. In their own country, it was of no consequence if you were known; better if you were. If people had heard of you, feared you, avoided you, things happened. Fear was an excellent motivator. That's why he had sent Ramon. It was a message. It said we are omnipotent! Don't stand up to us; you can't win!

The day after the meeting, he had heard nothing. Fucking nothing!! He raged at his son and his tardiness. He rang Ramón's home in England and got his wife. Before she had a chance to say anything, he screamed 'Where the fuck is Ramon?'

She was terrified. This man...this animal.....had raped her when she had once gone to his house to deliver something for Ramon. To shut her up he threatened to kill her child. Her child! She struggled to speak. 'I have not seen him since yesterday. He did not come back last night.....' she choked. Trying to help and offer mitigation, she ventured, 'Perhaps he got drunk...'

For her help she got a torrent of vile abuse screamed at her and the promise of another good fucking if he ever met her again. In his world, women fucked and cooked but did not make suggestions! He slammed the phone down!

They decided to wait one more day and meet up at the hotel again to determine their next plan of action. They were not concerned, as no one in their right mind would harm their emissary, his son, as they would understand the consequences if they did. They had already 'killed' their boss, so they knew any retaliation would be their last. No, there had to be a clearer explanation, and maybe the whore had been right: he had got drunk. That was more than likely it. The clubs had agreed to everything, and the prick had gone out and had a drink to celebrate his fucking fantastic negotiations skills and hadn't stopped.

Fucking idiot!

He thought a moment about his son's whore and put his hand in his trouser pocket.....

Chapter 48

Benshima

Senora Reyes was sitting at Benshima's bedside stroking her hand when Benny opened her eyes. Because of the drugs and the days of sedation, she struggled to keep them open, but after a little while the haze cleared. 'Mama.'

Mama leaned over the bed and held her daughter as tightly as the wounds would permit.

'How are you, my love?' she asked, and died inside when Benshima said, 'I'm okay, mama how is James.....?' She had been dreading this. She had rehearsed her answer, but now could not remember it.

'He's okay, my love. Poorly but okay.'

She moved the conversation quickly. 'How do you feel, my love?'

Benshima looked into her mother's eyes. 'Tell me the truth. How is James.....?' Tears flooded into her eyes. 'Is he dead?' It was too much for Senora Reyes, who burst into tears. She was a strong woman, but this was a living nightmare. She was a mother. Benshima's mother. Her daughter had been shot! Shot twice! What *bastardo* would do that? Why did she have to be gunned down? Why should a mother have to accept that her daughter should be gunned down in cold blood? She held both of Benshima's hands in hers.

‘He is not dead, my little hija, but he is very poorly. The bullet that hit him in the head put him into a coma. There is brain activity, but what it means we do not yet know.’

Benshima covered her eyes and cried. ‘James,’ she wailed, ‘James.....’

She cried continually for several minutes, then suddenly she gained strength. Strength through purpose.

‘Can I see him now?’

‘As soon as the doctor says you can be moved – you have a lot of stitches in you – but then arrangements have been made.’

‘I want to go now,’ she insisted.

‘Have one more night’s sleep, my love. Heal just a little more, and it will be done.’

‘Now.....’ she said insistently. ‘It’s very important.....’

‘I know,’ Senora Reyes said softly. ‘I know.....’

Benshima looked questioningly at her mother. That tone of her voice? She knew that tone. ‘You know?’

Senora Reyes nodded slowly.

Benshima looked alarmed. ‘How do you know?’

Her mother could not speak, and tears welled in her eyes. She tried desperately to stay in control, but it was overwhelming. The never-ending nightmare.

‘How do you know.....?’

‘The doctor.....’

‘And?’ she said urgently, ‘.....and?....and?.....and?’

She gripped her mother tightly and shouted, ‘And?!’

Her mother shook her head and sobbed. Benshima broke down, and her wailing became loud and pitiful. She banged on the bed with her fist and shouted, 'Bastards!....Bastards!....Bastards!.....Bastards!'

The door flew open, and a nurse appeared. Senora Reyes held up her hand, shook her head, and the nurse stood by the door. In case. Through her anguish, Benshima said to her mother, 'They've killed my baby.....?'

Her mother nodded slowly, and Benshima slipped into a hell of despair where no one could reach her. The nurse went out, and a moment later a doctor appeared, who quickly sedated her and let her slip into a deep sleep.....

Chapter 49

Halstomicnili

H was sure he had them arguing in his head.

A

You are pretty useless

I'm not!

Are

Not!

You don't know what to do!

Do

Don't!

And so it went on.....

Chapter 50

The Cabal

The cabal met again the next day on the top floor. It was early evening, and work on the hotel had stopped for the weekend. They were alone other than their black 4 x 4s waiting patiently for them in the underground car park. Ramon had heard nothing, and he was livid. The others kept their counsel, as he could easily put a knife in their chest. His lack of knowledge fuelled his anger. What the fuck was going on? He rung the whore again, and she had not seen his son, the worthless cunt, and still not a word. Not a fucking word!

‘What do we do?’ demanded Ramon of the others, but got no replies. Who the fuck was going to tell him anything when he was in this state?

‘I’ll tell you what we fucking do, you useless cunts,’ screamed Ramon senior, ‘we kill the fucking lot of them!’

Without thinking, one of them said, ‘In England? We go to England, and we kill them all?’

‘Are you making fucking fun of me?’ screamed Ramon hysterically and pulled a small Uzi semi-automatic from his coat.

‘Of course not, just calm down, calm down, Ramón. We’re on the same side. We’ve got enough problems without fighting amongst ourselves.’

‘Then just be careful. Be very fucking careful.’

‘What are we going to do?’ asked another, ‘because from where I’m looking, we’re fucked. We made our play, and unless I’m sorely mistaken, we’ve been shown the door. We have no information, no power, no anything.’

‘Are you saying,’ screamed Ramon, ‘that we walk away? It that what you’re fucking suggesting? We’ve paid a small fortune to have someone killed; my son is who knows fucking where and could be dead in a fucking ditch, and you want to walk away? What the fuck are you? English?’

The man declined to say what he thought: That the English did not appear to have walked away from this.....

‘We have to attack. We have to take the initiative. We have to ring them and tell them we’ll burn it all down if they don’t give it us. The bastards have to be shown who’s the boss. We are the boss,’ he shouted. ‘We are the boss!’

Ramon slammed his fist into the wall. No one said anything. Let the fucking maniac cool down.

‘Let’s take a moment to calm down,’ said one. ‘Here, let’s have a glass of wine and work out a way forward.’

He uncorked two bottles, then went around the table filling the glasses. Temperatures cooled, and a reasonable amount of analysis started about where they could go next.....

A short distance away and well below their line of sight a driverless remote-operated crane had started up. It had been used for the metal structure and was only waiting for the

arrival of the air conditioning units, which it would hoist to the roof, and then it would go back to the hire company. The gantry of the crane dipped down to earth like a pecking bird, and then after a few moments, it started to rise. The gantry extended to take it up to its full height.....

They were getting nowhere, and Ramon was getting angry again.

‘Fuck!’ he screamed, and his Uzi barked a hail of bullets from its muzzle, and buried themselves in the wall. Where was that fucking son of his? Where the fuck was he? Why hadn’t he rung?

‘Please....Ramon.....sit down.....sit down,’ an associate pleaded. ‘Please...’

Ramon sat down, still shouting, and then he noticed the man sitting opposite staring, wide-eyed, at something behind his shoulder. Two others followed his gaze, their jaws involuntarily dropping as they did so.

Ramon looked round, and for a moment he didn’t understand. Then he did. Paralysed, he watched the crane move higher, and then its arm extended until it was directly above them. And there, sixty feet out of reach, dangling by his legs on the hook from the gantry, was Ramon junior, his son. His only son.

‘Ramon,’ he screamed. Although Ramon junior was gagged, he emitted a dreadful muffled sound, and his terror-contorted face screamed of his nightmare.

‘Hang on,’ yelled his father, his fury making him blind to the fact that Ramon junior had no say in the matter. His father was just about to turn and run downstairs when he saw the hook slowly open, and his son start his journey downwards toward them.

A rope trailed behind him still attached to the crane. He plummeted down head first until, ten feet above them, the rope that was around his son’s neck went taut and flipped him head over heels. For a second he just hung there, suspended, then his body slowly released itself from his head and continued downwards, landing with a soft thud by them on the roof.

Ramon junior’s head just stayed there, cradled in the noose that had been around his neck, and then it slowly tumbled out and continued its halted journey to follow its dismembered body to the ground. His head hit the floor, bounced and rolled towards his father. Junior’s dead eyes looked up at him, and blood trickled out of his neck.

Ramon recoiled in horror, then an all-consuming need for revenge swept through him. He let out a loud scream of agony and ran to the wall and looked over but saw no one. Changing tack, he ran to the lift, which would take him to the basement and the 4 x 4s. The lift was still at the top, but it took too long to open, so Ramon kicked it in a wild frenzy. Like most things in Ramón’s life, the lift appeared to respond to aggression immediately, and it opened, and they piled in.

Again it took a moment or two to respond to the constantly pressed button, so he screamed abuse at it and smashed the lift with his fist and kept smashing it all the way down.

As they got out in the basement, they noticed not only four gleaming black BMW 4 x 4s but another four, dirty, older cars. Who the fuck was using their, *their*, car park? They had left strict instruction that at weekends no one must use their site. For Anything! No one! Their anger towards the cars was almost as vile as their anger towards the unseen killers of Ramon junior. They had an automatic psychopathic reaction to being crossed, and as they ran towards their cars to get their submachine guns, they made mental notes to hurt whoever had dared to use their, *their*, car park.

Collecting their weapons from the holding bays under the seats, they turned to head towards the sunshine that streamed in from the entrance. They had gone less than five yards when they heard the car alarm go off on one of the old cars and its piercing shrill note bounced around the empty basement car park.

Ramon, fuelled by raging anger, adrenaline and a need to inflict pain, led the group and was half way to the entrance when the alarm stopped....

Almost immediately the first bomb detonated, and a blinding flash erupted from it. The force ripped the old car apart, and a door hurtled like a Frisbee through the air and caught one of the running men waist high and sliced him in two. The bombs in the other old cars exploded immediately, and the remaining

gang members were thrown to the floor by the blast. Two of the BMWs were blown over and rolled across the basement floor. For a moment there was an eerie calm.....

Ramon rose up a fraction and looked around him. Although it was hard to see through the dust, something was missing, but he wasn't quite sure what.

When he realised it was too late.....

The supporting pillars that the cars had been parked by were no longer there.....destroyed in the blast. Ramón's mind automatically but involuntarily worked it out.....if there are no supporting pillars then.....

He heard a long creaking groan and watched, helpless and terrified, as the hotel, still intact, dropped twenty feet onto the basement floor. And him...

His scream, the cabal and their dreams were flattened beneath seven thousand two hundred tonnes of reinforced concrete.....

Their 300-room holiday hotel stood there for a moment, exactly the same, just twenty feet shorter, showing off its rooms with sea views, and then it dropped the remaining eighty feet and disintegrated, leaving behind only a growing cloud of dust.....

Two miles away, the new Hotel Manager was having a sandwich when he heard a muffled blast, then a long *whoosh*. He looked out of his hotel window towards the sound which had come from the direction of his new hotel that he could

just about see as a speck in the distance from his room.
Shading his eyes from the sun for a better view, he could see
nothing but a large cloud of dust.

What was that?

Who cares?

It could be anything.

Who knew what they did around here in this backward place?
Could even be the whole friggin town beating their carpets?
He grinned. National Carpet Beating Day. That must be it.

Bring the family.

Step up now.

Knock over a duck.

Have a pig roast.

Enjoy the rides at the fair.

Have a hot dog.

Have your fortune told.

He grinned to himself and went back to his sandwich. Life
would be much better when he had his own room in the new
hotel and staff to wait on him hand and foot.....and dick.

Chapter 51

Halstomicnili

H heard them arguing. He was sure of it.

If we put that there, and that there, and that there.....then that will allow that to go from there to there.....

Can't see it. Just can't see it. Look.....if we connect that to that, and that to that....and that to that....surely that's better?

I'm not sure...

It isn't as though repairing brains was something we've done before, is it? I mean, he's had one or two punches to the head because he's somewhat of a pugilist, or thinks he is, but that's different. A bit of swelling, too much pressure here and there, cocking up the circuitry for a bit but hardly noticeable, and something we can easily mend. But this.....?

Anyhow....

How about we do mine first, and if that doesn't work, we'll do yours and see what that does.....?

Chapter 52

The hospital

Benny was transferred back to the original hospital to be close to her beloved James. She was still in a considerable amount of pain, but it was essentially where the bullets had left her body, and the tissue was ripped. Kaye, the replacement for Payne, had a word with the Chief Executive and managed to get her a room very close to H and permission to have her bed pushed next to him in the daytime so that she could touch and talk to him.

Although Benshima wanted instinctively to be with and protect her man, she was instinctively providing exactly what he needed: sensory contact which was essential for a coma victim.

The next time Kaye visited H, he found Benny by his side. He introduced himself, and Benny said, 'Tell me, Mr Kaye, what exactly the situation is with James? Exactly.....'

Kaye pulled up a chair. 'Do you want the good news or the bad news?'

'I don't want any kind of news, and I don't want to play games. I asked you to tell me about James, and I would appreciate it if you did....'

Kaye, chastened, changed gear. He had heard about Payne, and he didn't want his practice to suffer. Indeed, do a good job here, and Payne's work was going begging.....

'The situation is this: as may have been mentioned before, your husband is very lucky. He is young, very fit and has an athlete's body. He is strong and, I am told, strong-willed, and because of that his body is healing very rapidly. In relation to his head injury, I will have to be a lot less specific as I cannot see or hear what he is thinking. The scan shows some activity, and at times a lot of activity, but unfortunately, that merely tells us that his brain is alive. It does not tell us whether the brain is doing anything useful or intelligent. It may just be churning away absolute nonsense or less than nonsense. His wound is a borderline wound and may, or may not, have severed main cranial nerve paths. We cannot tell at this stage. His brain is all there, so to speak, but has been sliced by the bullet. The part of his skull that was essentially a flap after the incident, we have stapled back to his head to keep the severed part of the brain in. The brain's blood supply is intact, and there was no cessation of blood at any point to the brain, and so there was no, for want of a better word, stroke.....'

'So what do we do?'

'We do nothing..... except keep Mr James warm and comfortable, and you talk to him as much as you can. On top of that, of course, we monitor pressure areas, take care of the mouth, eyes, and skin; physiotherapy to protect muscles and

joints; reduce deep vein thrombosis risks and monitor stress ulceration of the stomach. On top of that, nutrition and fluid balance will be closely monitored, and urinary catheterisation the norm. Infection control is in place, as is the maintenance of adequate oxygenation, with the assistance of artificial ventilation if needed, which currently it isn't.....'

He paused to make sure she was keeping up...

'.....But mainly we sit and wait for Mr James to let us know whether this is temporary, in which case he should make a full recovery, or whether this is permanent and' he made a tiny grimace.

'And.....?'

'He may never recover and could be in that state until he dies. That could be days, weeks, months or years. There is also, of course, an in-between situation where he makes a good physical recovery, but the damage to the brain may stop speech or some form of movement or impaired thinking processes along the line of dementia. You could end up looking after Mr James as an invalid for the rest of his life. The point is, Mrs James, I don't know.....'

But Benny knew. Her man will come back.....will come back.....will come back..... and she gave his hand a big squeeze.

She went back to talking to James. '.....and then there was the time we went down the Autobahn in the'.....she looked down at the notes.....'Ferrari 360 Modena. You went very

fast.

Do you remember that James?

The red Ferrari?

Do you remember that?.....’

Later that night, as she lay in bed, she repeated to herself:

James.....will come back.....will come back.....will
come back.....will come back.....will come back..... will
come back.....will come back.....will come back will come
back.....will come back.....will come back..... will come
back.....will come back.....will come back..... will come
back.....will come back.....will come back...

until she fell asleep.

Chapter 53

Halstomicnili

The argument raged in his brain...

If you don't fix that, nothing works.

I'll do it; I'll do it. Stop hassling me.

I'm not.

You are!

.....

.....

Done yet?

Oh for Christ's sake! Here! If you can do any better, you do it.

Just asking.....

Chapter 54

White pussy

.....Two months later, on the dot, the four black lads that had tried to rob H and Benshima rang the number H had given them. Andy Pandy took the call, but it meant nothing to him, as it had been weeks since H had told him about them and much had happened since. To say the fucking least! The man on the other end of the phone explained how a big man had told them to ring this number, and they could earn lots of money. A light bulb switched on in Andy Pandy's head, and he finished the sentence silently*and lots of white pussy.*

Ah yes, he remembered now.

'Gotcha now, mate,' said Andy, 'the boss was right impressed with you lot....yeah, gotcha now, gotcha..... Where do you live?' He listened. 'OK, what you need to do is go to an address I am going to give you, so get a pencil or something. Or knife it into your mate's head, eh?' He giggled at the joke. 'Go there a week tonight, ok? A week tonight at eight o'clock. OK? Got it?.....good.....yeah, no sweat.....lots of money....yeah....ok, now the address is.....'

A week later as dusk silently moved to dark, the four lads arrived outside the factory unit and went in through the small side entrance. They were hardly through the door when Andy

Pandy and three accomplices stuck guns in their faces.

‘Strip off your clothes,’ demanded Andy Pandy.

‘What the fuck’s going on, man?’ asked one of the lads and got a smack across the face with a hard metal pistol for his trouble.

Andy put a gun next to a head and said, ‘If you cunts aren’t stripped before I finish counting to five, this fucking gun will blow your head off.....one.....’ no one moved ‘.....two.....’ he held it closer, ‘.....three....’ and as one, there was frenzied activity and suddenly the floor had clothes scattered on it.

‘Put your hands behind your back.....’ he looked down, ‘....big boy.’

‘Man, you gotta be making some kinda mista...’

He didn’t finish the word as Andy grabbed his hair and put the gun in his mouth and forced it down his throat.

‘One more word,’ snarled Andy, ‘one more fuckin’ word and I am going to get mightily pissed.....’

They put their hands behind their backs and were tied securely. Sticky tape covered their mouths.

‘First things first,’ said Andy Pandy, ‘which one of you is Phillip? The one with the brains?’

He looked at them and waited. After a moment, Phillip grunted.

‘Phil, the boss says I have to sort you out first, so you come with me.’

He pulled him into a small office at the other end of the Unit, shut the door and sat Phillip down in a chair. He sat opposite.

‘Phillip.....so you’re the brainy one, eh? How’s that then? You hold up H. You fuck with his woman. How’s that intelligent?’

Phillip mumbled something behind the gag.

‘I see..... And then you come here with a promise of loot and pussy? And that’s intelligent? Are you absolutely fucking mad? Have you cunts got any brains at all?’

Andy Pandy shook his head and sighed. ‘If there was one person in this world you really shouldn’t have crossed, it was H. Why the fuck did you pick on H?’ He sighed again. ‘I mean, anybody, *anybody* but H.....Do you have *any* idea what happens to people who threaten H? Intelligent? I don’t fucking think so.’

Phillip’s eyes had changed. He hadn’t worked this out. What did it all mean?

A *promise* of loot and pussy? What was he saying? Had they been done? Is that what he was saying? No money?

‘Phillip, I almost feel sorry for you....’ he thought for a couple of seconds, ‘naw....actually I don’t; I’m fucking lying. But nevertheless, you are going to pay for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and making the wrong decision. That’s life, Phillip. Life, Phillip, according to H, is all about timing. And yours was crap.....’

He got up to stretch his legs and walked behind Phillip. Without altering his stride, he picked up the foot-long, two-inch-diameter iron bar off the table and brought it down as

hard as he could on the unsuspecting black lad's head. The first blow nearly killed him. The second did. The third, fourth and fifth were only because Andy Pandey liked killing people. Andy undid his zip. It was one of life's pleasures to fuck someone still warm.

Five minutes later he took out his mobile and dialled a number. 'Pete, it's Andy.....how ya doin'?...good. Pete, got a collection for you, down at the unit. Some garbage for the tip. OK? Good. Usual collection fee? You robbin' bastard...that's better. Leave it to you. Key will be in the usual place. See ya.'

He left the office to join the others.

'Phillip is not coming on our little journey. He's going with some mates of mine to help produce methane gas....'

In the Unit, a Ford Transit van stood waiting.

'In the van,' commanded Andy, and with a few kicks, they did as they were told. A few minutes later they were on their hour's journey to the home of a friend of H. The friend was very rich and had a passion for gambling in the evening and early mornings. In the day time, he lavished time and money on his other passion...

In the back of the van, the naked and trussed black lads were working on a plan. While they could not move their hands too much, they still had their teeth. One of them stood up and jammed himself against the side so he wouldn't fall over if they turned, and another sat behind him and started to pull at

the knot in the rope. Bit by bit, and with an aching jaw, he managed to loosen the knot enough for his mate to wriggle his wrists through. He untied his legs then untied the others.

‘What now?’

‘Is the door locked?’

He tried it. ‘Yeah.’

‘Then we wait, and when they stop and open the door, we get ‘em.’

The other two looked a little uncertain. Naked? God knows where? And we are going to take *them*....?

‘What do we do? Swing our dicks?’

‘What other option do we have?’ said the leader, seeing their unconvinced faces.

True.....

The van went up the mile-long drive through a colonnade of beautiful towering trees to a fork in the road. Left was the enormous country pile he had inherited and right, in the gloom, they could see a group of buildings.

Turning right, after a few minutes a light came on over a large building, and a man directed them to one side. An up-and-over door opened, and the van reversed in. The door shut behind them, and the smell in the air was thick and overwhelming. Andy’s men got out, opened the back door, and the black lads jumped out, swinging punches as they did.

Andy and his men backed off and took out their guns. The black lads ran for the door, and Andy watched in mild amusement.

Where the fuck could they go?

What the fuck could they do?

They were locked in for fuck's sake! Andy would have shot them there and then, but H had given him strict instructions.....and you did what H said. To the fucking letter....or else.

With three guns trained on them, the black lads realised they had lost their gamble. Of all the places to open the fucking doors, it was a locked-up fucking barn....or something. They moved intuitively as a group to a corner.

'You do realise, boys, that we now have to tie you up again? Now lie on your fronts and let's do this again. If you move, I will put a fucking bullet in you...'

Defeat overwhelmed them, and they did as they were told.

'What the fuck is going on, man?' one begged. 'You've got it wrong. We're here to work for you, man; you've got it wrong.....'

Andy smiled. 'No, we haven't got it wrong. You told a friend of ours, who you treated quite badly, by the way, what you wanted, and we are going to provide it. To save you having to go out and get it, we've brought you to it.'

'Come on, man,' he pleaded again, 'we just want to make a bit of money, have a good time, eat pussy.'

'White pussy.....' said one of the captors.

‘Eh.....?’

‘You like white pussy.’

It was a statement, but it sounded wrong. There was something in it that had a resonance of malice. How could that be? What the fuck was wrong with fucking white pussy?

‘What’s your name?’ asked Andy’s mate.

‘Eh....?’

‘It’s not fucking difficult, is it? You’re the only one that I’m talking to at the moment, so what’s your fucking name?’

‘Elroy.’

‘Fucking Elroy. It had to be, didn’t it? We’ve got ourselves a fucking Elroy. Don’t you cunts ever have proper names?’

‘Eh...?’

The man looked at one of his partners, who was also black.

‘Now, Arnold here has a proper name, don’t you, Arnie?’

Arnie nodded.

‘Arnie here, we have no problem with at all. Arnie’s all right. Arnie’s one of us. Ain’t that right, Arnie?’

Arnie nodded again.

‘Now, my name is fucking John,’ he grinned, ‘actually it’s arsy John, but that’s a bit ironic, eh? Anyhow, it’s John; see? Not fucking Delroy or Dwayne or whatever else shit you come up with. I mean, even Michael fucking Jordan, one of your Gods, The Man, is called by a proper fucking name so what the fuck’s it all about?’

Elroy was lost. He had no idea what was going on, and he was cold and uncomfortable. He was still sure that they would understand it was a big mistake and they weren't who they thought they were, but the 'white pussy' remark still bothered him. Andy went to the front of the van for some electrical tape and put it over Elroy's mouth. He'd had enough of Elroy, and it was time to get on. They had a drive back yet, and time was moving on. He nodded at the man who had met them, who had still not uttered a word, and he turned and led the way. They dragged their stumbling captives up a long iron stairway to a balcony. Underneath, it was pitch black, and Elroy thought it had a smell like a shit house...

A light came on, and the area below lit up.

Marvin, Elroy's best friend since junior school, looked down and dread immediately and completely invaded his mind and body. His mind went completely blank, and he stood rigid, staring through unseeing eyes. The others started to understand, then began to tremble. Nothing happened for a minute or two, and then, from a small entrance, they saw their nightmare come into view. In moments they were shaking and screaming with fear through their gags.

'You wanted white pussy,' said Andy, 'and we, the nice men that we are, are providing it.'

John beckoned to one of his compatriots, and they grabbed Elroy, picked him up horizontally and face down, and took him to the high wall overlooking the pit below. His body was only just over the wall when the starving six hundred pounds white

Siberian male tiger leapt nearly ten feet into the air and closed his huge mouth over Elroy's head and ripped it off as it fell back to the ground. Blood gushed out of Elroy's headless neck, and the men heaved the rest of the dead body into the pit to be ripped apart by his waiting mate. The tigers had not been fed for a week in readiness for tonight.

They moved the other boy the few inches to the wall and pushed his head over. Andy gripped his hips, and the other two pushed his shoulders, so his head and neck were well over the pit.

'Come on, you fucking hungry bastards,' screamed Andy, 'Come out and fucking play.'

The large male circled below, sat back on its haunches and leapt. The boy's head was ripped off as the tiger dropped back down and blood flowed like a river from the headless neck. John and Arnie threw the body over. Andy pumped his fist!

Andy looked at the other youth lying still on the floor. They moved to the, but he was already dead, drowned on his vomit that the gag had not let come out. A touch pissed off they threw him over in disgust. The pair of enormous Siberian Tigers who usually consumed a hundred pounds of meat a day moved in quickly. The female grabbed one of the lads, shook herself, and his body went this way and that like a rag doll while the other Siberian amused itself throwing the

carcasses up in the air like a ball for a few minutes, then settled down to eat. Tomorrow every ounce of flesh would have been eaten off their bones and what was left would be thrown in a machine and ground down to powder to make more animal feed.

Nothing wasted.....

As they drove home in silence, spent by their activities, Andy suddenly said,

‘Fuckin’ Delroy. What kind of fuckin’ name is that?’

Arnie nodded.

It was unlike H to take revenge when he had already settled the score, but they had threatened Benny, and that wasn’t on. That just wasn’t on at all...

Chapter 55

Hfoomesmoctucoa

The ECG flashed like a Christmas tree but still no problems with his blood supply. Thank God again.

They watched him jerk and twitch. He moaned and muttered.....

H's brain was going crazy. Bright lights flashed everywhere!

Words and numbers flooded his brain as the synapses repaired, and the neurons signalled to each other and to other non-neuron cells in the muscles and other places waiting patiently on hold for instructions.

Images flew across his eyes. Images from his past, from every time he had lived...

Words gathered in a vast confusion, and then he watched as they organised, as though in great armies, and marched forward to a battle.....

Numbers followed. Vast swathes of numbers.

Every number known to man was there...

They stretched out there, into the distance, like someone trying to get to the end of Pi.....

And then they turned and circled back. Millions and millions of random numbers circling him. Deciding what to do. Where to go.

And then they started to peel off and arrange themselves until they were happy that two and two did indeed make four.....

His eyes opened, and the first thing he saw was Benshima.

‘Welcome back, my love,’ she said, with huge tears rolling down her cheeks, ‘Cerberus decided not to let you in.....’

‘Benny.’

Chapter 56

Hathaway reflects...

Hathaway sat at his desk and looked at several large monitors on the wall. They told him many things about his businesses. At the push of a key on his computer, he received information from the on-site servers at their locations. He knew the sales figures, finances, cash flow, debtors, creditors – everything that you need to know to make sure the people he employed did their job. He loved the position of power he was in; loved having hundreds of people working for him, and he loved the ‘yes, sir’, ‘no, sir’ that came with it.

It had taken him many years to build a legitimate business empire that made him a lot of money, but he could not resist a crooked deal. If H was a thinking man’s thug, then Hathaway was a businessman’s crook. In fact, if you could have a legitimate crooked business, he would now be on the front page of the Financial Times as a Captain of Industry. But for Hathaway, there was no buzz in business. His operations made him vast amounts of money and a luxurious lifestyle, but no buzz. There was a buzz in robbery, arson, killing, fraud. *Then* there was a buzz. *Then* you got hard. *Then* you stuck it up the back of someone’s arse and pulled the trigger.....whoosh.

Metaphorically, of course.....

Thinking of the buzz made him stir; he clicked the mouse and looked at another big screen. A woman crouched on the floor and around her were half a dozen men with their cocks out, and she was sucking them all. He watched for a while, then bent down and from a bottom drawer pulled out a handkerchief embossed with the letter E. From the same drawer, he took an envelope, already addressed, already stamped. He undid his zip, watched the woman on the screen and masturbated; at the last second, he placed the handkerchief over his dick and shot into it.

He sat back and relaxed, waiting for his racing pulse to ease, and then he wiped his dick dry with the handkerchief, carefully folded it and placed it in the envelope ready for posting the next day. He looked at the screen and watched the men and the woman, and loathing spread over him, and he shut the screen off in disgust.

For some reason, he immediately thought of H. Was H going to die? Was he going to live? H may survive death, but would he survive life? In a coma or wheelchair, paralysed or partially paralysed. Speaking gibberish, not speaking at all. What a fucking death on earth! A shudder shook him, and he knew he was again visiting a darkness that he had within him.

What was it? Why was it? Who was it?

It had always been there like a raven on his shoulder. A black, ever-present, screeching, clawing presence. What are you, you black monstrosity? For a moment a dread descended on him, then, as swiftly as it arrived, it left.

It was late, and he was tired, and soon he would go to bed, but first he wanted to get back to the world he was comfortable in, so he decided to make a few thou. He tried to make five or ten thou a night if he had the time. It was easy and tax-free, so..... Although he had millions and made millions, he could not resist an opportunity to screw somebody. Anybody. Suckers were there to be taken or why else were there suckers?!

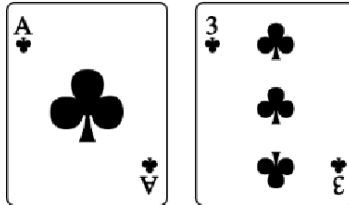
He clicked on an icon, and a poker site came on-line. He clicked on another button, and on another monitor, a matrix appeared showing all the cards and all the suits in a deck. On the same screen, buttons had '*normal*', '*override*', '*random*', '*choose*' and '*disconnect*' embedded on them. Hathaway went to the site and put himself down for a £500 buy-in, six-man Sit and Go. There were four already registered, and a sixth quickly followed. Hathaway pursued his usual policy of only playing premium hands and taking a pot here and there. It kept him third or fourth in the chips, and that was fine. When the table was down to three, he clicked on the button marked '*override*', and the screen table flickered for just a second then stabilised. He saw the cards.

Everybody's cards.....

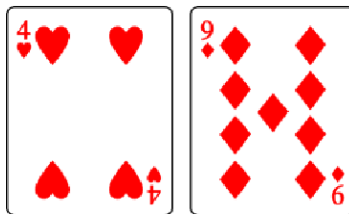
Of the six thousand chips the leader had just under three thousand, and he and the other player around fifteen hundred each.

He had Ac 3c, chip leader, who was 100 chips small blind had 4h 9d; the other player, table name *pleezefold*, was big blind with 200 chips and Kc Qc.

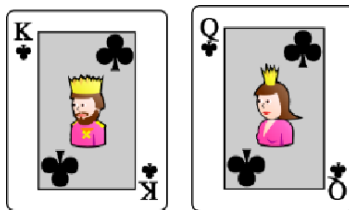
Hathaway



Alfie



Pleezefold

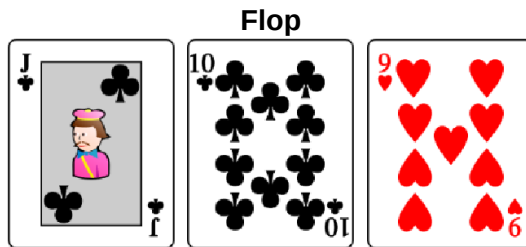


This was ideal.

Hathaway called the big blind, chip leader, Alfie, called, and the big blind raised it to three times the big blind.

Hathaway called. Chip leader folded.

Hathaway clicked the pointer of the mouse three times on the matrix glowing on the monitor, and the flop came Jc, 10c, 9h.



Hathaway grinned. His opponent had a king straight and a possible king flush. He must be pissing himself. What would he do?

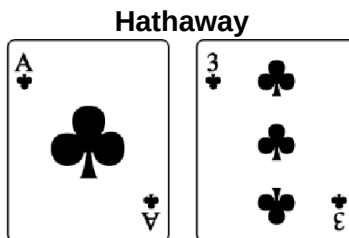
Would he go all in now, but that could scare Hathaway off, or play it slow and then get Hathaway?

There were already 1800 chips in the pot, which was half their stack.

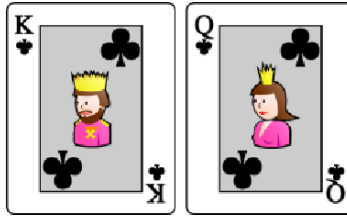
Hathaway put in the minimum raise of 200 and waited.

His opponent raised it to 400 which meant he was now completely pot committed. Hathaway went all in, and his opponent followed.

Hathaway had a flush draw with a twenty-eight percent chance of catching it and his opponent already had a king straight.

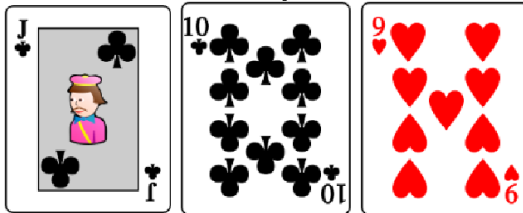


Pleezefold

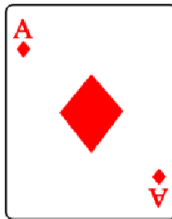


Hathaway clicked the mouse, and another Ace came on the turn.

Flop



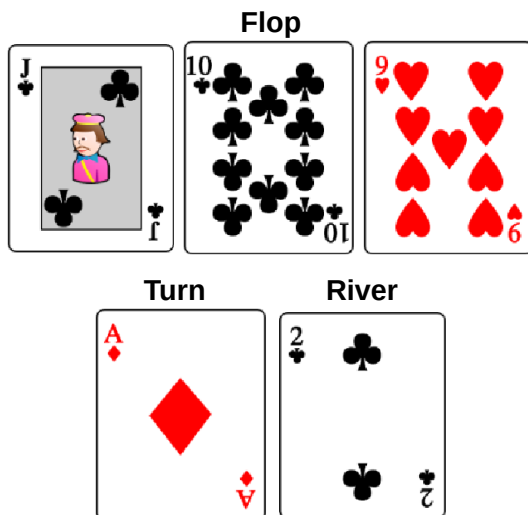
Turn



Boyo had improved his straight to Ace. Boyo should know that Hathaway's chances had now halved, and Boyo would be tasting his money.

Hathaway clicked again, and a lowly two of clubs showed.

Flop Turn River

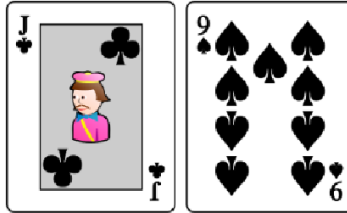


The lowest card in the deck to give him the winning Ace flush hand; dominating the straight! There were times when Hathaway was a touch sadistic. To lose to a lowly two of clubs – how undeniably pissing off-able. The chips moved towards him, and his opponent vanished from the screen. Hathaway couldn't resist it, so he typed 'Lucky' in the chat box. There was no reply.

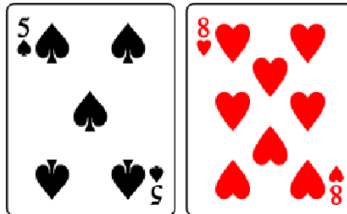
Down to two, and Hathaway pressed 'normal', and the hands were dealt.

They now had the same amount of chips each, and he had Jc, 9s and his opponent 5s 8h.

Hathaway



Alfie



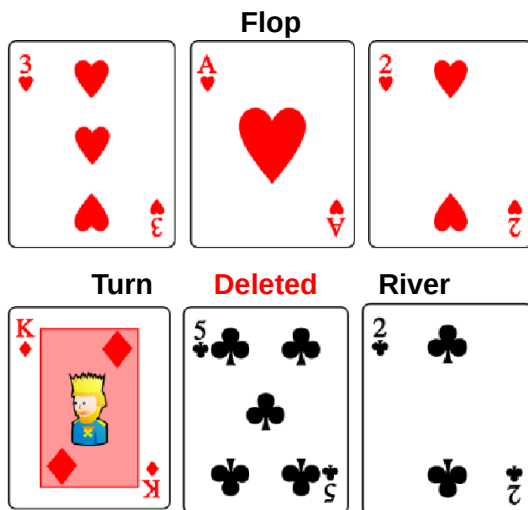
Hathaway called the big blind, and his aggressive opponent went all in. Hathaway looked at the monitor and saw what the flop was going to deliver was a possible gut shot straight and flush draw to Alfie. Good.

The Turn – the King of Diamonds – would not change things, but Alfie would get a Five of Clubs on the river, giving him the winning hand.

Hathaway pressed override, clicked on the matrix, and the five changed to a 2d.

Hathaway called the all-in.

The cards were dealt



and as all the chips moved to him he typed **gg**.

The reply came, '*Alfie – Fu-ck you Rico*', and the screen went blank.

Hathaway, aka Rico, smiled. It was lucrative to own a chain of bookies that had its own internet poker site.....

Hathaway looked for one more game; it would cover the wife's expenses for the month, and then to bed.....

Chapter 57

God visits

In his home in Gerrards Cross just outside London, one of the more expensive areas of England, Luke was getting out of the shower. He had just completed a ten-mile run around the streets and lanes and felt good. Ten miles hardly taxed him, but it kept him toned, worked his cardiovascular system and gave him some fresh air. He put on a white Egyptian cotton robe and went downstairs. Going to the lounge, he heard the front doorbell, so he diverted into the kitchen, looked at the small monitor and saw two women standing there; both appeared to be holding bibles. Morons? Seven-day horizontalists? He grinned at his little joke. Just ignore them, and they'll go away..... The bell rang again, and he was just about to go back upstairs when he changed his mind. He felt like a bit of company, and these idiots would entertain him for a few minutes. He opened the door. 'Yes?'

'Good morning, sir,' said the attractive auburn-haired woman, 'we wonder whether we could talk to you for a few moments about how your life could be better?'

Luke noticed they were both attractive which struck him as unusual. Why would attractive women need God when they could lie on their backs, and some idiot would give them everything they wanted?

‘My life is fine at the moment, thank you, but yours, how about yours? Could your lives be better?’

Luke wanted a bit of intellectual stimulation. Let’s give these two a hard time...

‘Our lives will only be better when we join the Lord in Heaven, sir; until then we spend our days talking to people and praying to the Lord to forgive the world for its sins.’

Touché

‘What is your name, sir?’

He paused for a moment. ‘Luke.’

‘I am Elaine, Luke, and this is Lynne.’

‘Do you sin, Luke? Would you like the Lord’s forgiveness?’

‘I do a bit, so if he’s got a minute get him down and he can sort me out now.’

The ladies smiled. Luke was inwardly embarrassed. It was so lame, and no doubt they had heard it before. If this was his intellectual repartee, it was time he went back indoors... God one, Luke nil.

‘The Lord has a lot to do, Luke, but if you want to join us, I am sure he would recognise that as a sign that you wanted to travel the road.’

‘The road to where exactly?’

‘To salvation, Luke. Where you will rejoice in the peace and tranquillity that is the Lord’s reward for the rejection of sin.’

‘I think I would find that a little boring.’

‘Luke, have you never looked at a full moon, the setting sun, a flower glistening with morning dew, a new born lamb and felt His presence? Haven’t you, Luke? At that point haven’t you secretly wished you were at one with God? He who created these things? He who gave you life?’

Luke was beginning to get irritated with these questions. They were too probing. Too personal. Too accurate. Had killing his fellow man become.....wrong? It had never occurred to him before.....why was it occurring now? He changed from irritation to aggravation.

‘You will have to excuse me now, but I have to get dressed to go out, so if you wouldn’t mind.....’ and he forced a smile with his dismissal.

‘Of course, Luke,’ said the blonde, ‘it was kind of you to give the Lord and us your time.’

He nodded as though somehow agreeing that he had given any time at all to a non-existent, omnipotent thing that scans trillions of planets across trillions of light years looking for people like him to save. What bollocks! Elaine held out her hand. ‘It was a pleasure to meet you, Luke.’

He took it, and as she squeezed he involuntarily said, ‘Ow,’ and winced.

She looked surprised. ‘Are you all right? Did I hurt you in some way, Luke?’

He grinned foolishly. ‘There was something sharp in....er...your hand.’

She looked at her hand then looked up apologetically. 'It's my ring, Luke. I broke it, and they fixed it, but it left a bit of a jagged edge. I am so sorry, Luke.'

'It's not a problem at all; it just made me...jump.'

Lynne moved to him to shake his hand.

'You haven't got a jagged ring as well, have you?' he asked jokingly.

She held up both hands and smiled. No rings of any kind.

'Thank you again, Luke, we have benefited by meeting you.'

She shook his hand, and they moved away a couple of paces and looked at him. Luke heard one whisper, 'About now....'

'What.....?' and then his head started to go dizzy.

His survival instincts kicked in, but as he tried to get to the door, his knees buckled, and he keeled over.....

Chapter 58

A nice swim

Liam drove the Mercedes through Cannes and on down to a less busy Marina and parked by a small cafe. He sat at an empty table basking in the morning sun and ordered a light coffee, hot croissant with fresh butter, and settled down to read an imported copy of The Times. A hundred yards away he could see the sleek yachts of the rich and famous and watched the men strut their stuff in their sailor outfits, and the women show off their expensively natural, melon-shaped bosoms.

After a while, he went back to the Merc and drove out of the marina, around the bay to a small inlet where he parked with one or two other cars. The glamour of the yachts was a couple of miles away, and this was quiet and of no interest. Switching off the ignition, he went to the back, took a bright blue towel out of the boot, then bent down and put the magnetic key holder under the car.

He walked leisurely towards the sea, and at the water's edge put down the towel and stripped down to the trunks he had put on before he left home. Wrapping the clothes in the towel, he left them at the edge. If someone wanted to nick his

clothes, best of luck to them, but he still went over to the man sitting nearby. Gesturing towards the small bundle, he asked, 'Souhaitez-vous l'esprit?'

'Non probleme.'

Lliam waded into the sea, and even though it was warm, he still instinctively hesitated for a second as the sea water rose and touched his balls. His arms reached out, he arched his body and dived into the beautiful clear sea, swimming thirty yards under water then surfaced, feeling refreshed. Treading water for a couple of minutes, he swam strongly out to sea for ten minutes and trod water again.

Water was his second home, and the thought that the bottom was several hundred feet below did not bother him. Indeed, he would want at his life's end to be buried at sea, to spend his days swimming amongst the fish and the coral on an endless journey following the ocean currents.

A hundred yards away he noticed a beautiful Sunseeker Manhattan 84 yacht with several people on board. They had been watching his easy, powerful swimming style and raised glasses of wine to him in salute. He waved back and smiled. While his job of killing people paid quite well, he was not in that bracket. He could certainly afford a decent boat, more than likely a mill or so, but the ongoing costs? The crew, the maintenance, the fuel?

Alas...

Some owners must be paying a mill a year in costs alone..... Shit.

His body was relaxing.

He and Luke had just come back from North Korea. Smuggled in from China four weeks earlier, their contract was to put a bullet into KIM Jong Il's deputy.

He had no idea why.

He thought it would have been better to stick one into KIM Jong Il, but apparently not. The people paying the money knew best..... Four days they trekked through the hot, sweaty forests with their contact. Then installed in a house just four hundred yards from one of the palaces where the deputy had his headquarters, and from where his cavalcade departed on his numerous tours of the city. They sat there for days, having several opportunities to blow him away, but had not been given the go. And then the mission was aborted entirely. Just like that!

So they trekked back to China, and a military plane took them to Kenya, from where they found their own way home.

What a waste of time....but what a lot of money for it!

Had he been less distracted, he may have seen the bubbles starting to strike the surface around him, but when he did, it was too late. The divers with the air tanks on their backs came up from the bottom, and each held one of his legs and pulled him down.....

The yacht turned and slowly moved towards them.....

And the man sitting on the beach walked over, picked up his clothes, walked to the car, found the hidden key and drove off in the Merc.

Chapter 59

H is back

H's recovery began, but in a bizarre way, he was not as badly injured as Benny. His brain was unscathed to a large extent, and all he needed were surroundings he knew, to allow it to reconfigure itself, and a bit of rest. Benny was also healing well but still in some pain, which the painkillers were helping to control. They were both extremely lucky as they could, indeed should, both be dead.

They moved to The London Clinic where they were allowed a room together and where they stayed for a further three weeks. H had physio for his unused muscles, but was soon doing a million miles a day on an exercise bike in the physio suite. His trusty laptop was delivered and quickly hooked into the hospital wi-fi to play internet poker.

And Benny surreptitiously watched.....for any signs of degradation in his manner, which the doctors said could indicate a relapse or internal bleeding, but she saw nothing except a man who wanted to get back to his life.....

She wondered what life would be like now.

Would it change?

What was happening out there that someone would want to kill James?

Would they try again?

Should they move?

And the baby? Should she tell him about the baby? Tears welled in her eyes.....

When they would soon be leaving the hospital, Senor Reyes suggested a month or so, or forever if they wanted, in Colombia. James and Benny thanked him, but both declined. Their life was here, and here was where they were going to get on with it. Senora Reyes arranged for bulletproof glass to be put temporarily behind the windows in James' apartment!

Chapter 60

The twins

When Luke woke, he saw his brother looking at him through the bars in the next cage. Luke and Lliam didn't know where they were, but they knew it wasn't where they wanted to be. They were both naked, in cages measuring about three-foot square by four and a half feet high, which were suspended from the ceiling at the end of a large room. In front were several empty chairs. It was a closed, airless room, with bright lights over them, dimmed lights over the chairs and a large clock on the wall in the distance.

'What is this?'

Lliam shrugged.

'Any idea where we are?'

He shrugged again. 'It ain't a beach in France, I know that for sure.'

The cages were just big enough to sit in, but their muscles ached after a few minutes, and they had to continually move in that tiny, cramped space to ease them. For hours and hours, no one came in the room. There was no food, no water, no sound. They urinated and defecated where they crouched, trying hard to scrape as much as they could out of the cages as they were sitting or kneeling in it.

After eighteen hours, a man came in with a hood over his head and gave them water. They shouted questions at him, but he just turned and left. Twelve hours later, they were given more water and a morsel of food. Their bodies were racked with pain as their muscles could not move far enough to remove the acids building up in them, and they cramped continually.

Twelve hours later, four men came in and sat down on the chairs. One of them had a plastic box from which he took a bottle of wine, four cups and several legs of chicken. He handed them out to his compatriots. The twins could smell the chicken, and their bodies screamed for food, but there was no way they were going to plead for anything..... they were warriors, and warriors didn't beg!

'Let me tell you what is going to happen,' said one of the men, 'first we will ask you some questions, which we would like answers to. We realise that you will be reluctant to cooperate, at least initially, but we are quite sure that one of you will help us even if your brother is not still alive to see it.'

Luke and Liam looked at each other. *The other not alive to see it?*

'Second, if you want to talk to us, you address us as follows: I am One,' he pointed along the line, 'two, three, four.'

The man paused for a moment, lit a cigarette, took a bite from the chicken and sipped the wine.

'Tell me,' said One, 'how was Korea.....?'

The twins knew they were as good as dead. If these were the people that had paid to send them there, then they apparently no longer wanted them around. If they were the other side and had found out, God knows how, then it was a painful death coming up. And no way to fight.

‘You are reluctant to answer.....which is understandable,’ said Two, sounding like a schoolteacher. Placing his elbows on the table, his chin on the cups of his hands made him even more of a schoolteacher.....

‘Have you heard about the experiments that Stanley Milgram did in the 1960s?.....no?.....well let me explain.....

‘Milgram asked a group of volunteers to be either a *teacher* or *learner*. The teachers and learners were taken to a room where the learner was placed in a chair and electrodes strapped to him. The teacher is then taken to a room next door where the learner can be heard but not seen. The teacher is put in front of a machine that gives an electrical shock to the learner if they answer a question wrong.

‘With me so far? *Teacher and Learner*.....?’

‘So, the Teacher is given a list of questions that he asks the Learner. If the Learner gets it wrong, the Teacher is told to administer a shock. Each time the learner gets a question wrong the voltage is raised.

‘It was an interesting experiment that, if you will excuse the pun, shocked the researchers.

‘They found that under pressure to conform and do as they were told by a person in authority, the Teacher would actually increase the voltage bit by bit until the current was enough to kill the Learner. No matter how hard the Learner screamed in protest.

‘Interesting, don’t you think.....?’

The twins said nothing.

‘However,’ he continued, ‘in that experiment, the Learner was actually an actor who would feign pain and agony as the shock was administered, and so no one was hurt, but of course, the Teacher didn’t know that.....Would you like to ask any questions at this stage?’

‘Where are we?’ asked Luke.

‘.....So what we thought we’d do is a slight variation on that experiment. You will see above your cages there are wires attached that go to the ceiling and then to a device that sends a voltage to either, or both, of the cages. Do you understand?’

The twins did not answer, and Three, who had his hands in his pocket, pressed a button on a small remote. The twins screamed in agony as the electricity hurtled through the cables to the cages and invaded their bodies. They jerked and seized in their tiny cages, their limbs banging hard against the bars.

‘I am so sorry; I forgot to tell you that we have started. We are using Milgram’s ideas, but we have no actors and have changed it slightly. You are going to be both Teacher and

Learner. We will ask one of you a question, and at that point, you will be the Teacher. If you answer correctly, nothing happens. If you mislead us and we realise it, or if you refuse to answer, then your brother will receive a shock. Each time you refuse or mislead us, the voltage will increase. Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ Luke said, but Lliam just nodded. The electrical shock took his brother’s breath away.

‘Do you understand.....?’

Lliam shouted, ‘Yes,’ immediately and mouthed a silent ‘sorry’ to his brother.

‘Good,’ said Two, ‘then we will begin.’ He nodded to Four, who had a small folder which he opened.

‘Question one.....to Luke, and then we will alternate: what are your real names.....?’

The question took both of them by surprise. Why would they ask that? How did they know they had other names? Oh, Jesus Christ, what else do they know?

‘Did you understand the question, Luke?’ asked One.

‘Yes.’

‘And the answer is.....?’

Hesitating a moment too long, Luke watched in horror as Lliam screamed when his head banged against the hard metal bars when the current jerked his neck muscles taut.

‘Richards,’ said Luke quickly. ‘Richards! Please don’t hurt him.’

He looked at Lliam and shook his head in anguish and mouthed the words '*I'm sorry*', which was an understatement for these two emotionally and psychologically joined twins who had gone through so much together and only had each other to rely on.

'Good,' said One and nodded to Four.

'Next question to Lliam. Lliam, where were you born?'

'Portsmouth.'

'Luke, who taught you to shoot.....?'

Luke froze. What the hell to do now? Is this a test and they already know, or is this what they want? He answered.....

'Lliam, in Korea who were you paid to kill.....?'

Before Lliam answered, he was trying to work out who these people were or who they represented. If they knew about Korea, how could they be Korean? If they had found out about the contract, why ask? And if they were the people who hired them, they would already know..... So, who the hell were they?

The current went up a notch, and the bolt threw Luke against the cage, banging his head, and he grunted in breathless agony.

'Lliam, answer please.....'

Chapter 61

So how....?

After eight weeks, Benny and H left the hospital in Secure Security's bulletproof limo and returned home. Benny was well again although she would bear the scars for the rest of her life. The entry wounds had healed, the scars minimal and in time would mainly disappear, but the exit wounds had been large and angry, and they would take quite a while to subside. James' body had completely healed.

The only outward show of the attack was that he now a parting on both sides of his hair, one where the bullet had parted the skull. It made him look a bit like a Navajo Indian! His mind had been a little confused for a while, but it had quickly reconfigured itself, and now he was fine. Benny told his employees not to go to the hospital as she was concerned H would launch into aggression mode, and it would harm his recovery, but now that they were home, Toby was invited to tell H everything he knew.

Toby went through it all, bit by bit.

'It was weird, H; one minute we are at war with some unknown gangsters and the next minute...puff....gone. Just like that. Senor Reyes puts me in touch with someone who tells me what to do. I meet the emissary guy and then go out

to make his coffee. A small bomb or something fills the room with gas, and then two big bastards take him away. And that's the last I heard.....nothing.....absolutely fucking nothing. I rang Senor Reyes, who told me everything would be sorted out and to get on as normal running the clubs. And so I did, and I have.'

'You don't know much.....' said H disparagingly.

Toby shrugged. 'I can only tell you what I know.'

'And Senor Reyes organised this.....?'

Toby thought for a moment. 'Sort of.....I think he just rang some people and paid them to sort it out. I don't think he'd have a clue about things like this, but he appears to have the money and the contacts to get things sorted. That's what I think.'

H thought a moment, then nodded. It was true: money could get you most things.

H waited until after his evening meal, then rang Senor Reyes to thank him for everything he had done. Not only had Senor Reyes 'sorted it out', but he had paid for the hospital bills, and of course the cost of the Gulfstream would have been enormous. H offered to pay, but Senor Reyes declined. H politely told Senor Reyes how much he appreciated it, but he would send a cheque for the hospital bill. H also questioned Senor Reyes about the events, but Senor Reyes apparently knew very little, and it was as Toby had said. What Senor

Reyes had done was called in a favour at the Colombian Embassy and left it to them. He gave H the number to ring to get all the details he needed.....

H left it a week, then rang the number, and after waiting for several minutes spoke to a gentleman who suggested they meet and had a chat. A Secure Security driver took H round to a small coffee shop the next afternoon where he met a man who bought him coffee.

‘My name is Eduardo James, and I am pleased to meet you. As they say in England, “any friend of Senor Reyes is a friend of mine”.’

‘Thank you. Senor Reyes must be....well connected.’

The man smiled. ‘Senor Reyes and his family are very important people, James. They have large industrial and agricultural interests and employ many of my countrymen. They are known as good employers and look after their people, and that goes a long way. Also, of course, due to their lineage, their wealth and their patronage they know many influential people, our Ambassador being one. And so when Senor Reyes asked for a little help.....’ he opened his hands ‘we helped.’

‘And could I ask....how did you help?’

‘The details are really unimportant, don’t you think? We were asked to help with a little difficulty, and we did. Suffice it to say you will not be bothered by these people again.’

‘Just like that.’

‘Just like that, Senor James.’

‘Forgive me, Eduardo, I don’t wish to be rude, but I need a little more than that. Senorita Reyes was nearly killed, and I have to be sure it does not happen again. I have to understand the threat.’

Eduardo thought for a few moments.

‘James.....as you would say, “in a nutshell”, we talked to their Emissary, who was a nice, helpful man. He explained that a group of East European gentleman wanted to buy your clubs cheaply, actually for nothing, as a starting point for a business in Britain. A sort of overseas expansion. They felt the easiest way was to kill you and then walk in and take over.....’

‘I think one or two people in London would have beaten them to it....’

‘Be that as it may, that’s what they thought. Anyhow, we talked to some friends of ours in their vicinity who felt it was time their overseas expansion, indeed their local expansion, should be curtailed, and indeed I am informed it was.’

‘Can I ask how it was.....curtailed?’

‘Yes, in fact, you may find this funny as it is amazing how coincidences and fate intermingle and resolve things, but it would appear that they were building a holiday hotel, and it must have been poorly constructed, and while they were there one day, it collapsed on them.’

‘Just like that....?’

‘Just like that....’

‘Amazing coincidence.....’

‘Amazing.’

‘So the threat has been buried?’

He nodded. ‘Buried, yes. Buried. You and Senorita Reyes are quite safe. I guarantee it, Senor. And we have guaranteed it to Senor Reyes, which should tell you everything.’

Eduardo stood up and shook H’s hand. ‘It was a pleasure meeting you, James. You have a number for me. If ever I can help in any way, please do not hesitate to ring.’

James took a card from his pocket and gave it to Eduardo. ‘Please ring me and let me invite you for a meal at one of the clubs. Bring your wife if you have one and friends if you want. As a thank you.’

‘I will, James, I will.’

Several weeks later Eduardo rang to ask if he and the Ambassador and a ‘few friends’ could have a meal as it would be the Ambassador’s birthday. H worked out which night would be the quietest, closed the club and opened it up for the Ambassador and anyone he wanted to invite. The food and drinks were all covered by H.

It was the least he could do for people who could ‘coincidentally’ get a hotel to collapse....!

Chapter 62

Team again.....?

Hathaway rang H. 'How's it going?'

'Fine. Everything mended. I know what two twos are again, which is handy as it seems I never see a fucking pair at poker nowadays. You?'

'Good. Wedding soon, thank God, as the money she's spending on that could keep Zimbabwe going for a fucking decade.'

So even Mugabe couldn't spend as much as 'she', thought H, grinning.

'Just saying hello and not stopping, so take care.'

H put down the phone, pressed the button on the console and waited. The phone rang again.

'You up to a bit of a caper or shall I pass it on?'

'I'm fine. In fact, I'd like a bit of action. Haven't been shot in the head in weeks!'

'OK, as long as you're sure. Got a sniff about dud notes. Good ones. They're doing tens, twenties GB, and fifties and hundreds US. Place on the south coast where they stick them on a motor launch and take them over the channel and then move them around Europe. I am told that this little team has

all the expertise in the world, but their own security is a touch lax, so I reckon we could boogie on in there and help ourselves to the product of their labours.....’

‘Sounds good to me...’ said H. ‘What can you tell me?’

‘I’m in France now, but tomorrow I’m back in London. Why don’t we have a quiet lunch somewhere and I can fill you in? I haven’t seen you in a while...’

‘Good idea, it would be good to see you before the wife cleans you out...’

They arranged a time and a place.

The next day, after a long stint in the basement gym, H went out and bought two new suits, stayed half an hour so the tailors upstairs got his size right, then caught a cab to the small bistro. They had arranged for twelve thirty, and H was a touch early, so he bought himself a copy of The Times and settled down for a few minutes’ read on a ‘lived in’ leather couch in the waiting area. At one o’clock, Hathaway hadn’t arrived, so H rang his mobile, but there was no reply. H racked his brains to make sure he had the time right, but was certain he had. He settled down again to read the paper, and at one thirty he rang again, but still no reply. He left a message with the bistro manager to tell Hathaway that he had gone and gave him his number to ring.....

Chapter 63

The Chateau

Hathaway put down the phone to H and turned on the TV. After a few minutes of flicking through the stations, he'd had enough and went to his study. For some reason, he was struggling to settle....just one of those nights.

Should he play poker?

Should he do work?

Should he watch porn?

Should he just do fuck all?

He hadn't got a clue.....

Logging in to the poker, he spent the next few minutes playing in pound games and going all in on every hand until he was bust, then started again. He was soon bored and turned on the porn.

She was there again. The same woman, the same men, the same mouth, the same cocks.....but it didn't stir him. She didn't stir him. He switched it off.

He had to do something to get rid of the restlessness, so he decided to go for a walk in the grounds. It was early evening, and there was at least an hour and a half of light left, so he put on some casual shoes, took a walking cane with the silver dogs head handle out of the ornate black cast iron container and set off.

He had a favourite walk which took him through the manicured grounds with their bowling green lawns, to the large structure that housed the tropical plants and water garden with its giant lilies, each about two metres wide and with a scent like butterscotch and pineapple. Hathaway had imported scarab beetles especially to pollinate the lilies, and the result was excellent. He idled there for a while, drinking in the smells, touching the plants, feeling their texture. The weird thing was that he had never suffered from hay fever until he built his immense 'greenhouse', but now, without the allergy tablets, he sniffed and sneezed, and his nose ran. A nice side effect of the tablets was the fact that he got less hungover..... Weird.....

He carried on, back into the sunshine and around the lake whose depths teemed with trout. Above their lazy swimming, multi-coloured wild fowl paddled away obliviously. Heading into the woods the long shadows held him in thrall as their grotesque shapes told him of ghosts and galleons, Wendy and Peter Pan, wizards and goblins.....

He strode on, looking at this, smelling that, and after a couple of hours, he meandered his way back to the house feeling much better. Much more alive.

He put his shoes and cane back into their respective housings and went back to the lounge. Opening the door, he saw, in the fading evening light, Luke and Liam sitting there,

waiting for him. Although he was surprised to see them his face instantly beamed with affection at their presence.

‘Boys, what are you doing here?’

The boys neither replied nor moved. For an instant, it did not register. ‘Boys.....?’

Fear gripped his heart, and he wanted to run. But why? But where?

‘Boys.....?’ he said softly, his voice trembling, a foreboding enveloping him.

He moved to Luke and saw the rope tying him to the chair; looked across to Lliam and saw the same. Their faces were badly bruised, and red burn marks left weals where they had been tortured. He looked slowly behind him because he knew the people that had put them there were still in the room, but there was no one there. No one moved out of the shadows to kill him.

He untied Lliam and cradled his head lovingly in his arms and softly wept. When the enormity of his life without them permeated his brain, his weeping turned to a dreadful empty, tortuous wail. Moving over to Luke, he enveloped him with as much love as the world could spare, rocking him gently side to side like an innocent baby. Recovering a little composure, he moved them gently to the floor where they could lie comfortably in peace. He sat down with them, holding their hands and slowly rocked as the tears flooded from his stinging eyes. The only people in the world who he had loved were dead.

Dead...

He wanted to scream at the top of his voice, but what was the point? *What was the fucking, shitting, arseholing point?*

Hathaway had quite forgotten who had put them there or why. At that point, he didn't give a shit if they were still in his house and blew his head off.

I don't give a fuck! He screamed silently in his head to an unseen foe. *I don't give a fuck!*

Why would anyone kill his boys? Why? He moved their heads to his lap, stroked their hair lovingly and sat there in a daze of despair. For two hours, he cradled and caressed them. In his more coherent moments, he dwelt on who had done this dreadful thing, and he knew. *He knew.*

The bastards who had sent them to North Korea and had pulled the plug had decided that *no witnesses* was the best policy. And there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn't fight a superpower for Christ's sake! Surely there could have been a better way? Why hadn't they talked to him?

Anything can be resolved....anything.....

The boys could have just retired....gone away....anything....it could have been sorted. Bastards!

Why? You fucking, moronic, arrogant bastards! He screamed into the gloom and to a God that wasn't listening.....

Chapter 64

Talking is good for you...

H heard nothing off Hathaway for nearly a month but thought little of it. For H and the people of H's world, time was generally of little consequence. It only became an issue if there were consequences that arose from poor timing. Other than that.....

Going through the clubs' figures at home, he got a phone call. 'H, Ernest here.'

'Ernest, where have you been? I got quite concerned about you and made a couple of inquiries, but you were still alive, so I left it until you contacted me.'

'Couple of problems, H. Sorry. Some very close friends of mine died unexpectedly, and I had to help sort things out. Funeral, graves, that sort of thing, sorting out loose ends.....that sort of thing.'

'Sorted now?'

There was a perceptible pause, and H knew that Hathaway was struggling to keep his emotions in check.

'Yes, sorted now.'

'You ok, Ern.....?'

H never called Hathaway Ern, but now..... maybe now was a good time.

‘Do you ever think life is a cock-up, H? You work your arse off, you make a few quid but..... But.....’

H said nothing.

‘The two people that died were the closest thing to family that I had in the world. Alright, I know I’ve got my own, and I love Patricia, and I’ll spend whatever it takes to give her a lovely wedding, but my wife is a frigid, leeching piranha. How is that right? A wife that is not a wife...? Then what the fuck is she?.....’

H listened to Hathaway. H had never heard Hathaway talk like this. His social and domestic side had been a closed book, and certainly shows of emotion were unheard of. What was going on? Who had died? H didn’t even know Hathaway was close to anyone. You just don’t know people.....

‘.....I mean, just because you sign a piece of paper in the eyes of some god and overseen by some clown in a skirt, you’re married? What the fuck does that mean? She’s a’

H let Hathaway go on. Whatever was on his mind was being directed at his wife, so let him get on with it. H listened but didn’t hear and found himself thankful that he had Benny. He reflected and realised how much his personal well-being had changed since they had been together; he also realised that it had become a way of life and one which he took for granted. It also occurred to him that Benny had been shot because of him. He knew that already, but its importance had eluded him. And if he had died and Benny lived, what would have

happened to Benny? He had made no provision for Benny at all; he had assumed life would go on, and that would be that, but if he had died, there was no Will.

For everything that Benny had given H, she would get nothing..... Absolutely fuck all. His mother would automatically get most, and the arseholing Chancellor would get the rest. *Fuck that!*

‘..... and I’ve had enough. I’ll get this wedding over with and work out where to go next. But there has to be something else, H.....? I don’t know whether it’s living in a monastery or selling up and putting a few quid into charities, but I’ve had enough. Know what I mean, H? Know what I mean.....?’

And in a way H did. But in the meantime, before Ernest found his monastic calling, there was the little matter of lots of scam money waiting to be collected down on the south coast.

Chapter 65

Take a note.....

He had a word with Big John who decided it would be pleasant to take the Mrs and kids for a day out to the south coast. He took the tatty old Vauxhall Omega, and they meandered around the coast, going into small coves with the kids, until tea time beckoned. Then they wandered up a track until he found the farm house. He got out of the car and ambled to the door which opened before he could knock it.

‘Yes?’

Big John beamed and put on his useless expression.

‘Mister Hampton, I’m sorry we’re a bit late, but we got lost. I’ll just get the stuff out of the car, and the kids want to go to the loo, so if you can give us a minute.’

‘You’ve got the wrong place, mate.’

Big John fished in his pocket and found a piece of paper.

‘Lower Farm, Mr and Mrs Hampton, cheap and cheerful bed and breakfast.’

Big John looked at him expectantly.....

‘Mate, I told you, you’ve got the wrong place.’

‘Where is it then?’ asked Big John.

‘How do I know? You’ve got the address and this ain’t it.’

‘Just a minute,’ said Big John and ambled back to the car. ‘He says it isn’t them.’

‘Don’t tell me you’ve got us lost.....again.....you dozy clown,’ his missus said. ‘Well, the kids need a loo, so ask the man if we can use his and we’ll go.’

Big John ambled back over to the door and explained the problem.

‘Can’t help you, mate; you’ll have to find somewhere else.’

He ambled back and explained to his wife, who got out of the car and stormed to the door. ‘You can’t help the kids? Why can’t you help the kids? They only want to use the loo! It’s not much to ask, is it? The kids to use the loo?.....What have you got against my kids? They’re well behaved, aren’t they? Aren’t they.....?’

At that point, the door opened wider, and another man said, ‘What’s going on?’

Before his compatriot could say a word, Mrs Big John launched into a tirade about cruelty to children, the NSPCC, paedophiles and perverts generally.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ said the latecomer, ‘let the kids use the loo and let’s get on. Just the kids, right?’

‘Right.’

The kids ran from the car, piled in the house, scampered around until directed to the loos, then ran back to the car.

‘Thank you very much,’ shouted Mrs Big John through the car window as they turned around and headed back down the lane. After thirty minutes, Big John found a Cafe, and they settled down to a healthy tea time full English breakfast.

‘Right,’ said Big John, ‘you first, Emma.....’

'I saw two men, dad, but I heard two others speaking in another room, so I had a quick peek.....'

'Describe the rooms, Emma.....' and he gave her a pad and a pencil...

Big John sent one of his men down to watch the to-ings and fro-ings, and then exactly a week later they paid the farm another visit. As dusk descended, a large JCB chugged its way up the lane to the farmhouse..... and kept going straight through the front door! Several men followed with guns.

It was all over in seconds.

The occupants were trussed up and gagged, and the money, with the equipment, put into a lorry that waited on the drive. Big John had also been told to establish who was the forger of the team, which he achieved with an enthusiastic display of violence, and he was taken away into the night.

A few hours later the currency was on its way to Portugal, where Hathaway's contact would sell it on for about forty percent of its face value, which was about two point five mil. Hathaway would get sixty percent and H forty. The forger was re-employed by a London mob looking for a touch more expertise in the dodgy money area.

Everyone was happy.

Chapter 66

The Wedding

Hathaway looked very dapper in his superbly tailored Savile Row suit, handmade Salvatore Ferragamo shoes and deep blue silk tie that he had bought in Xi'an when he had been to see the Terracotta Army at the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor.

It was eight weeks after the death of the twins, and while he still sunk into despair when alone with his thoughts, he had cast off the melancholy for this weekend and for his lovely daughter, who was marrying a boy from a local, well-to-do Spanish family.

While having no interest in religion, he was happy to take it as it came, and he found the traditional Roman Catholic wedding fascinating. When they were at the altar, his new son-in-law gave Patricia thirteen gold coins as a symbol of his love and unquestionable trust, pledging that he placed all of his goods into her care and safekeeping. Acceptance by Patricia meant taking that trust and confidence unconditionally with total dedication and prudence. Ernest found himself thinking that if he had had a Roman Catholic wedding, he may now be financially much better off and giving his wife a good fucking.....

The symbolic coins, so Ernest learned later, originated in the 17th century, twelve of the coins representing the twelve apostles and the other the giver.

He watched, fascinated, as a large lasso, el lazo, made up of entwined orange blossoms, was placed around their heads in a figure of eight to symbolise unity.

In a peculiar way, Ernest was moved by this outward display of love and devotion and could see, perhaps, how the Roman Catholic Church had understood the needs of people and the importance of enduring pomp and ceremony much more than the Church of England. Even though it was all bullshit!

In the vast marquee on the lawns of the hotel, the guests mingled and chatted amiably, fuelled by expensive food and obscenely expensive wines and champagnes. The weekend had cost Hathaway nearly fifty thousand, but it was his only daughter, and he wanted her to be proud of him....and his in-laws to know he was a man of substance.

Not a man who usually drunk too much, Hathaway had decided it was the one time in his life he could 'let go', so he refilled his champagne glass and wandered outside to immediately bump into his wife. His champagne spilled, and the sparkling liquid watered the grass. Hathaway made a mental calculation and thought that represented about fifteen quid.

'Sorry,' she said.

Ernest struggled for a second. *Sorry!?* When was the last time he had heard her say *sorry*? Oh yes, it had been when she said ‘I am so sorry I ever met you.’ Charming.

‘It was my fault.’

‘Come,’ she said, taking his arm, ‘tell me what’s going on in your life,’ and guided him over to a quiet seating area. Ernest was lost. Who was this woman? The bitch, the cow? Who was this being nice to him? Ernest assumed she must be drunk, but he knew she was not. Sitting down, she pulled her seat close to his. ‘Tell me, Ernest.....’ *Ernest? Ernest?* ‘.....how is everything going? Tell me about where you are now in life. Tell me.....’

She sounded quite sincere, so Ernest stumbled and stuttered about his business, his life generally, the loss of ‘two close friends’ until he ran out of things to say. She listened intently, and when he had mentioned his ‘loss’, she had squeezed his hand affectionately.

‘Time has moved a long way since we were married, Ernest,’ she said softly, ‘things have happened, things been said, things misconstrued.....’

I didn’t *misconstrue* you sucking off the pool boy, thought Hathaway and immediately felt guilty. Whatever was going on, he didn’t really need to drag that up.....again.

‘..... and I would like to tell you where I am now.....’

Where I am now? Thought Hathaway, *where I am now?* What the hell was this? Had she become a psychiatrist?

‘.....and then I want to suggest something.....’ he heard her say.

She talked at some length about their past, their problems, their differing lives and needs, and how, over time, those variances.....

Variances, thought Ernest, we had *variances*. I supposed if I had sucked off the gardener, there would have been no *variance*...

‘.....those variances become less like peaks that we cannot climb and so restrict us, more like hills and valleys to be walked and enjoyed.....’

Ernest was lost. *Variances, peaks, hills and valleys to be enjoyed*. Eh..? She carried on, and it seemed to Ernest that she was making an effort for a reconciliation.

Reconciliation? Surely not. He must have misheard. Damn champagne...

‘Marion,’ he said, ‘this is a bit confusing for me, and I may be mishearing everything you have just said, so could you sort of sum it up in one sentence.....please.’

‘Yes....I’d like us to try again.’

‘Us?’

She nodded.

‘Together?’

She nodded.

‘Again?’

She nodded.

‘Honestly?’

‘Completely and utterly.’

Ernest was ecstatic. He was joyous. This woman who had fucked half the world when they were together, but who he completely and utterly adored wanted him back!

‘How?’ stuttered Ernest.

‘I will move back to England if you want me to, and we will resume as man and wife. I know it may be difficult for you, but I have thought about this for a long time and very much want this to happen.’

He shook his head in continuing disbelief. ‘When?’ he croaked.

‘I suggest I spend the next three or four weeks getting my, our, place on the coast ready for my departure and then we just use it as an escape, or we can sell it. Whatever you want.....’

Our place on the coast; whatever I want. Ernest could still not believe it. ‘Have you talked to anyone else about this?’ he asked with just a hint of paranoia.

‘I’ve talked it over quite a lot with Patricia and told her I would speak to you today to see if there were any chance you would have me back....’

Have you back, have you back? Are you joking?

‘Would you give it a try, my love?’ she asked, looking deep into his eyes.

My love?

He nodded, smiled and held back tears he desperately wanted to shed.

She gripped his hand tightly; her face beamed. 'Let's go and tell Patricia.'

They got up, enquired as to the whereabouts of Patricia and were told that the newly married couple had gone down to the lake. They walked through the perfumed garden to the lake which opened up before them, passing through the deep red, scented carnations that surrounded it. Smart marketing, thought Hathaway, not quite casting off his businessman's hat and using his extensive horticultural knowledge, that they had deep red carnations, which he knew were supposed to represent deep love and affection. A pair of black swans with three tiny fluffy cygnets glided lazily along the shore and paid no attention.

Hathaway was feeling life as he had not felt it in such a long time. It was wonderful. All this time.....

He felt joy.

He felt happiness.

His daughter getting married, he remarried.....

Their daughter and son-in-law were sitting on a simple wooden seat with their backs to them, and Patricia had her head cradled on his shoulder. Ernest was overwhelmed with the emotion. Not for years had he felt such raw, unconditional happiness. This was as it should be, and he realised how he had yearned for it, all these lonely, barren years. Marion skipped a few paces ahead to tell Patricia and started to say 'Daddy and I....' when she screamed. A dreadful, piercing, wailing scream.....

Hathaway rushed to her, and as he looked upon them, a hammer smashed into his heart, and his breath left him. The blood coming out of their chests had stopped and dried in the beautiful summer sun, and their faces were peaceful as they faced eternity together.....

Marion looked at Ernest through her tear filled face. 'Who would do this.....?' she wailed, 'who.....?'

He held her close. 'I don't know.....'

The police were swarming over the scene in minutes, taking statements, measurements, samples. From what they could establish, the shots must have come from a wooded area across the lake where they found footprints and an imprint in the grass where someone had lain down, presumably to take aim.

The next day Patricia's previous boyfriend was brought in for questioning. A hot head he had taken their split badly and had threatened her, but after fourteen hours of questioning they let him go. Though the police were not convinced of his innocence, he had a cast-iron alibi from his current girlfriend, who he had 'spent the afternoon in bed with'.

Three weeks later he was again arrested. He was drunk in a bar and boasted of the killing of Patricia, and someone tipped off the police. This time they kept him for questioning for three days. They did exhaustive forensic tests on his clothes and skin and went to the house where he lived with his mother and took it apart for the murder weapon. In his bedroom,

under a wardrobe, they found a loose floorboard. On inspection, the homemade hideaway came up with little treasures, but nothing in the way of a gun. There was a nice stash of pornography and some pretty ladies' shoes, lipstick and eyeliner. It seemed he had one secret at least. In the end, they let him go again, and when they did, he smirked a very knowing smirk.....

Four weeks later they found him floating in the lake of the hotel where the bride and groom had been shot. The police decided it was suicide and made little play of the bruises around his neck.....

Hathaway knew it was not suicide.....he had paid a lot of money for this particular death.

Chapter 67

Marion

Marion's plans to be back in England with Ernest were put back a little due to the death of Patricia. Ernest spent more time in Spain helping Marion get sorted out, then flew Patricia to England to be buried in their local family church where her grandparents were buried.

In due course, they handed over their Spanish home to a company who would look after it in their absence and left for England. Although both had been apprehensive of the move, it had worked well, and their loving reunion helped them through the long nights when Patricia invaded their thoughts.

Ernest put the Chateau in France up for sale, and it was bought in days by an ex-stripper who had gone into films and made it big. It was not exactly who Ernest would have chosen to inhabit the elegant chateau, but life with Marion was mellowing him, and he decided he didn't give a shit. She had bought it and all its contents and paid a good price with no haggling so fuck it!

All that was left to do was take the helicopter to France, complete the sale, hand over the keys and head back home. Marion did not want to go, as the Chateau had been part of Ernest's life and not hers, so she stayed in Surrey.

After the signing, a party had been arranged to celebrate the exchange, and he stayed a short while out of politeness, but as soon as he could, he excused himself and set off back.

Sitting next to the pilot, he could not help but think how his life had changed. So much despair, so much happiness, so much despair and now life with Marion..... A roller coaster he could have done without. He never thought he would get over the death of the boys, then the death of Patricia, but with Marion at his side, there was less a past to remember, more a future to look forward to.

It had been a long time since he had felt like this. Forward-looking. Perhaps the last time was when he met Marion, and now here he was meeting her all over again.

It was wonderful.....quite wonderful.

It brought him to a decision he had made. He had decided to give up his old life. The capers would stop, and he would sell his businesses and retire. Maybe just keep one that gave him a bit of a pension and allowed him to get his cars cheap and a few things that could be bought and not pay the vat.

Who knows?

But either way, he was out.....

He disembarked at a small local airport and drove the seven miles home in the Bentley. The electric doors obeyed his command to open, and he parked inside the four-bay garage

next to the Mercedes Coupe and his wife's Mercedes Sports. Walking into the sun, the doors closed behind him, and he went to the side door of the house.

Letting himself in, he shouted, 'Marion.'

There was no reply, but it was hardly surprising as it was a large house, and you could happily lose a football team in there. Ernest wandered around downstairs and peered out into the garden, but no Marion. Climbing the stairs, he walked towards their bedroom and heard the shower running in their en-suite. He called, but realised she could not hear, so went in to surprise her. Through the steam, he saw one arm protruding from under the shower curtain and frantically ripped it to one side to see her lying naked. She was quite still with a hypodermic needle embedded in one arm.

Kneeling down, he pulled her to him, but it was too late.

She was dead.....

Completely numb, he sat down by her, looking at her.

This couldn't be happening.....

How could this be happening?

The boys...

His daughter...

His beloved Marion...

How could life be this cruel.....?

He felt an incredible empty bleakness..... and then a dreadful pain ripped through his body and then..... nothing.....

Chapter 68

The moon in June.....

H had also been doing some thinking, and at breakfast decided to ask Benny her opinion.

‘I have an idea, and I need your opinion.’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Well, I need to explain it properly, so why don’t we have a night in and a good meal, and I can take you through it at leisure?’

‘OK.’

After breakfast, Benny went off with her friend Carmen to Harvey Nicks and H to Secure Security. He had a meeting with the manager, and they arranged further training for their limo drivers. It just wasn’t enough nowadays to be able to point, drive and park!

When it came closer to lunch, he got a cab to the Blue Door Bistro tucked away in the Montague Hotel close to the British Museum. H quite liked its genteel atmosphere, light and airy dining room, and they did a mean steak. Walking in, he saw Terry already sitting at a table drinking Evian.

‘Terry.’

‘James, how are you?’

‘Good.’

‘Fully recovered?’

James looked at his watch. ‘Half past six.’

They both giggled like schoolboys at the old joke.

James sat. ‘I’m starving.’

‘What are we having?’ asked Terry.

‘Well, I usually have steak, but we’re eating in tonight, so.....fish for me, I think.’

‘Suits me. Too much, and all I want to do is sleep all afternoon.’

Terry called over a waiter, and they ordered.

‘So...’ said H, ‘how’s it going?’

‘OK....’

‘Only ok?’

‘It’s proving a touch difficult, James.’

‘How so? My credit not good enough?’

‘It’s yes and no to that, but there are other....minor complications.’

‘Minor?’

‘Sort of...’

‘Terry. What the fuck are you trying to say?’

‘Twenty-five mil is a lot, James.’

‘Only if you can’t raise it.’

‘To raise it, you would have to guarantee the loan, which you can’t. Or bring in one or two partners, people we knew.’

‘You know I won’t do that.’

‘I know. But you’re not big enough, creditworthy enough or have as much influence as one or two people who are also smelling the ground. Let’s face it, the big boys will snap it up, and you can’t compete with them.’

H said nothing.

‘James, we have known each other a while, and I would have no problem, you know that. My masters, however, see one or two clouds on the horizon if we go down this route, and they do not like clouds....I’m sorry.’

‘Talk me through everything, and then at least I can work out how to get over these perceived hurdles. But no chance from your lot?’

‘Sorry.’

‘You’re paying for lunch then.’

‘You ok about this?’

‘Business is a bit like poker. There are good beats and bad beats. Poker is the mirror to life.....’

‘Lost ten grand last month.’

‘Shit!’ said H. ‘And *I’m* a bad bet?’

After lunch, H went round to an indoor market and bought a superb piece of hung fillet steak to go with the minted potato salad that Benny would prepare with fresh vegetables she would buy on the way home.

It was what they did. H cooked the meat, ‘a man’s job’, while Benny created the salad, ‘a woman’s job’. In the middle of this procedure, she once said, ‘Apropos our conversation re a

man' and a woman's role, and in the light of increasing acceptance of homosexuality, whose job was it now to suck a dick?' James thought a moment and gave his Solomonesque judgment. 'It's blows job' and giggled stupidly.

In the kitchen, H cauterised the steak by placing it in a red-hot frying pan and turning it until all its sides were seared, and the juices would no longer get out, then he put it under the grill, but not too close. He turned it after twelve minutes, then after another twelve, it was ready. It joined the mint vegetables on the slightly warm plate, and they sat down.

H raised his Riedel Cristal glass. 'To us.'

'Forever,' she said affectionately.

The word *forever* hit H hard in his chest. That someone would love him and be with him *forever*, he found incredibly moving. He knocked a fork off the table, and as he retrieved it, he wiped his moist eyes with his sleeve.

Composed again, Benshima watched James, as she knew they were in the 'ritual tasting of the steak'. She watched him put a slice in his mouth.....wait for it.....

James savoured the steak for a moment. It was wonderful. It had a succulent taste with just enough blood, and its texture meant that it chewed easily. As a steak should.

About now, thought Benshima. *About now...*

'Not sure.....what do you think?'

She smiled. The steak was always wonderful, but James just wanted her to say so.

'Mmmmmm wonderful.'

'Not too dry?'

'Not too dry.'

'Tasty?'

'Tasty.'

'Good then?'

'Good.'

'Just good?'

'Very, very good.'

'OK,' he said, pleased, and tucked in. When they were half way through the meal, Benny said, 'You wanted my opinion on something?'

'Oh, yes,' said H, 'two things actually.'

'Won't be a min.' He went into the bedroom, opened a drawer and came back with an A4-size photograph holder with a piece of paper in it, and something typed on it.

'It's not very good. It's er....actually....it's er, actually....a poem.'

'A poem? Where did you get it?'

'My head.....'

The Beach

As she's sitting on the plane
Only her smile betrays the strain
Of the flight that is before her
So she nestles down to sleep
Knowing it will keep
The demons still within her

As she steps out of the plane
She starts to live again
As the heat cocoons her
Her senses seek the sea
Where she knows she'll be
Cleansed of all within her

*Benshima goes down to the beach
Extends her arms to reach
The stars that shine above her
They greet a child they know
They caress the child below
The planets move around her*

The sea invites her in
Like a long lost twin
Dolphins swim to greet her
Down and down they dive
Her body comes alive
Their grace bestowed upon her

She swims farther out to sea
Renewing her decree
That life must live within her
Her body feels a thrill
She knows they always will

Be waiting there to love her

She stays for quite some time
Till everything is fine
And peace returns within her
So now it's just once more
She goes down to the shore
Gives thanks to all before her

*Benshima goes down to the beach
Extends her arms to reach
The stars that shine above her
They greet a child they know
They caress the child below
The planets move around her*

'I think it's beautiful,' said Benny.

'Are you sure it's ok? Not a bit naff?'

'It's beautiful.'

'I started it in Barbados, in my head, and finished it at your family home.'

She got up, went over and kissed him. 'Thank you.'

He nodded a bit sheepishly. Killing, maiming, looting, and pillaging were all in a day's work, but giving Benny a poem was proving very uncomfortable. Please God, let no one else find out!

‘Oh, and I also wanted your opinion on something else...’

‘You’ve written the music to go with it?’

‘Naah.’

‘I was joking.....what else do you want my opinion on?’

‘I was wondering what you thought of marriage? You and me.....marriage?’

‘Yes.’

‘Eh?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘Just like that...’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes?’

It was what H wanted, but somehow hadn’t seen it this way. His face mirrored his perplexity.

‘James, I would have married you the first day I met you if you’d asked.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes?’

‘Let’s not do this again, James.’

‘But I did ask you. I asked you to be with me...and you said no.’

‘Is that the same as “Please marry me”?’

‘No.’

‘There you go then.’

She sat on his lap; he held her tight.....held her safe.....as he said he would.

After the meal, when they were half asleep together on the large sofa, Benny suddenly shot up, went to the bedroom and came back with an envelope which she handed to H. 'I completely forgot about this. It was left on your bedside table at the hospital, and no one knows who left it.'

H looked at the envelope and its inscription:

*This envelope must only be opened by James James
The contents are confidential
and for his eyes only*

'This envelope must only be opened by James James?' He looked at her quizzically. 'What do you mean, "no one knows who left it"?''

'Well, they gave it to me when I was well enough to have it, but I didn't pay it much heed, and I am afraid, "the mists of time", as they say.'

'It's a bit worrying that someone came in and nobody knows who.'

'Not really. You're assuming that whoever left the envelope was unknown to us and therefore up to no good. How can you know that when you haven't even opened it? It could be off Toby or one of the men.'

'True,' he said 'true....'

He opened the envelope, and Benny watched his face as a range of emotions passed like clouds over it. His arms went to his sides; he just stood there motionless and speechless.

'What is it?' asked a concerned Benny. 'What's wrong?'

He handed her the letter. She read it quickly and said, 'What's it mean? Who is this person?'

H read the letter through again.

Dear James,

I read of your 'accident' and wanted to help.

I was given a special dispensation by the Abbot to visit you (I should point out that in the three-hundred-year history of our Monastery, this is the first time a dispensation has been given to allow the Vow of Stability to be broken – that is, we vow never to leave the Monastery).

Also, I was allowed to take to the hospital our most Holy Bible, the original Bible that our founder used when he first started the Monastery.

I came to your bedside and prayed for you, and if you are now reading this letter, Our Lord has answered my prayers and decided, in his wisdom, that you should live.

I have thought about you, occasionally, for twenty years, as you were the vehicle that allowed me to find The Lord and for that, I will be eternally grateful.

Go with God,

Brother George (you may remember me as 'Clown' from the building site)

'Fuck me!' exclaimed H. 'Fuckin' Clown! Fucking hell! Fuck me!'

'I think we get the drift, James,' reproved Benny, 'but what's it all about?'

He told her about Arthur and Clown and its conclusion at 'The Enclosure'.

'And he finds God, for Christ's sake...I knock his teeth out, break his wrists, break his leg and leave him on the floor to rot, and he finds God!'

He thought for several moments then bounded out of the room. 'I must ring Arthur.....fuck me.'

Chapter 69

Mmmmm....?

They set a date for three months hence, and life went on in the meantime.

H sat down one day and, unbeknown to him, went through the same process that Hathaway had undertaken. He took stock.

Hathaway was no longer around, and the opportunity for capers had dried up considerably. He could have found other streams of intelligence, but so far he hadn't pursued it.

Maybe there was no need for capers?

Maybe it was enough without capers?

Maybe just the odd caper?

Maybe just one or two every so often.....?

The clubs were making good money, and he could add two or three more.

Secure Security was doing extremely well, and he thought a subsidiary in the Middle East had vast potential.

And then there was the other project....but Terry, the *banker*, hadn't come up with the money. That was still a line he had to pursue.

It was only twenty-five mil for Christ's sake!

Chapter 70

Leave the girls to it...?

Two weeks before the wedding, which Benshima had arranged in a tiny Roman Catholic Church in a small village to the west of London, Senor and Senora Reyes arrived from Colombia to spend some time in the Capital before the festivities. Although invited to stay at H's apartment, they had booked themselves into the Savoy Hotel on The Strand.

'The Savoy, Jose?' James had queried.

'Any Hotel who has employed both Cesar Ritz and Auguste Escoffier is doing something right, don't you think? Perhaps I should also add,' he said with a mischievous smile, 'we own a few shares in the Holding Company....which allows us a generous discount.'

A week before the wedding, they were having lunch, and Benshima suggested they all go to the National Gallery, which 'housed one of the most important assemblages of European Art in the world'. Much as James was loathe to miss this incredible event, he said, 'Would love to, but I've arranged to go and see a friend in a nursing home, but perhaps we could meet up later for dinner?'

‘Would you mind,’ said Senor Reyes, ‘if I joined you, James? The women are wearing me out, and an excursion would be good.’

‘Of course,’ said H, smiling, as he knew just how the Senor felt.

The Mercedes 600 SL headed out to the private Arbrook Nursing Home in Esher where H’s friend was being looked after. On the way, Senor Reyes asked, ‘Where do you go from here, James? In relation to business....? Indeed, do you want to go anywhere?’

James sighed. ‘It’s been occupying my mind a lot lately, and my first inclinations were to open another two or three clubs and take Secure Security over to the Middle East. But, you obviously don’t know this, but Ernest...where we’ve going....the man that’s ill.....Ernest had a large Group of businesses that have come up for sale. He’s got loads of stuff... car dealerships etc., but what he’s also got that interests me is a chain of betting shops, a casino, and an internet poker operation.

‘Now, I don’t actually know too much about Casinos, other than losing money in them, but I have spent a lot of time getting what information I need. Also, as you may remember, I started my life in betting shops and so I know a bit about them.....’

Senor Reyes listened.

‘Now, time has moved on in that industry, and I am years behind in relation to technology etcetera, but the underlying theme is the same.....make sure the odds are in your favour. Plus the fact these are already up and running, making money, and with an in-situ management and staff.....’

‘But....?’

‘The but is, I’m struggling to get the money. I thought I had a deal with my Bank, but they decided against it. I can’t offer enough collateral against the loan. While I’m prepared to put up the clubs and Secure Security as collateral, I’m not prepared to put up the apartment because if it all goes wrong, Benny and I need a home....’

James was reeling off his own thoughts, essentially to himself, and he didn’t notice the concentration in Jose’s face.

‘.....The clubs and the security make about two million a year pre-tax, which gives us a good living but does not allow me to borrow the twenty-five mil that I need.....’

‘How much does.....Ernest’s?.....Group make?’

‘Well....his thirty shops make about fifty grand a year each, which is at the low end of shops from what I can ascertain. The average is about seventy-five grand a year, but a good shop in a good location can do up to two hundred, so there should be room to manoeuvre them up a bit. Also, there are only three locations where they have Fixed Odds Betting Terminals, and I am not sure why.’

Jose looked at him, puzzled.

FOBTs, explained H, were essentially slot machines but different. They offered betting opportunities on roulette, horse racing, cards..... Serious gambling but against the machine and fixed odds.

‘And they’re only allowed in betting shops, nowhere else.....’

From the enquiries James had made from his gambling friends, the roulette was most popular, and he found out that in some betting shops the FOBT machines were the most profitable things in the place, far outstripping the over-the-counter trade. Jose nodded his understanding throughout the discourse. James had forgotten that in Bogotá alone there were seven casinos and that Senor Reyes may have actually had a minor knowledge of the subject...

‘The big boys,’ James continued ‘would pay about seven times the profit, so that’s about three fifty each, times thirty....say about ten to eleven million for the shops.’

Senor Reyes nodded.

‘The casino is different, and I’ve done a lot of digging about casino pricing.....’

Chapter 71

Cleggy

.....H had rung Adrian, an old friend of many years who ran a Casino in the West Midlands. H knew that Ade would give him absolutely no business information as Ade was one of those peculiar characters – honest. Ade would no more give sensitive information about his employer's business than rat on his mother, but Ade *would* point him in the right direction...

'Ring Cleggy,' said Ade, 'he can help you. He used to work for Stanley and did a lot on the casino side, and if anyone can help you price the deal, it's him..... And another thing, he's retired now, so don't expect to get the information for nothing. Cleggy's a hard bastard!'

'Thanks, Ade, appreciate it. Tell me, Ade, if I buy this place you going to run it for me?'

Ade thought for a moment. 'Excuse me asking, H, but are you thinking of this as a business or as the.....*front*...to something else?'

'As a business, Ade. Stand-alone, cost and profit centre.'

'Then I would certainly talk, H, yes.'

'Good. Be in touch.'

'Is that Cleggy Jenkins?'

‘It could be,’ said the voice on the other end of the phone.

‘Who’s asking?’

H explained who he was and that he had been given the number by Ade and what he needed. ‘Can you help me?’

‘It’ll cost.’

‘What will it cost?’

‘A grand.’

‘No thanks, I’ll find someone else. Appreciate your time. Take care.....’ H paused long enough before he disconnected.

‘Hang on, hold on, we can sort something out.’

‘Like what?’

‘How about a monkey and a case of good wine?’

‘I can do that. But the monkey stays in my pocket, and the wine in the boot, until I know you can give me what I want.

OK?’

‘OK.’

‘White or red?’

‘Red.’

Cleggy was in his mid-sixties and looked good for his age. He had obviously been an active person in his life, and it showed. H wondered how the hell he had done that while he was in the gaming industry, what with the long days and longer nights. Cleggy sat him in the lounge and made coffee. ‘So you want to buy a casino?’

‘Yep.’

‘And if I give you a rough price and how we got to it, I get the monkey and the wine?’

‘Yep.’

‘OK.’

‘As it happens, there is one for sale in Birmingham at the moment for about eight million, but it’s been on the market for two years, and so I think we can assume it’s bit pricey. More than likely nearer six and a half would be my bet.’

‘How much do you think it makes pre-tax?’

‘Don’t know, but at a guess, between, say..... eight hundred and one point one.....something like that.’

He looked quizzically at H. ‘What do you know about Casinos?’

‘They seem to be good at taking money....? I suppose I don’t go often enough to get a feel for the business. I think the last time I was in one was about....’ he thought for a moment, ‘maybe six months ago.....’

.....In fact, it was eight months earlier, and H remembered the night. He had got into a poker game and limped in with Aces, catching one of the players off guard who had Kings and had gone all in, thinking his hand was good. It had cleaned him out; the buy-ins had passed, so he was gone..... He glared at H and hissed ‘Cunt’ as he left the table.

When H left later in the evening, he was getting into his car when he heard a thump on the passenger’s side and saw the Player from earlier in the evening had kicked the door of the Merc. H got back out of the car.

‘Scratched your door, cunt,’ said Player. ‘What ya gonna do?’

In the bright overhead lights of the car park, H appraised his assailant. About five eight, heavy build, solid, flattish nose, cauliflower ears. Maybe a rugby player but more than likely an ex-boxer.

‘I don’t want any trouble.’

‘You limped in.....made me look a cunt.’

‘I’m new at the game; I didn’t know.’

‘Give me my money back.’

‘You lost it in the game; I didn’t steal it off you.’

‘Give it me back or pay the price.’

‘I don’t want any trouble, so I’m going.’

He marched around to the driver’s side. Definitely a boxer.....good. More than likely a light heavy in his younger days, but now he was bigger, but still in good shape.

‘You’re going nowhere until I get my money and more for making me look a cunt.’

H stepped back a pace, facing player, and instantly held up both his palms near his upper chest. Player instinctively threw a punch at one of the palms. *Years of training*, thought H, *years of training*. The punch wasn’t designed to hurt, just hit the hand. An automatic old training routine, a demonstration of expertise. The instant it did, H held it with the other and twisted it sharply outwards while at the same time pushing the wrist under and upwards. Player screamed at the excruciating pain. To avoid the pain and the inevitable break of the arm and wrist if H went farther, he was tottering on one leg and raised on his toes. Agony was contorting his face.

‘You kicked my car,’ said H. ‘You’re gonna have to pay for that. What say we call it five thou?’

‘Fuck off,’ and then screamed as the wrist broke.

‘I haven’t got that...I haven’t got that.....’ His voice was changing.....

‘How much have you got?’

Player didn’t want to say, but: ‘Three....three....’

‘Where is it?’

‘Inside pocket.’

‘I am going to take it out. If you so much as move a muscle, I will break your arm....and that will be the start. Understand?’

Player did not reply. H put more pressure on Player’s arm, and Player screamed in agony as the pain overwhelmed him.

‘I asked you a fucking question, and I expect an answer...do....you...understand?’

‘Yes,’ he replied instantly.

H took out the wallet, flipped it open and saw the notes. Looked about right.

‘You got a car here?’ asked H, applying more pressure.

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ he screamed.

‘Where?’

‘Over there.’

‘Take me.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Billy.’

‘Billy what?....goat?’

‘Simmons.’

H thought that the name struck a chord but couldn't recall where. With Billy still on tiptoe he took H to a new BMW Coupe.

'Nice,' said H. 'How much? Fifty, sixty?'

'Sixty-five.'

'Mmmmm..... Open it.'

'My keys are in the other pocket. I can't reach.'

H fished in his pocket, took the keys out and pressed the remote. The doors unlocked, and H opened the driver's door.

'OK, let me précis this..... I take a few quid off you at cards. You don't like that and decide to get your money back by scratching my car and hurting me. Is that right?'

'Yes.....yes.'

'Mmmmm.'

H led him nearer the side of the car, then grabbed his hair and smashed his face down onto the roof. The mixed sounds of denting metal, cracking teeth, breaking nose and squashed flesh made an almost musical note. H quite liked that. It appealed to his sense of the ridiculous. Air on a Merc Roof. Not quite what Bach had imagined..... but there were no Mercs around then for his imagination to work on.

Billy was dazed and half-conscious, and H steered him into the car. Bright red blood dripped over white doe leather. H moved him around so that it dripped everywhere, then dragged him out and took him round to the boot. He looked at the remote, saw the symbol, pressed it and watched it slowly and silently rise. Seeing the golf bag inside, he pulled out a

club. He noticed it was a seven iron, although he had no idea what a seven iron was, but it was enough that the club head looked quite vicious.

‘Now, you got a mobile?’

A quiet and meek voice said ‘Yeah...in my pocket.’

H fished it out and stamped on it. H had had enough. It was late, and a long way home. Ah well...

He swung Billy round fast enough that he lost his balance, and as he went down, he caught the side window of the car head on, smashing what was left of his face. As he slid to the ground, H forced his arm up until it snapped at the shoulder. He bundled the unconscious Billy into his car then walked around it, smashing it with the seven iron. Door panels, windows, lights, wing mirrors were decimated. He fished inside the car, found the catch and opened the bonnet. The electronics and aluminium block were also destroyed. Going back into the car, he propped up Billy in the seat, closed the door and went back to the Casino, where he found the Manager talking to one of the doormen.

‘Johnny...’

‘H? Thought you’d gone.’

‘Had a bit of a problem with a guy from the table. He says his name’s Billy.’

The Manager and doorman took a quick look at each other. Billy? Bit of a problem with Billy? Nah...can’t be our Billy. Our Billy is an ex-champion boxer and can handle

himself.....Billy?

‘You’ll find him in the car park. You’ll know his car when you see it.’

Johnny knew of H. He had heard the tales...but most tales were exaggerated bullshit. But if it was Billy?

‘I’m sorry for any trouble H.’

‘It’s ok, Johnny...it’s ok. These things happen.’

He turned back towards the car park, then turned around again as though he had forgotten something. ‘And one more thing, Johnny: would you kindly tell Billy that if he ever bothers me again, I’ll kill him.’

It was quite matter-of-fact because it was a *matter of fact*. The Manager’s face went white, and a chill swept through his body. For some reason, he had absolutely no doubt whatsoever that H would kill Billy. No doubt whatsoever. Oh fuck!

H went back to his car and looked at the damage on the passenger’s door. Peering closely, he could only see the faintest of marks. Ah well.... a grand for a cut and polish and two grand for....something nice for Benshima.

Johnny and Eric, the doorman, went to the car park and looked for Billy’s new Beamer. What they saw was a bit of a shock.

‘Fuckin’ hell!’ spluttered Eric, who was not averse to a bit of carnage himself, but this... The car was destroyed, and Billy was unconscious with an arm dangling at a funny angle and

his face smashed in. There was blood everywhere.....

'I don't get it,' said Eric, 'Billy can beat the shit out of anybody, and here we have what looks like a fuckin' car bomb's gone off and Billy half dead.' He paused for a moment, trying to remember 'H didn't look bothered at all... In fact, his fuckin' suit wasn't even fuckin' creased....fuck me.'

Johnny took a deep breath and remembered what Ade had said about H: 'A really nice guy, but you must never cross him. From what I gather, he doesn't do things in half measures.....if you know what I mean.'

Johnny didn't. But now he did. I think Billy boy was a lucky lad, thought Johnny, a very lucky lad.

.....H let the memory go and looked at Cleggy.....what had he said? oh yes, what did he know about casinos? 'They seem to be good at making money...'

'They are, but not as good as you would think. If they win too much, the punters don't come back, so the gross profit is quite low, and you would expect it to be at the twenty percent level. Of which the tables are about seventeen percent and the slots about nineteen. The tables make up about eighty percent of the take, so you can see the slots have a better contribution. Actually, the margin on the slots per go is quite low, but of course what happens is that winnings are immediately put back, so although the margin is low, the churn is very high.'

‘A provincial casino will have maybe fifty thousand customers, but half will not visit in any one year. The average punter visits between nine and twelve times a year and gives a profit to the casino of about thirty pounds.’

‘You getting all this?’

‘Oh yes.....Oh yes.’

‘OK. As to price. A provincial may be making between, say.....eight hundred and.....one point two million, which means the cost to you is more than likely between eight and a half and thirteen million. You got that kind of money?’

H ignored him.

‘OK, you can get the money, but the main problem is the Gaming Board – actually the *Gambling Commission* now. They’ve moved up to the Midlands, Birmingham, whereas they used to be in London.

‘Anyhow.....

‘Obviously, you will need a Personal Management Licence, which you won’t have, but I assume the current Manager will have, so that should be ok. But you will still have to obtain a Certificate of Consent to allow you to buy a Casino.’

‘Why?’

‘Because gaming laws in Britain are incredibly strict, and before you can buy a Casino, you have to show that you are a ‘proper’ person within the meaning and the spirit of the Act. That means the money you pay for the casino is scrutinised. You have to show that every damn penny is legitimate. It’s as simple as that! And....you will need to show that even though

you don't know too much about casinos, you have at least one expert that does.....' He held up his hands and waved them evangelically.

'Your Saviour has descended.....'

H just looked at him and smiled. If he could get Ade on board, he may not need Cleggy, but it may be a good idea to have Cleggy. He looked at things.....differently. Unabashed, Cleggy continued, 'Now, assuming you can jump all those hurdles, there is one bit of good news.'

'It would help,' said H, who was working out whether all his money could be scrutinised. In actual fact, his businesses were on the level and only the proceeds from his *extra curricular activities*, which were in Switzerland anyhow, could be suspect.

'The good news. Up to now Casinos have not, since the 1968 Gaming Act, been able to advertise. In the trade, it was called *unstimulated demand*, and it was a complete bastard. You could not stimulate demand. The whole world could advertise but not the gambling industry.'

He stopped for a moment and took a sip of cold coffee. 'However, in the new 2007 Act, which comes into being in four months, the gambling industry *will* be able to stimulate demand. Good, eh?'

'Sounds bloody wonderful.'

'It is, but don't forget that may push up the price of the casino as it has more potential to make money.'

'OK.'

‘More coffee?’

‘Please.’

He put the kettle on and swilled out the cups. When they were done, he handed one to H who helped himself to the sugar bowl.

‘Did you know,’ said Cleggy ‘one of the overheads in some large casinos in Vegas is the cost of oxygen?’

H looked perplexed. ‘Oxygen?’

‘Yeah. How do you think all those people keep awake all night and why you feel so bad when you leave and go into the open air?’

‘Oxygen?’

‘Yeah. They pump it through the aircon system continually. Good, eh? Anyhow, back to your casino. Nowadays it’s all about providing add-ons to get people in and keep them in. Sports bar, cheap but good grub, maybe a gym, etc. etc. You have to attract the punters as there is a lot of competition out there. You have to get them, look after them and keep them loyal. They are incredibly fickle. And remember, a casino wants their punters to win....relatively often...say four times out of ten. There has to be a hook. *A gambler needs hope.*’

They chatted some more, and H had what he wanted. And Cleggy, for a consideration, would also help with the pricing and an assessment of the casino. Good! As he was getting up to leave, Cleggy said, ‘Do you play poker?’

H nodded.

‘Internet or casino?’

‘Both, but mainly internet, as it’s less time-consuming.’

‘What stakes?’

‘Usually two fifty or five hundred.’

‘No Limit Holdem?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Format?’

‘Usually six-table.’

‘Do you win?’

‘On average.....yeah.’

Cleggy smiled.

‘Why are you smiling?’

‘You’ve been lucky.’

‘Lucky...?’

‘Oh yeah.’

‘How so.....?’

‘You’ve never met the Fabulous Four.’

‘Eh?’

Cleggy thought for a minute. ‘You and me level playing?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I’ll show you.....’

Cleggy led H through the house, across the garden to a summer house that had been converted into a kind of games room, and inside four men sat at computers. On the monitors showed a poker table. H looked at the screens, and each had

the same image. The same table. The same table ID. Six players around the table, game just started, second hand playing.

'Watch the Fabulous Four at work,' said Cleggy, and pulled up a chair for H to sit on.

As the game progressed, it was obvious what was happening. It was the four men sitting in the room, acting as one, against the two unsuspecting punters at the table. It didn't take long. Twenty minutes later, it was all over. The two punters were out, and the remaining two went *all in* to finish it and get a winner and runner-up. H looked enquiringly at Cleggy, but he had already done the maths. A five-hundred game with a thirty-pound buy-in. Total winning pot three thousand. The cost of entry for the four men was two thousand one hundred and twenty. Potential winnings eight hundred and eighty quid. The game was over in less than twenty minutes; call it half an hour. The best part of nineteen hundred quid an hour. Shit! Split between five it was three hundred and eighty each. An hour! Tax-free!

Cleggy looked at H. 'Like it?'

H thought for a moment. 'Yes and no.'

Cleggy waited...

'As a businessman, I like the model. In fact, I like the model very much. As a punter, I don't. No matter how good I am, if I meet your guys, I lose. That about right?'

'Absolutely.'

'Fucking hell.'

Cleggy warmed to his subject. 'There's no way you can win against these guys unless you get Aces every hand. And even if you do, you know as well as I that Aces look good as a starter but play badly against four, and you will lose.'

'It's peculiar. I sort of knew the internet was crooked but somehow never thought of it in any depth and *never* assumed that it would affect me. Bit naive, I think.'

Cleggy shrugged.

'But surely the computers pick up your patterns? Same four people, same games, same winners. *Surely* they see the pattern?'

Cleggy looked hurt. 'Do we *look* stupid? Do *I* look stupid?'

The Fabulous Four all turned and glared at him in a hurt and offended way.

H held up his hands and shrugged in mock apology.

'We have lots of different names, and we never play the same four names twice. We also move from site to site.'

H shook his head from side to side. 'I'm never playing on the net again....'

Cleggy grinned. 'We don't want to spoil your fun, so I'll give you the secret code.'

'Secret code?'

H was thinking it was all starting to sound a bit ridiculous. Secret codes?

'Although the player names are all different,' explained Cleggy 'there are numbers behind the names like most internet players. It's either because their name has gone and so they

have to add a number to make it different, like James1234, or they put their birthday, like James 200447 etcetera. Well, we put a number behind, but they all add up to the same total. That number is twenty. It's essentially a *check sum*. So all you have to do is look at the lobby and just check that more than one doesn't add up to twenty. If they do, look for another game.....'

Chapter 72

Ernest

‘.....The casino,’ continued H to Senor Reyes, ‘makes about a million a year, which means it will cost about eleven mil or so. In relative terms, it’s not a big earner, but of course it’s cash. No bad debt and excellent cash flow. The internet site contributes very little. It’s just a front end leased from Cryptologic, who are a gaming software company, and it’s under-exploited. It’s dull and dreary and can be smartened up considerably.’

‘Twenty-five million doesn’t seem unreasonable,’ said Jose, ‘in fact, it seems a good price.....Nothing hidden.....?’

‘Not that I can see, but I’d have to do *due diligence* to make sure.’

‘The thing is, gambling is popular. Make the bookies better, smarten up the internet site, and the contributions could double. And one day America may open up again.....’

He took a breath. ‘There’s also the point that the clubs and the security company have a spin-off. There have to be ways of promoting the clubs and security from the betting and vice versa and increasing the volume of each.’

‘Do you have all the details?’

‘Yep.’

‘Business Plan?’

‘Yep.’

Jose was quiet for a minute. ‘As you know, James, we have a large group of companies ourselves. We bank with several major banks in several countries. Recently I had lunch with Senor Carmena of *Colombian Bank*. Senor Carmena is their Head of International Investment, and about a year ago they started a push into other countries, Britain being one, and have a branch in London. Now, I know they are very keen to increase their portfolio, so why don’t you give them a ring? I would think they may be a bit more relaxed about the lending criteria than your current Bank. And, of course, you can tell them that you are going to be my son-in-law.....it may not help too much, but it breaks the ice.’

‘It sounds a good idea, Jose. I appreciate that.’

They drove several more miles then James pulled into the grounds of the Home. The Merc made loud crunching sounds as it manoeuvred in the white gravel car park. Walking up the steps, they went into reception.

‘Here to see Mr Hathaway,’ said H, signed the visitor’s book for both of them and wandered off to the main lounge where Hathaway usually sat staring at a big plasma television on the wall. There was hardly anybody in the lounge, but there was Ernest slumped down in his seat staring at the TV with dull, vacant eyes.

As they approached, H said 'He can understand what you say although at times how much is debatable. The stroke left him quite paralysed, so he can't move, except one arm, a little, and he can't speak.'

They sat by Hathaway. 'Good afternoon, Ernest, how are you?'

H realised as soon as he had finished the sentence that he had said it in a tone that suggested he was talking to a three-year-old child. Hathaway looked slowly at him, then at Senor Reyes and nodded very slightly. He mouthed something, but it was inaudible.

'We just thought we'd say hello,' said H, feeling a bit like a prune. Who, he thought, drives God knows how far just to say 'Hello' for Christ's sake?

H was beginning to feel that this was not a good idea. You decide to go and see someone who needs a bit of company, then when you get there, you can't think of a damn thing to say! However, he soldiered on, rambling about the weather and the news and the City and shares and.....and....

Hathaway grunted occasionally. H was running out of conversation and was relieved when Senor Reyes said, 'James, would it be possible to get a drink?'

It was music to H's ears. A chance to get away for a few minutes.

‘Ernest, I am just going to get a drink, and so Senor Reyes will chat to you. OK?’ He couldn’t believe the crap he was trotting out. ‘Would you like one, Ernest?’ he asked, realising again that he was talking bollocks.

Ernest mouthed something. ‘OK, Ernest. Sugar?’

Ernest mouthed something again and off H went, not having a clue at all what Ernest had said.

Chapter 73

You may not know this.....

Senor Reyes sat and looked at Ernest for a few moments, then pulled his chair closer. Ernest's eyes registered a fleeting apprehension.

'Senor Hathaway, your life is a bit of a struggle at the moment?'

Ernest said nothing, but his face formed an expression that said, *That's a bit fucking obvious!*

'You know, Senor Hathaway, the youngsters today have a saying which I used to find irritable, but it now has a parallel which makes me accept it. *You*. You, Senor Hathaway, are a prime example of "what goes around comes around". Did you know that, Senor Hathaway?'

In the back of Hathaway's eyes, someone was listening.

'You see, Senor Hathaway, you have interfered in the lives of others. You have killed, you have stolen, you have cheated.....I *mean* cheating a few thousand a night.....*pennies*.....at cards?'

Hathaway tried to say something, but it was just a guttural sound.

'No? Does the name *Rico* mean anything to you?'

Hathaway's eyes widened.

‘How could you?’ carried on Senor Reyes. ‘We used to watch you and were very tempted to change your cards at the last minute. Our friends in Russia are very good with invasive technology, but we watched, and we learned.....about you.’

Hathaway made a guttural sound of protest.

‘Come, Senor Hathaway, we both know it to be true. And because of your indulgences in other people’s lives and affairs, you find yourself here. And why is that? It is because everyone who was near and dear to you is dead, and you couldn’t take it....’

Although Hathaway could hardly move, his body became stiff, and he focused entirely on what Senor Reyes was saying. *What does this little Spanish bastard know about everyone close to me? What does he know about me?*

He started to get agitated.

His infirmity, lack of control and lack of power made him everything he never wanted to be, and took away everything that made him what he was. He tried to animate his annoyance at this conversation but could only make louder grunting noises.

Senor Reyes leaned further forward. ‘Yes, senor, because of you..... Because of you, a few imbeciles in Eastern Europe lie under tonnes of hotel rubble.....’

‘Because of you, the twins are dead.....’

Hathaway looked at him with wild eyes. *The twins? The twins?.... How could this little bastard know about the twins? No one knew about the twins!*

‘Because of you, your daughter and her new husband are dead.....’

Hathaway started whimpering. His mind was screaming the unthinkable! *This animal had shot his daughter. His beloved Patricia. His beautiful, innocent Patricia..... which meant.....which meant.....which mea.....*

‘And because of you, your wife is dead.....’

Hathaway’s body started to shake.

‘And do you know why they are dead, Senor Hathaway?’

Hathaway’s tortured eyes looked at him. Ernest tried to move forward and grab his throat, but nothing moved except his right arm....a little.....just a little. He tried to scream his anger and hatred, but the gurgling sounds emanating from his throat sounded more like a man drowning.....

Senor Reyes waited a few moments for Hathaway to be less animated, and then continued, ‘Because you tried to kill my daughter..... My *daughter*, Senor!’ he said quietly but with menace.

In the twilight world behind Hathaway’s eyes, he tried to put two and two together.....

‘What had she done to you except fall in love with someone on the wrong side of the tracks? How did that make her a target? If you wanted to kill James, I could have understood it; that may have been business. I would have understood that, but I would not have condoned it. If you hurt my family, Senor, you hurt me. But he was also your colleague, and you killed

him for a few dollars. You took a few grubby dollars....how much?..... a quarter of a million.....half a million?.....for a contract kill from an obscure little East European gang who wanted James removed ready for their takeover..... Why would you do that? Why....? And you used one of your own 'boys', Senor. You send one of your own boys with a gun to kill a friend and his woman.

'My daughter.....

'Are you an emotional pygmy?

'Did you have nothing in that heart of yours?'

Senor Reyes sat back for a moment. Hathaway looked at him as though he was seeing the devil. Senor Reyes sat up a little more and stretched his back, which had gone stiff as he leaned to talk to Hathaway.

His back eased, he moved in close again.

'You see, Senor, with power, lasting power, comes responsibility, selectiveness, care. That's what makes true power infinite. For most people, power is transitory. It arrives in a rush and goes all too quickly because they have not understood the essence of power. Power grows over time as it becomes institutionalised. True power is power in itself, of itself. Transitory power is the power of fear or money, both of which wane... They are merely imbalances in the current framework which God, nature or other men will seek to redress.'

Hathaway was watching and listening to him intently.

‘In my country of Colombia, people have wielded enormous but transitory power. My good friend Pablo Escobar had great wealth and power which he achieved through his cocaine trafficking. I think at the time..... can you believe this, senor?....’ he chuckled, ‘Forbes Magazine listed him as the seventh-richest man in the world. Pablo and I laughed at that. A cocaine trafficker, a Drugs Lord, the seventh-richest man in the world.....? Life is strange.....’ he paused and was lost in thought for a few moments, ‘but it helped his reputation grow, and he gloried in it. That was his downfall, Senor. Glory. The need for praise and stature.....’

He looked at Hathaway. Hathaway still watched him intently behind his rage-filled eyes, hanging on every word.

‘Our family, Senor, is different. We make our money, and we stay in the background. I actually funded Pablo to allow him to start his own business as he used to work for us. I recognised his potential, and he did not let me down. As you may have guessed, Senor Hathaway, we have many interests of which cocaine is but one, but by far the most profitable one. Unfortunately, Pablo went a bit crazy, and in the end we saw his death as the only way to stop the madness, but more than that, the spotlight. The lights were getting a bit bright over our

heads, and that was not what we wanted, ever wanted, so Pablo, for all his good qualities, had to go. It was a shame.....' His voice went quiet. 'I liked Pablo.'

He paused for a moment as he thought of Pablo.....The psychopathically violent Pablo but who had been like a son to Senor Reyes. It was a tragedy when he had to help arrange his death. Sadness moved through him momentarily.

'But it was transitory power built on unrelenting violence and enormous wealth. It had no foundation, no solid bedrock on which to build. Our family has that. We have bedrock; we have enormously strong foundations built over many years..... We are one of the richest families in the world, and hardly a soul knows we exist. And that's how we like it.....'

Hathaway was struggling to articulate something but couldn't.

'So what has this to do with you, Senor? It is simple. You were unfortunate to try and kill the daughter of someone more powerful than you... Senor, it is unlike me to boast, but in relation to power, you are not even a beginner. You played at it, and you played with the wrong person.'

Senor Reyes stared at Hathaway and knew he was on the edge.

'Power, Senor Hathaway, is relative. You thought you had power, which you did, *relatively*, but it was nothing. Mickey Mouse power. Illusory power. But I, Senor Hathaway, have immense power, as I have already demonstrated. And to

further demonstrate my power, I am going to tell you a secret which you can sit here and think about for the rest of your *paralysed* life.....’

Hathaway’s eyes were enormously wide and wild.

‘Your aged mother and father live in a quiet cottage on the south-west coast, do they not, Senor? Padstowe, I believe? Have I said that correctly? My associates tell me it is a lovely village.’

He paused for a moment to give time for Hathaway to take it in.

‘I have arranged that one night later this week, as they sleep, their house will be burnt down.....because of you.’

Hathaway’s body was trembling with anger, his shaking became worse, and red suffused his face.

‘You also have a brother; I believe you went sailing with him last year....? He and his wife and three sons will also die.....’

Hathaway’s contorted face took on the grotesque features of a gargoye.

‘And you have two quite delightful nieces? One is fair-haired and the other a soft brown.....am I correct, Senor? They will be abducted and given to our East European friends who seem to have an insatiable appetite for pretty, *innocent* little girls.....They will suffer appalling sexual and psychological degradation.....because of you, Senor Hathaway....because of you.....’

He watched as Hathaway groaned and writhed in an internal hell, his mouth contorted and frothed as he desperately wanted to scream and kill the bastard in front of him.....but couldn't.

'All because of you.....' Senor Reyes emphasised 'all because of you.'

Hathaway's hands contorted, his chest heaved, his face went a deeper red, then a massive shudder enveloped his body, and he slumped back in his chair. After a few moments, his chest moved, and he exhaled once and was gone.....

It had been too much, and the massive heart attack had released him from any more pain, as Senor Reyes thought it may.

James arrived with three cups of tea on a tray.

'Ernest asleep?'

'Yes, he seems quite comfortable.'

'Shall we go and find a bench in the gardens and leave him to it? And then we may as well go.'

They sat in the summer sun and talked about this and that and drank their cups of tea. As they were walking back to the car, James said, 'I'm sorry to have dragged you out here for nothing.'

Senor Reyes smiled. 'It was good to meet Mr Hathaway at last....'

'Mm,' replied James absently, and unlocked the doors of the Merc.

Chapter 74

Helping your friends...

When they returned home, H went on up in the lift while Senor Reyes stayed in the lobby to make a call on his mobile. For just a second, he fretted at the cost of ringing Colombia from a mobile...

‘Senor Carmena, please.....Senor Jose Reyes.’

He was put through in seconds.

‘Miguel,’ he said affectionately, ‘how are you?.....and the family?.....’ he listened for a while, ‘then you must bring her to England for treatment.....I can help with the name of a good consultant, and of course, the Gulfstream flies to Europe quite often, so why not let us bring the poor child over.....it’s no trouble, Miguel, no trouble at all.....’

The mobile started to break up, so he walked out of the door into the London air.

‘Can you hear me, Miguel....? Good, good.....yes, I wonder if you could help me, Miguel? As you know, my daughter is marrying an Englishman in a few days. He owns clubs and other companies, and there is an opportunity to buy a casino and betting group.....yes.....the right time....that’s what we thought. Miguel, I remember you wanted to expand here, and

I wondered whether you would..... about twenty-five million or so.....good.....I will guarantee it if you need.....no?.....good, good.....

‘There is just one more thing, Miguel, if you would be so kind.....it would help me if he did not know of my involvement in this. Ask your Manager to demand financial statements, business plans etcetera so that he has to *work* to get it.....you understand....?’

Senor Reyes listened, then let out a small chuckle. ‘Miguel, you become more Machiavellian by the day.....that would be ideal.’

They talked for a few moments more, and Senor Reyes said, ‘I will tell them to have the Gulfstream at your disposal, Miguel; you just ring Esteban at the refinery, and he will arrange everything.....it is my pleasure.....goodbye, my friend.’

He clicked off the phone and put it in his pocket. Looking out towards London he watched a plane ascend into a bright blue sky....and smiled.

You had to protect your own.....

Anyway.....

Anyway at all.....

Chapter 75

Retired...

Sitting comfortably on two easy rocking chairs, an old couple sat on their veranda looking out over the Padstow estuary, the reflection of the moon like a beacon in the sea. Nearly bed time they were sipping mugs of hot milky Horlicks with just a touch of sugar, as they were convinced it helped them sleep. Finishing their drinks, they went inside, washed the cups, locked the doors and wearily climbed the stairs to bed. Once undressed, Mabel Hathaway climbed in bed, and her husband, Dennis, opened the window to let in the sea breeze and the gentle sounds of the breaking surf.

'I love being here,' he said to his wife for the umpteenth time since they had found their ideal retirement location nearly twenty years ago.

And for the umpteenth time, she replied automatically, 'And me, dear.'

He climbed into bed, kissed her gently on the forehead and within five minutes, their eyelids were getting heavier, and they fell asleep. Dennis dreamed of sailing boats with gleaming white sails that went up to the sky while his wife dreamed of garden fetes and sponge puddings...

In the early morning, the wind sharpened, and a muted breaking sound could be heard through the window. Dennis stirred slightly, and half awoke. 'Did you hear something, love?' he whispered to the back of his wife's head. From somewhere within her dreams she replied, but only moaned. He listened for a moment more, but heard nothing, and fell immediately back into a deep sleep.....

..... he stood proudly on the deck of Gypsy Moth IV. Francis Chichester looked him in the eye.

'Well done, young Dennis. Without your skill, we would never have made it round Cape Horn alive.....'

This is young Dennis, Your Majesty.....he saved our lives....

Arise..... Sir Dennis.....

Yes, Your Majesty.....

He stirred again as he heard another sound, and it roused him. He looked at his wife who was still sleeping soundly and wondered what to do. Part of him just wanted to curl up again and go back to his dreams, and the other part knew he should investigate. He wondered whether he should wake her. Get her to ring the police if there was a problem? Get her alert? Ready?

No....it was more than likely nothing, but a quick peek downstairs wouldn't hurt..... He got slowly out of bed so as not to disturb her, found his dressing gown draped over the back

of a chair and wandered off downstairs. As he went into the lounge, he heard another noise, but from where he wasn't sure.....

'Hello.....? Is there anyone there?'

The creak behind him made him jump, and his pulse started to race as anxiety began to flow through him. His heart was old, but it still worked... He turned around quickly, but there was nothing other than the shadows dancing in the room from the palms that waved outside. Taking a deep breath, he tried to calm his nerves, but his hands were shaking. He moved gingerly from room to room until, as he approached the dining room, he was sure he saw something move furtively behind the half-closed door.

'Is there anyone there?' he asked, with a voice that was reluctant to speak. 'Who's there?' he said, trying to be more assertive, but he was now starting to shake with fear.

He didn't know what to do. What do you do? Do you go in and look? Do you ring the police? For a split second, his dream came back, and he was the brave sailor, saving the ship, and so he decided to look...

Leaning forward, he extended his arm and pushed the door open. He knew he should put the light on, but a part of him didn't want to see...

'Who's there...?'

A hand touched his shoulder.

'Dennis...what are you doing?' asked his wife behind him.

Dennis leaned against the wall to try not to slump to the floor in a faint.

‘Dennis?’

He struggled to talk to her as his heart was pumping so fast.

‘Thought.....I.....heard.....something....’ he gasped.

‘In there?’ she said, and walked past him into the dining room...

A part of him knew what was going to happen. It knew..... It was like seeing an accident in slow motion. He knew.....

‘Nothing in here....’ she called to him.

He was too old for this and was suddenly weak and weary. Mabel came back out. ‘Come on, back to bed. I think you’ve been sailing the seas again.....?’

He nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

In bed, she went quickly to sleep, but he stayed awake for a while and listened.....

Half an hour later he dozed off.....

.....over there, Sir Francis, an iceberg....

.....without your keen eyesight, young Dennis, we would have been scuppered...

....well done.....promote you to captain on next voyage.....take over the helm.....safer with you, young Dennis.....

Deep in his dream, he knew something was wrong. Here he was in the Arctic, and yet he was hot. He watched as the icebergs started to melt like snowmen on a warm winter’s

day. Waking with a start, sweat pouring from him, he saw the room glowing red. He started to panic and shook his wife. 'Mabel! Mabel!'

She woke instantly.

'Quickly, quickly!' he pulled her arm frantically. 'We've overslept.' He pointed to the hot sun coursing in through the window. 'We should be at the market getting the fresh fish....'

Chapter 76

H

After losing yet another game of poker, H lounged back and put his feet on his desk.

Ah fuck!

Ah well...

Nah...ah fuck was more appropriate.

More games of losing the 50 - 50, 60 - 40 and 70 - 30.

He sighed a deep sigh and closed his eyes, that were a bit sore from staring at the monitors. The computer pinged, and he watched as an email came up on the third screen. He smiled as he read it. It was from his mate Harry Kee who had written:

Thank you for that Alzheimer's joke you just sent me. It was quality...

H giggled to himself.

'Why are you giggling?' asked Benny, who had walked in and he hadn't heard her.

'This email, it's funny.' He enlarged it so she could read it.

'Why is it funny? You send him a joke, in bad taste I may add, and he says he enjoyed it. Why is that funny?'

'I haven't sent him one....'

She burst out laughing. 'I shouldn't, but I like that....'

‘Quite,’ said H, ‘quite.’

He dragged his feet off the desk, and she sat on his lap, her arms circling his neck and her head on his shoulder.

He closed his eyes again.

‘I hope I can get the loan,’ he said.

‘Well, daddy is quite important to that Bank, so I am sure they will at least give you a good hearing.’

‘I hope so. It would be one hell of a step up the business ladder.’

‘I know,’ she said lovingly, ‘I know.’

‘I would have the clubs, a casino, the betting shops and my own internet poker site. No matter how much I lose, I get the money...’

‘You may want to look at the maths of that again James....’

He thought for a moment. ‘I got a bit carried away.’

She kissed him lightly on the cheek.

‘I want to succeed in life.....’ he said.

‘You will.....’

You can find more books by David Jaundrell at
www.davidjaundrell.co.uk
